PROBLEMS OF SCHOLARSHIP IN A BAHA'I CONTEXT

The report, included in the second issue of the Baha'i Studies Bulletin, of the Weekend Institute on 'Baha'i Scholarship' held in Yerrinbool, Australia, does indeed inspire -- or, perhaps, provoke -- comment, as the Editor suggested it might. I do not, however, propose to take up his suggestion to tackle the question of 'what constitutes Baha'i scholarship?', largely because I do not believe that such a concept is itself a wholly meaningful or useful one within the context of contemporary academic traditions. But I do wish to examine some of the assumptions underlying the approaches and attitudes to scholarship that seem to have informed the Yerrinbool Institute. I think this is worth doing, if only because many, if not all, of these assumptions lurk in some degree behind much Baha'i thinking at a much wider level.

The reader should bear in mind that I write these observations as a professional academic who is, by choice and by temperament, not a member of the Baha'i community. I do not, however, regard myself, nor do I wish to be regarded as a 'non-Baha'i' counterpart of an idealized type defined as 'the Baha'i scholar', principally because I cannot regard myself (or anyone else who happens not to be among the body of the elect) as existentially defined (even in negative terms) on the basis of adherence/non-adherence to Baha'ism and its tenets. I am not a 'non-Baha'i': I am a human being who happens not to believe in Baha'ism or, for that matter, Mormonism, Spiritualism, Marxism, Islam, fairies, or a host of other things. People are no more 'non-Baha'is' than they are 'non-Mormons', 'non-Jews', 'non-blacks', 'non-women' or whatever. One might go further and say that people cannot really be defined within such categories even positively expressed: people may be Baha'is, but they may also be many other things simultaneously and even contradictorily. It is in categorical thinking of this kind that discrimination, be it racial, religious, sexual, or whatever, begins. Once others have been defined negatively, as, in a sense, non-persons, and oneself positively, the creation of discriminatory legislation or social attitudes may follow without hindrance. In this context, the reference in the Yerrinbool report to 'the Baha'i scholar' and his 'non-Baha'i counterpart' may be understood as, perhaps, the most critical element in it, indicative as it is of an attitude of mind that has far-reaching implications.

At the same time, it is only fair to add that, for almost fifteen years of my adult life, I did seek to define myself in such terms, and it is undeniable that my own rejection of the values and categories of the Baha'i system inevitably colours my thinking about it. In what is to follow, however, I wish to avoid turning a general discussion into a personal vindication, however much the arguments advanced may be deeply linked to my own intellectual and psychological development. Perhaps the most essential point to be borne in mind in this context is that virtually all of the ideas that follow were developed before my withdrawal from the Baha'i community, that it was a change in my perceptions in these and related areas that was, in the end, responsible for my decision to leave what I could no longer uphold. In other words, the following comments do not represent, in the main, an attempt by someone who has lost his faith to rationalize and justify that loss but represent a pattern of thinking (however incoherently expressed in the present account) that may be followed by those who still retain their faith as well as by those who have doubts concerning it or who have lost it entirely.

Perhaps the two things that struck me most about the report and that seemed to me most representative of what I have myself known of Baha'i thinking on this subject, were its anti-intellectualism and its quality of self-contained smugness, even, if I may say so, of arrogance. The blatant contrast drawn between 'the Baha'i scholar, well-versed in the teachings, upholding the covenant, bound by its laws, guided by wisdom, and humbled by knowledge of his responsibilities' on the one hand, and 'the scholar of the 20th century, whose knowledge has fed his ambition, set him aloof from society, and allow (sic) him to do anything he could

justify in the name of intellectualism' on the other, might be better ignored were it not so sadly typical of Baha'i attitudes, even where these are not expressed in such overtly crude and insensitive language.

The anti-intellectual tenor of such remarks is quite significant in that it allows us to make an important distinction. The Baha'i scriptural writings are not prima facie anti-intellectual or anti-scholarly (although, as I shall argue, they do enshrine attitudes that are intrinsically opposed to critical scholarship). They do, it is true, condemn a certain type of intellectualism that is centred in traditionalism, excessive reliance on external learning, pedantry, obscurantism, dogmatism, and so forth, but this can hardly be construed as condemnation of intellectual activity as such. More significantly, perhaps, it is, I think, clear that the kind of scholarship condemned in treatises like the Kitab-i iqan is a particularly Islamic style of learning, many of whose main faults have long been eliminated from Western scholarship. At least, the premises on which traditional Islamic scholarship and contemporary scholarship as developed in the West are respectively based are sufficiently different to make application of scriptural passages directed against the former to the latter a rather hazardous undertaking at best. There are, indeed, numerous Baha'i scriptual passages (with which most readers are, no doubt, familiar) that extol learning and confirm the importance of the role of the scholar in society. It is not altogether surprising that this should be so: the earliest Babis were all members of the 'ulama class, and many early Baha'is also emerged from such a background. Not only that, but Islamic values, on which the Baha'i ethos is wholly based, demand respect for the 'ulama and the learning they represent: condemnation of Islamic learning is directed towards what is understood as a debased form of it, not towards such learning in principle.

Current Baha'i anti-intellectualism is very much a reaction against this earlier trend and is explicable not so much in terms of ignorance of Baha'i texts to the contrary (since many of these have long been available) but, I think, to the social and cultural position of Baha'ism as a sect-type movement rather than a denomination or church (to use a terminology derived from Western sociological perspectives). Werner Stark has pointed out, with numerous illustrations, the way in which members of sects, who see themselves as representing a 'contra-culture' opposed to that of unredeemed society at large (a theme much pursued in contemporary Baha'i writing, particularly in pronouncements emanating from Haifa) are typically and fanatically antagonistic to the use of the intellect, to formal learning, and to critical study, particularly of religious matters (The Sociology of Religion, vol.2 'Sectarian Religion', pp.129-133). For the most part, Baha'is fit this category very well, both in their general attitudes to the values of what they see as a 'decadent' society and their specific rejection of the intellectual values and standards of that wider community. Not insignificantly, many of those Baha'is (including numerous leading members of the hierarchy) who condemn the intellectual attitudes of modern society are almost entirely unread in literature outside that of Baha'ism.

The attitude of self-righteous which I have remarked on as a marked feature of the Yerrinbool report is evident, not only in the language in which the whole statement is couched, but particularly in the way in which it seeks to judge 'non-Baha'i scholars' (i.e. the vast majority of all scholars who have ever lived and who are alive today and who will ever live) by a standard to which they themselves neither aspire nor accord recognition. To judge others by one's own standards and criteria will almost always lead to such a sense of personal superiority. More seriously, the report creates stereotypes on both sides of a wholly artificial border. Leaving aside for the moment the idealized figure of the 'Baha'i scholar', it may be worth commenting on the picture drawn with such broad strokes of 'the scholar of the 20th century'.

There is, of course, no such being, unless, perhaps, he exists somewhere as a Platonic universal. But even if we allow this generalization, what sense can we make of the attributes so liberally ascribed to this person? They are not, I

venture to assert, drawn so much from real life as imposed from without, entirely prescriptive and lacking in widespread empirical actuality. I for one do not recognize the picture, either in myself or in my colleagues or in those scholars known to me through their works. There is, of course, ambition and -- sometimes -- aloofness: but neither ambition nor pride are prerogatives of academics. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that such attributes may be found less often among academics as a whole than among certain other sectors of society, such as military officers, politicians, business executives, diplomats, entertainers, judges, **and so on.**

To be honest, my own gut feeling is that, if anything, the opposite is true, and true for very basic reasons. There are few things quite as genuinely humbling as academic work, be it research or teaching. To stand several times a week in front of a lecture-hall full of students is one of the most effective ways known of driving out of anyone's mind the conceit that he knows very much about even his own subject, let alone anything else. Reading the work of other scholars or simply revising one's own work is a regular shock to the ego. Scholarship -- real, pushing, serious scholarship -- is a process that brings one again and again into contact with one's own limitations. Few ways of life demand such constant reappraisal of one's own abilities and achievements: there is very little room to rest on one's laurels. The more a scholar learns about his subject, the more he realizes he does not know, how much work there is still to do, how many ramifications he can never hope to explore. Knowledge does not feed ambition -- it feeds what is often enough a sense of blind panic as one's mental horizons expand to show wider and wider vistas of the unknown. Perhaps that all sounds a bit rhetorical and possibly forced, but I am trying to express a genuine characteristic of the life of the academic mind.

By way of contrast, I have commonly found those with a limited knowledge of a topic to be the most cocksure about their grasp of it. Undergraduates and the 'self-educated' often show this tendency in abundance. There is nothing to say that such people may not attain to insights that have evaded the expert, but it is seldom the case that much real use can be made of such insights without the wider conceptual and contextual framework into which the more experienced scholar alone will be able to place them. This is, I think, of singular importance within the Baha'i situation, where, in my own experience, those with a limited knowledge of, say, Baha'i history, are the first to shout down any alternative versions of what they 'know' to be true. Such people tend also, in my experience, to be the first to identify their own opinions with **'the Baha'i view'.**

This question of arrogance is, I would say, quite central to the problem at issue here. Normal scholarship involves a complex process of researching, testing hypotheses, exposing one's ideas to criticism, modifying one's views, and, above all, knowing perfectly well that, in ten or fifty years' time, someone else is going to come along and demolish ninety per cent of one's best theories. It is still possible to be fairly proud of work one has done (and I cannot see what is so terrible or unnatural about that -- do we condemn artists or composers or gardeners or athletes for showing pride in their achievements?), but it is a relative sort of pride. One tends to develop a certain detachment -- academics who identify too closely with their ideas are likely to receive severe blows to their self-esteem when their ideas are attacked, as they are bound to be. On the other hand, what could be more liberating than the belief that the ideas one holds come ultimately from an all-infallible source, that one is protected by something called a 'covenant' (and, of course, the necessary institutions to enforce it) from straying into the paths of error? I do not wish to appear flippant about something which is deeply meaningful to many sincere people, but I do want to draw their attention to how their position of absolute certainty may appear from outside. That may not matter much to them, but it does matter to the rest of mankind.

It would, of course, be entirely wrong of me to suggest that this trait of

arrogance in the possession of the truth is confined to Baha'is, or even that they possess it to a higher degree than anyone else. Obviously, they share such attitudes with the members of a good many other organizations that also claim access to ultimate truth. Once one has accepted the diktat that 'this is the truth and all else naught but error', however humble one's demeanour, it conceals an inward arrogance of the spirit of the most overweening kind. 'Non-Baha'i' scholars are then perceived as themselves arrogant, not so much because of anything they do or say, but because they have (unknown to themselves) the temerity to disagree with what Baha'is believe.

Let me turn from the problem of arrogance to more fundamental issues. At the heart of the dilemma faced by Baha'is in the matter of scholarship is the assumption that it is possible to categorize human knowledge as 'Baha'i' or 'non-Baha'i'. According to the report, 'A Baha'i's work, in whatever discipline, must be done in the light of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah, i.e. it would be untrue to his profession to make assumptions or draw conclusions which were contrary to the teachings in an attempt to conform to current thought'. Just what is meant by the phrase 'untrue to his profession' (assuming that 'profession of faith' is not what is intended by 'profession')? I can think of few things more untrue to the standards of professional scholarship than to make one's assumptions or draw one's conclusions on the a priori basis of certain supernaturally revealed truths, rather than in accordance, not with some fictitious concept called 'current thought', whatever that is meant to be, but the principles of academic honesty, precision, rigour, and discipline.

The attitude expressed here seems to be based on the main theme of the Baha'i World Centre Research Department's comments on the Baha'i Studies Seminar held in Cambridge in 1978. Those comments would, in themselves, merit close analysis, in terms both of intention and content, but, for the present, I propose to draw attention only to the following passages: 'In scientific investigation when searching after the facts of any matter a Baha'i must, of course, be entirely open-minded, but in his interpretation of the facts and his evaluation of evidence we do not see by what logic he can ignore the truth of the Baha'i Revelation which he has already accepted; to do so would, we feel, be both hypocritical and unscholarly. Undoubtedly the fact that Baha'i scholars of the history and teachings of the Faith believe in the Faith that they are studying will be a grave flaw in the eyes of many non-Baha'i academics, whose own dogmatic materialism passes without comment because it is fashionable....'

Let us look first at the assumption made in the second sentence here, that the belief of Baha'i scholars 'will be a grave flaw in the eyes of many non-Baha'i academics'. I think it is fair to say that this is a wholly unwarranted and undemonstrable assertion and that it betrays more than anything the prejudices of those making it. The problems involved in the study of a particular religious tradition by its own members have for a long time now been recognized and debated, and it is generally accepted by scholars that there is, in principle, no reason why belief should, in and of itself, constitute a barrier to research any more than unbelief. What is, of course, objected to is distortion originating in prior convictions, but here again the objection applies with equal force to non-believers as to believers. The assumption indicates a fundamental ignorance of what actually goes on in 'non-Baha'i' circles, particularly in the academic field, as does the parallel assumption that 'dogmatic materialism passes without comment because it is fashionable'. Here, as elsewhere, I do not deny a modicum of truth to these assertions, I simply beg to point out that they are extreme and that they grossly misrepresent the attitudes and methods of the academic community at large.

More serious, however, is the assertion of the first sentence that, when searching after facts, a Baha'i scholar must be 'entirely open-minded' but that, when assessing those 'facts', he cannot 'ignore the truth of the Baha'i Revelation which he has already accepted'. As a statement on methodology, this is problematic for several reasons. At the most basic level, it involves a profound

misunderstanding of scientific method and the logical process of research, whether this be in the 'hard' or the 'soft' sciences. I propose to examine in detail the question of scientific method as such at a later stage of this response, but for the moment I would like to draw attention to the problem raised by a division of the research process into two semi-autonomous parts: neutral fact-finding and subjective evaluation. This represents a rather simplistic interpretation of the inductive method, beginning with the assumption that the researcher just goes out and looks for 'facts', the latter existing in some sort of epistemological vacuum. In reality he does nothing of the sort. Sir Karl Popper used to demonstrate this point to his students by asking them at the beginning of a lecture to 'observe'; naturally, they very soon began to ask for more information as to what they should observe, for what purposes they were expected to observe, and so on. Selectivity in the observation of facts is an essential part of the scientific process, but to be selective one must introduce an element of evaluation into one's method.

It is, nevertheless, essential to the quality of research that the scholar be entirely 'open-minded' at all stages of his work, particularly in so far as the discovery or re-evaluation of empirical data may force him to change his earlier hypotheses. The most basic meaning of open-mindedness (and the most crucial one for scientific research) is acceptance of the possibility that what one believes may be partly or wholly false (I shall look further at the question of falsification later). To indulge in niceties on that issue would be entirely dishonest. That one has accepted certain propositions (even metaphysical ones) at any given point is not to say that one cannot or should not reject them at a later stage. This is, in fact, implicit in the Baha'i concept of an unfettered search after truth: Baha'is constantly demand of others that they be willing to abandon their current beliefs -- why should they themselves be exempt from that demand? If it is correct to condemn the followers of other faiths for their lack of open-mindedness in refusing to change them, why should it not be equally correct to condemn Baha'is for the same reason? Presumably because they alone, out of all the peoples of the earth have a monopoly of the truth. Such a view hardly advances us very far from the Middle Ages. Within the Baha'i context, if scholarship is to be open-minded or honest at all, the scholar must be willing to accept as a potentially valid proposition the possibility that the Baha'i version of historical or other empirical data is not a reasonable one and that, like any other interpretation, it may be rejected. I can readily accept that to ignore what one believes would, in a sense, be hypocritical. But to do so would only be 'unscholarly' if by that were meant that one would fail to take those presuppositions into account in one's work, together with others. I cannot, however, see what fundamental objection there can be for the believer to mentally 'reserve' or 'bracket' his own a priori convictions so that they do not, as far as possible, influence his research in ways that would result in avoidable distortion. This would not be hypocritical: there is a distinction between 'denying' one's beliefs and withholding them from the arena of debate.

It may, of course, be the case (and I suspect that this underlies the basic fear expressed here) that, in reflecting with a more fully open mind on the data relating to the Baha'i faith, an individual may be led to conclude that his original belief in it was misplaced. This certainly is what happened to me and to other former Baha'is of my acquaintance. What I really knew of Baha'ism when I 'declared' my faith in it was very little indeed -- was I expected to close my mind at that point, never to re-examine the data or my belief, either to reaffirm or abandon the latter? What, after all, is the alternative proposition? To control the truth so that it fits with what is actually taught or written? To reach our conclusions before we have even examined our evidence? To acquit or condemn before witnesses have even been brought? This approach itself introduces a fundamental logical contradiction that, I believe, lies at the root of official Baha'i uneasiness about genuinely independent research. If we state (as Baha'i dogma demands we do) that the expression of truths in the Baha'i writings and the empirical events connected with them correspond, in some way, to 'objective' reality, it is essential that research be carried out with as much 'objectivity'

as possible.

As long as the results of that research seem to confirm what is elsewhere postulated dogmatically, scholarship would seem to provide a 'scientific' or 'objective' corroboration of transcendent reality. But what if the same methods of research, the same 'objectivity', should produce results at variance with the texts? Reason compels us to reject, even if only provisionally, the original expression of dogma. We can then either reinterpret it (and, from the point of view of faith, possibly gain deeper spiritual insights thereby) or discard it in some way (perhaps by a personal act of rejection). The approach suggested by Haifa and Yerrinbool is to reassert the priority of the original 'truth' and to deny validity to the 'objective' research, which then remains a dead letter. On such a basis, of course, we may as well not waste our time carrying out the research in the first place.

Let me try to approach this in another, more concrete, way. A basic conviction of Baha'i orthodoxy is the belief that the historical record of the lives of the Bab, Baha' Allah, and ʿAbd al-Baha' is, in some unexplained sense, 'true', in a way that earlier prophetic records are not. There is, of course, room for addition to the record, but not for radical re-evaluation. At the same time, it is recognized that historical research may perform a useful service by providing confirmation of existing basic records (such as God Passes By), in the form of documentary evidence, corroborating analyses, and so on. But what if research should reveal hard contradictory evidence, possibly of a serious nature, or if it should, at least, reverse the probabilities against the orthodox version? What if, for example, a historian should find that he is compelled (for internal or external reasons) to accept a version of events given by someone defined by orthodoxy as an 'enemy' or a 'covenant-breaker'? Either his basic method of proceeding is valid, in which case this new version deserves to be credited with at least provisional plausibility, or it is not, in which case his confirmatory evidence ought also to be dismissed. One cannot, in the academic world, re-make the rules to suit one's own progress in the game.

The matter becomes even more problematic, I think, where the researcher is able to point directly to fundamental contradictions in the Baha'i texts themselves or to provide evidence that certain texts have been suppressed in order to protect the faithful from such contradictions. Merely to say that such contradictions do not (cannot) exist or that one is interpreting as 'suppression' what is really the application of 'wisdom' simply will not do. If ʿAbd al-Baha' portrays Babism as a fanatical movement characterized by 'the striking of necks', burning of books, destruction of shrines, and so on, which has been superseded by the sharply contrasted ethics of his father's faith, while Shoghi Effendi avoids translating numerous passages of this nature and instead creates an image of the Babis as peaceful, meek, and tolerant, there is a real problem to be overcome that no amount of heavy-handedness can cause to go away.

Nevertheless, the Universal House of Justice makes it quite clear in a letter dated July 18, 1979, to an individual who had participated in the Cambridge Seminar (not the present writer) that 'it does not see how a Baha'i historian can in all honesty claim to be a faithful believer on the one hand and, on the other, challenge in his writings the veracity and honour of the Central Figures of the Faith or of its Guardian'. That may well be true, and I am happy to respect such a conviction, but I think it is only fair to point out that it is not possible to hold to this viewpoint and simultaneously carry out academic historical research which can claim to be entirely honest and critical. I do not say 'correct' here, but simply 'honest and critical' within the terms of rigorous scientific scholarship.

The problem involved here has, I think, been well expressed by Peter Berger in The Sacred Canopy (Anchor Books ed., N.Y., 1969, p.181):

> All this leads to the commonplace observation, frequently found in the opening pages of works in the sociology of religion, that the theologian qua theologian should not worry unduly over anything the

> sociologist may have to say about religion. At the same time, it would be foolish to maintain that all theological positions are equally immune to injury from the side of sociology. Logically, the theologian will have to worry whenever his position includes propositions that are subject to empirical disconfirmation. For example, a proposition that religion in itself is a constitutive factor of psychological well-being has a lot to worry about if subjected to sociological and social-psychological scrutiny. The logic here is similar to that of the historian's study of religion. To be sure, it can be maintained that historical and theological assertions take place in discrepant, mutually immune frames of reference. But if the theologian asserts something that can be shown to have never taken place or to have taken place in quite a different way from what he asserts, and if this assertion is essential to his position, then he can no longer be reassured that he has nothing to fear from the historian's work.

It is not, perhaps, insignificant that Baha'is are generally more than happy to accept the results of historical criticism of this kind where it is seen to contradict theological positions held by the exponents of other faiths. There may be certain reservations in the case of what are regarded as 'divinely-revealed religions' (although even here, 'evidence' against the historicity of the resurrection of Christ, for example, would be highly acceptable and uncontentious), but with regard to other religions or sects (such as Mormonism, for example), there would clearly be no objections even to the most radical questioning of historicity or whatever. In fact, the usefulness of scientific historical method would, no doubt, be extolled. I think this point is one that Baha'is would do well to ponder.

It may be objected that the Universal House of Justice has made it clear that there is ample room within the Baha'i faith for differing interpretations of history and doctrine (e.g. Wellspring of Guidance pp.88-89, and the letter just referred to). This is certainly an important principle and one that deserves greater attention in day-to-day Baha'i activities, but I fear that it is much too qualified in theory and little applied in practice to be of more than restricted value to pioneering spirits within the Baha'i community. Innumerable alternative views have already been foreclosed by 'authoritative' statements or the emergence of a broad and fixed consensus or by the existence of a widespread fear of contradicting figures such as Hands or Counsellors. In my own quite wide experience, the principle has generally been invoked to permit the perpetuation of popular or canonical opinions as equally valid with alternative views based on documentary evidence of a more solid nature, while other overriding principles have been brought into play to prevent the dissemination of the latter. Minor changes or alternatives are undoubtedly possible (such as the note in The Babi and Baha'i Religions to the effect that the date of the martyrdom of the Bab was almost certainly July 8 and not July 9), but more radical modifications remain inadmissable. These latter (and even the former, to some extent) present particular problems where they are premissed on incontrovertible and significant contradictions in the Babi or Baha'i texts, as I have suggested above. It is easy enough to deny the possibility of 'real' contradictions, but this is more a theological than an empirical position and is bound to prove inadequate in extreme cases. In the end, alternatives can only be expressed (because they can only be understood ontologically to exist) within a basically non-contradictory (though not necessarily non-paradoxical) framework.

It may be argued -- as is done by the House of Justice in the above-mentioned letter -- that 'historical research is largely a matter of evaluating evidence and deducing probabilities' and that 'historical evidence, moreover, is always fragmentary, and may also be accidentally erroneous or even intentionally fabricated'. This is, of course, perfectly true, and no competent historian would seek to deny any of it. What is problematic is the actual application of this

principle within the Baha'i sphere, since there seems to be no evidence of its being invoked in the cases of Nabil's Narrative, God Passes By, A Traveller's Narrative, and similar productions, all of which are open to serious criticisms on the score of historical accuracy, both in terms of accidental error and of intentional fabrication. In a sense, I fear that the possibility of uncertainty in historical research is being used as a gambit by Baha'i orthodoxy in an attempt to devalue potentially damaging research at the most basic level. It must be stressed that, for all the uncertainty that attends research of this and any other kind, it is, nevertheless, still possible to speak in terms of a central body of empirical data which may not reasonably be questioned. The recent controversy surrounding a publication that seeks to 'prove' that the Holocaust is a myth provides an excellent illustration of this point. Historical data is neither so poor nor so confused as to permit such a theory as a rational one: the empirical data is heavily in favour of the historicity of the death camps and of the numbers murdered in them.

This raises the question of comparability in academic debate. It is not enough to insist that Nabil Zarandi or Shoghi Effendi have said such and such, in an attempt to refute an item of empirical data to the contrary: it is necessary to adduce a comparable piece of evidence the probability of whose truth content would at least counterbalance if not outweigh the first theory. Not only that, but even in matters of evaluation, it must be remembered that what is most 'probable' within an orthodox Baha'i framework may appear reasonably unlikely from almost any other point of view and that there is no a priori reason to prefer the former merely because the topic concerns Baha'i history or doctrine. Clearly it is easier to operate a double-standard system in which alternative historical evidence can be disputed on the grounds that it is 'fragmentary', 'erroneous', or 'fabricated', while authoritative texts (and even popular conceptions) remain immune to criticism on this level. If the Baha'i authorities insist on dictating the rules of the game in their favour, is it surprising that so many of us prefer to leave the field?

The Yerrinbool proposition makes explicit a view that I have heard orally expressed on many occasions. It does not, in any fundamental sense, differ from the basic propositions put forward at the World Conferences on Islamic Education held in Saudi Arabia in 1977 and Pakistan in 1981: to reclassify knowledge according to Islamic criteria and to formulate Islamic concepts instead of current Western, secular ones for 'reunderstanding' and 'restructuring' the imaginative, social and natural sciences. The continuing strength of Islamic perspectives within the mental world of Baha'ism is, I feel, revealed here in all its vigour.

The very belief that such a thing is either desirable or possible reveals an astonishing lack of understanding of the principles on which modern Western scholarship is based. It shows, at the outset, a basic failure to distinguish between the perfectly valid postulate of Baha'i (or 'Islamic' or 'Buddhist' or 'Marxist') perspectives on virtually any area of life and the equally invalid assumption that such perspectives can be used to 'shape' knowledge without perverting the very processes by which it is acquired. Let us look, first of all, at the first of these postulates. It is obvious that Baha'is, like any other group of people sharing certain ideological assumptions, may have particular views about most issues, views they may, in many cases, share with other groups or which may be peculiar to themselves. It is inevitable that Baha'is will want to formulate clear opinions about, let us say, nuclear disarmament, or abortion, or homosexuality. This, of course, tends to result in the adoption of a sharply-defined, black and white party line on issues that are often, by their nature, grey and ill-defined, and in the substitution of received dogma for moral convictions arrived at through individual consideration; but this aspect of the matter need not concern us at the moment. Such opinions or dogmas are likely to be more clearly developed and more sharply expressed in the case of major issues like those just cited, than in the case of relatively minor matters, such as the use of cosmetics by women or the kind of music one ought to listen to. It is, I think, fair, however, to say that, in the Baha'i case, the desire to avoid contro-

versial public issues and to favour expedient policies has tended to blur opinion on more than one major topic. It is the 'outmoded' Christian churches rather than the religion of the new age that are outspoken about issues such as apartheid, the arms trade, poverty in the third world, political repression, capital punishment, and so on. Baha'is, like anyone else, may think that their view on a given matter is the 'correct' one, but (at present at least), they will normally concede the right of others to differ. Such perspectives are determined by theological and ideological criteria, and there will inevitably be conflict between differing opinions. Nevertheless, it is clearly legitimate to hold views on such subjects and to express them. The matter only becomes difficult when a given group seeks to impose its views on others, to make its own world-view predominate (as, in the long term, Baha'is obviously wish to do, through the creation of Baha'i states and an eventual Baha'i world system -- but let us not enter that particular digression).

The second postulate -- that ideological perspectives may legitimately be used to 'shape' or 'reshape' knowledge or understanding -- is, I have argued, as invalid as the first is valid. My reasons for saying this are complex, but perhaps they can be summed up in the contention that, when we come down to basics, there is no such thing as 'Christian' or 'Islamic' or 'secular' science, there is just 'good' or 'bad' science. Perhaps this will become clearer if we note that we can speak historically about, say, 'Greek' or 'Arab' or 'Chinese' science, describing a body or even a method of knowledge developed within a relatively well-defined cultural and geographical context; when, indeed, we speak of 'Islamic' science, we are thinking less of Islam the religion than of Islam the civilization, and we are, indeed, referring often enough to the work of Jews and Christians alongside that of their Muslim colleagues. In the modern world, divisions of this kind are less valid, and what was originally developed as 'western' or 'European' science has now become something international. An Indian may carry out 'western-style' scientific research as well or as badly as an American; and, for that matter, a Jew as well as a Muslim or a Hindu as well as an atheist.

The kind of reaction that leads to calls for 'Islamic' or 'Baha'i' or 'Creationist' scholarship has its roots in a perception of modern science (including the so-called 'soft' sciences like sociology, anthropology, history, or religious studies) as an inherently secular phenomenon that disregards 'higher' truths derived from sciptural texts. Such a reaction involves a profound misconception of the nature of science and perpetuates what is by now an outmoded dichotomy between it and religion. It may be replied at this point that Baha'ism does not, in fact, perceive any dichotomy between religion and science (or reason), but I propose to argue at a later stage that this is, in fact, precisely what it does and that the reality of this perception lies at the heart of many of the problems under discussion.

Perhaps the easiest approach to this misconception of the nature of science (understood in the widest sense of the term) will be a roundabout one. One fairly obvious point that may be made here is that much scientific work has been and is carried out by believing Christians, Jews, Hindus, and so forth, whose convictions about the nature of ultimate reality have not been perceived by them as conflicting with their understanding of empirical data. Questions of ultimate meaning do not fall within the province of science since the latter can only concern itself with those matters that are subject to empirical investigation. In one sense, this means that science is secular, but it is important to stress that it is so only in its subject-matter, not in its ideology. Scientific conclusions may, of course, challenge certain kinds of belief, such as literal acceptance of the creation myth in Genesis or the notion that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, but such beliefs are not concerned with ultimate or metaphysical matters and cannot, for that reason, be said to fall outside the realm of empirical research. The existence of God, of the soul , of a life after death are, in their very nature, questions that can neither be proved nor disproved by empirical investigation. They rest on faith and are compatible with any variety of theories about the nature of mundane reality.

It is, perhaps, worth re-emphasizing here an earlier point, that I do not believe there to be any fundamental objection within Baha'i circles to the application of critical, even sceptical research (such as the techniques of source-criticism) to specific areas of belief within other religions or sects. The Baha'i doctrine of non-literal interpretation of sciptural texts would, if anything, confirm such an approach. This indicates that Baha'i objections to demythologisation and so forth are not to such processes as such or in principle, but rather to their specific application to areas of Baha'i belief, where this might call in question cherished dogmas or even the entire edifice of Baha'i faith. A radical example of this would be the possibility of Baha'i 'debunking' of the Shi^{c}i belief in the birth of the supposed twelfth Imam. Since Baha' Allah himself has rejected the story of the Imam's birth as false and has condemned the four 'gates' as imposters, there would be no objection in principle to a Baha'i historian carrying out the most rigorous tests of the evidence nor, indeed, to his presentation of his findings in language as forceful as that used in the Baha'i writings on the matter (which is far from the humble, moderate, tolerant standard demanded by the House of Justice of Baha'i writers). But even to question for a moment a historical 'fact' such as the claim that the body of the Bab is actually buried in Haifa (I do not say it is not, just that the 'fact' has been challenged) would undoubtedly be to raise an uproar of considerable proportions. Special pleading of this kind is, however, likely to receive short shrift in the academic world.

I do not wish to turn this short essay into a treatise on scientific method, but I do feel that it is essential to say something, however inadequate, on the subject. Perhaps I should begin by stating the obvious but still not widely recognized point that 'science' (in the widest sense) is not a body of knowledge or a collection of data, but a method that can be applied to a wide variety of problems. In some ways, the idea that scientific knowledge and science are identifiable lies at the heart of the misconception I have referred to above. If science is a given set of conclusions about reality and if, as we see to be true, those conclusions can be modified, even radically, from generation to generation, then it may appear reasonable to seek fresh modifications based on different initial assumptions, such as the doctrines of biblical fundamentalism or Islam or Baha'ism or Marxism. An unspoken corollary of this view is, of course, that, once all the necessary reformulations have taken place, there will be no further need for modification, since 'science' would now correspond to an absolute or transcendent standard of truth. (Ernest Gellner's view of the Qur'an as a Platonic Word Mark 2 containing all possible propositions is entirely relevant.) A further corollary is that there would thus come into existence a number of competing scientific systems, the differences between which would rest, not on the empirical data available to them, but on the non-scientific a priori assumptions built into their initial doctrinal postulates.

This would be all very well, perhaps, if science did, indeed, operate in this way or could be made so to operate. But it does not and cannot. There are, of course, different theories about scientific method, but all of them are founded on certain principles that are the sine qua non of acceptable, quantifiable, and repeatable research. The scientist (or sociologist or linguist or historian) must proceed by methods that are rational, critical, open to criticism, universal, and as free from subjective bias as it is possible to render them. Furthermore, the findings of scholarship do not remain the private property of the individual scholar but are exposed to testing by his colleagues, on the basis of which they may be verified or falsified until such time as fresh research uncovers new information or improves the methods of investigation or introduces new hypotheses.

Scientific work in all fields has generally been held to proceed by a process of inductive reasoning, whereby research and observation lead to discoveries that are used to provide material for discussion, this in its turn leading to the formulation of general hypotheses designed to fit the known facts.

An attempt is then made to confirm these hypotheses by discovering supporting evidence, leading to the formulation of explanatory 'laws', on the basis of which further work is carried out, the frontiers of knowledge being thus continually pushed back. While this method has yielded remarkable results and is, therefore, of considerable practical value, it entails serious logical problems, first noted by Hume. No number of empirical observations can logically permit us to arrive at general statements about reality. The fact that the sun has always risen does not logically entail that it must always do so or even that it will do so tomorrow. We can, of course, proceed on the assumption that it will and publish tables giving the exact times of sunrise throughout the world, but an element of uncertainty remains -- a chemical factor of which we remain unaware may cause the sun to turn nova in a matter of hours.

The most effective solution to this problem is undoubtedly that proposed by Sir Karl Popper, whose works on the subject I cannot recommend too highly: Conjectures and Refutations, Objective Knowledge, and The Logic of Scientific Discovery (or, as an excellent introduction, Bryan Magee's short study simply entitled Popper). I cannot seriously attempt to explain in any detail the complexities of Popper's arguments, but let me refer to one or two points that seem relevant to our present undertaking. Popper began by examining theories such as those of Marx or Freud, which impressed him by their remarkable explanatory power. He came to the conclusion that the reason why such theories possessed this power was that, once one's eyes had been opened by the theory, almost any observation could serve to confirm it. The world would be 'full of verification of the theory'. The main reason for this was that any given empirical case could be interpreted in the light of the theory (either positively or negatively). It is a little like the situation in religion, where the effectiveness of prayer may be confirmed both by fulfillment and by non-fulfillment: in the first case, God has chosen to answer one's prayer (therefore prayer is answered), in the second, He, in His wisdom, has chosen not to answer (therefore it is, in another sense, answered). In either case, prayer is efficacious and it is in our interest to pray. By way of contrast, theories such as those of Einstein or Newton did not possess this quality of universal verifiability. Even a single observation to the contrary could serve to overturn a theory such as Einstein's that light must be attracted by heavy bodies. No number of sightings of white swans can ever prove the assertion that 'all swans are white'; but a single sighting of a black swan can serve to disprove it (and to force us to modify our original hypothesis to something like: 'most swans are white, but there are also black swans' or 'there are white and black swans, and there may also be purple swans, but no observations have been made of the latter').

Popper thus concluded that 'the criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability' (Conjectures p.37). Ideas must, then, be so formulated that they entail a high degree of risk of being falsified. The aim is to formulate hypotheses with a high informative content, which in itself implies lower probability. '... only a highly testable or improbable theory is worth testing, and is actually (and not merely potentially) satisfactory if it withstands severe tests -- especially those tests to which we could point as crucial for the theory before they were ever undertaken' (ibid pp.219-20). Scientific knowledge advances from problem to problem by the method of exposing new theories to the severest possible criticism.

If we may pause here to look at the Yerrinbool proposition, we can see that it would lead to an end to serious progress in most scientific areas. Once we admit propositions that, by their very nature, are deemed to be above criticism or which cannot be subjected to rational testing, the whole process grinds to a standstill. Or, if we do introduce propositions from a 'higher' authority, then we must do so on the understanding that they, like any other propositions, are open to criticism, to testing, and to falsification. Otherwise, we are not engaged in a scientific enterprise. Perhaps those at Yerrinbool do not wish to be associated with such an enterprise (as I suspect they do not): but then they

must abandon all pretence of respect for science, for the 'principle' that religion and science are essentially harmonious. It is evident too, I think, that Popper's principle would be quite acceptable to those at Yerrinbool or Haifa when applied in a relatively uncontentious area such as electrical engineering, but that it would be much less palatable in, let us say, religious history. This again raises the problem of special pleading and of the desire to divide knowledge, not on the basis of method, but of content (and contentiousnes

A major assumption underlying Popper's work, which is developed from the ideas of Alfred Tarski, is that there is such a thing as objective or absolute truth. The sciences, in particular the social sciences, have in recent years come under attack on the grounds that they cannot provide 'certain' knowledge. Scientific theories have been shown to be merely provisional, with the result that the positivist outlook has been discarded as meaningless. And so it is. But this should not allow us to justify a flight from reason towards irrationality (as has, indeed, become fashionable in recent years), nor should it lead us to some sort of relativism or subjectivism which is willing to accord the same probable truth content to each and every theory advanced. Science, to be meaningful at all, must be a search for truth (and, Popper adds, 'interesting truth'), recognizing that truth is hard to come by. In a sense, our advancing theories are steps on an unending path towards an ultimately unattainable goal, approximations rather than final statements about the truth. It is by means of criticism that we hope to test the truth content of our propositions: '... the rationality of science lies not in its habit of appealing to empirical evidence in support of its dogmas -- astrologers do so too -- but solely in the critical approach: in an attitude which, of course, involves the critical use, among other arguments, of empirical evidence (especially in refutations). For us, therefore, science has nothing to do with the quest for certainty or probability or reliability. We are not interested in establishing scientific theories as secure, or certain, or probable. Conscious of our fallibility we are only interested in criticizing them and testing them, hoping to find out where we are mistaken; of learning from our mistakes; and, if we are lucky, of proceeding to better theories' (ibid p.229).

The arguments put forward at Yerrinbool and elsewhere rest on the assumption that, since human knowledge is subject to error (being 'fragmentary', 'accidentally erroneous', or 'intentionally fabricated') we must discover higher, infallible sources of knowledge. Popper's ideas are significant here: 'How can we admit', he asks, 'that our knowledge is a human -- an all too human -- affair, without at the same time implying that it is all individual whim and arbitrariness?' The solution, he suggests, 'lies in the realization that all of us may and often do err, singly and collectively, but that this very idea of error and human fallibility involves another one -- the idea of objective truth: the standard which we may fall short of. Thus the doctrine of fallibility should not be regarded as part of a pessimistic epistemology. This doctrine implies that we may seek for truth, for objective truth, though more often than not we may miss it by a wide margin. And it implies that if we respect truth, we must search for it by persistently searching for our errors: by indefatigable rational criticism, and self-criticism' (ibid p.16).

The Baha'i (or Muslim or Christian fundamentalist) solution to the problem, however, is to consider, not the method by which we may seek to uncover the truth, but the source from which it may be derived (or 'revealed') -- be it the Kitab-i iqan or Shoghi Effendi or the Universal House of Justice (or the Qur'an or the Bible or Das Kapital). According to Popper, 'the traditional systems of epistemology may be said to result from yes-answers or no-answers to questions about the sources of our knowledge. They never challenge these questions, or dispute their legitimacy; the questions are taken as perfectly natural, and nobody seems to see any harm in them.

'This is quite interesting, for these questions are clearly authoritarian in spirit. They can be compared with that traditional question of political theory, 'Who should rule?', which begs for an authoritarian answer such as 'the

best' or 'the wisest', or 'the people', or 'the majority'. This political question is wrongly put and the answers which it elicits are paradoxical.... It should be replaced by a completely different question such as 'How can we organize our political institutions so that bad or incompetent rulers (whom we should try not to get, but whom we so easily might get all the same) cannot do too much damage?' I believe that only by changing our question in this way can we hope to proceed towards a reasonable theory of political institutions.

'The question about the sources of our knowledge can be replaced in a similar way. It has always been asked in the spirit of: "What are the best sources of our knowledge -- the most reliable ones, those which will not lead us into error, and those to which we can and must turn, in case of doubt, as the last court of appeal?" I propose to assume, instead, that no such ideal sources exist -- no more than ideal rulers -- and that all "sources" are liable to lead us into error at times. And I propose to replace, therefore, the question of the sources of our knowledge by the entirely different question: "How can we hope to detect and eliminate error?"

'The question of the sources of our knowledge, like so many authoritarian questions, is a genetic one. It asks for the origin of our knowledge, in the belief that knowledge may legitimize itself by its pedigree. The nobility of the racially pure knowledge, the untainted knowledge, the knowledge which derives from the highest authority, if possible from God: these are the (often unconscious) metaphysical ideas behind the question. My modified question, "How can we hope to detect error?" may be said to derive from the view that such pure, untainted and certain sources do not exist, and that questions of origin or of purity should not be confounded with questions of validity, or of truth.'

The 'genetic' nature of the question of sources is, I think, particularly well exemplified in the case of Islam, where the fundamental element in hadith (tradition) criticism was not verification or falsification of the matn or text (i,e. of the inherent probability or otherwise of the content of the tradition as transmitted) but investigation of the isnad, the chain of authorities, whose names guaranteed the purity of the descent of the text. Something of this kind is involved in the Baha'i system of authentication of texts on the basis of scribal impeccability, revelatory handwriting, or, most importantly, sanction by central and infallible authority.

Popper later identifies two main ideas as underlying the doctrine that the source of all our knowledge is supernatural. The first is that we must justify our knowledge or theories by positive reasons, which means that we must appeal to some ultimate or authoritative source of true knowledge. This idea he believes to be false. The second is 'that no man's authority can establish truth by decree; that we should submit to truth; that truth is above human authority'. He goes on:

'Taken together these two ideas almost immediately yield the conclusion that the sources from which our knowledge derives must be super-human; a conclusion which tends to encourage self-righteousness and the use of force against those who refuse to see the divine truth.

'Some who rightly reject this conclusion do not, unhappily, reject the first idea -- the belief in the existence of ultimate sources of knowledge. Instead they reject the second idea -- the thesis that truth is above human authority. They thereby endanger the idea of the objectivity of knowledge, and of common standards of criticism or rationality.

'What we should do, I suggest, is to give up the idea of ultimate sources of knowledge, and admit that all knowledge is human; that it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams, and our hopes; that all we can do is to grope for truth even though it be beyond our reach. We may admit that our groping is often inspired, but we must be on our guard against the belief, however deeply felt, that our inspiration carries any authority, divine or otherwise. If we thus admit that there is no authority beyond the reach of criticism to be found within the whole province of our knowledge, however far it may have penetrated into the unkown, then we can retain, without danger, the idea that truth is beyond human authority. And we must retain it. For without this idea there can

be no objective standards of enquiry; no criticism of our conjectures; no groping for the unknown; no quest for knowledge.' (ibid pp.29-30)

The Yerrinbool proposition, with its evident animosity to 'current thought' or, indeed, to 'true scholarship' that might threaten to 'unwisely question the foundation stones of the Faith', carries with it disturbing implications. At the risk of becoming boring, I would like to quote Popper again:

'Disbelief in the power of human reason, in man's power to discern the truth, is almost invariably linked with distrust of man. Thus epistemological pessimism is linked, historically, with a doctrine of human depravity, and it tends to lead to the demand for the establishment of powerful traditions and the entrenchment of a powerful authority which would save man from his folly and wickedness....

'The contrast between epistemological pessimism and optimism may be said to be fundamentally the same as that between epistemological traditionalism and rationalism. (I am using the latter term in its wider sense in which it is opposed to irrationalism, and in which it covers not only Cartesian intellectualism but empiricism also.) For we can interpret traditionalism as the belief that, in the absence of an objective and discernible truth, we are faced with the choice between accepting the authority of tradition, and chaos; while rationalism has, of course, always claimed the right of reason and of empirical science to criticize, and to reject, any tradition, and any authority, as being based on sheer unreason or prejudice or accident.' (ibid p.6)

'This false epistemology, however, has also led to disastrous consequences. The theory that truth is manifest -- that it is there for everyone to see, if only he wants to see it -- this theory is the basis of almost every kind of fanaticism. For only the most depraved wickedness can refuse to see the manifest truth; only those who have reason to fear truth conspire to suppress it.

'Yet the theory that truth is manifest not only breeds fanatics -- men possessed by the conviction that all those who do not see the manifest truth must be possessed by the devil -- but it may also lead, though perhaps less directly than does a pessimistic epistemology, to authoritarianism. This is so, simply, because truth is not manifest, as a rule. The allegedly manifest truth is therefore in constant need, not only of interpretation and affirmation, but also of re-interpretation and re-affirmation. An authority is required to pronounce upon, and lay down, almost from day to day, what is to be the manifest truth, and it may learn to do so arbitrarily and cynically. And many disappointed epistemologists will turn away from their own former optimism and erect a resplendent authoritarian theory on the basis of a pessimistic epistemology.' (Ibid pp.8-9)

That this latter passage might serve as a brilliant and concise description of the basic Baha'i epistemological attitude -- 'Gracious God! How strange the way of this people! They clamour for guidance, although the standards of Him Who guideth all things are already hoisted. They cling to the obscure intricacies of knowledge, when He, Who is the Object of all knowledge, shineth as the sun. They see the sun with their own eyes, and yet question that brilliant Orb as to the proof of its light.... The proof of the sun is the light thereof' (Iqan p.133; cf. Gleanings pp.105-6, etc.) -- and of the subsequent development of authoritarianism based on the need for interpretation (and even carefully controlled distribution) of the sacred texts is, I think, quite clear. Genuine scholarship, open debate, innovative thinking cannot flourish in a system that demands total control of all publications, that holds the power of disenfranchisement or, more seriously, excommunication, as a punishment for intellectual or moral dissent, and that judges a man by how far he conforms to the dogmas of a narrowly-defined orthodoxy.

The consequences of this authoritarianism can be seen at all levels of the Baha'i community, where bodies for the 'protection of the faith' (which is a euphemism for the suppression of dissent and its isolation) keep a close watch on those deemed dangerous to the status quo. In the realm of scholarship, this

attitude has had far-reaching and devastating results. Let me be outspoken in saying that I do not believe a single work of scholarship of any merit whatsoever has ever been published within the confines of the Baha'i system, nor do I think any are likely to be. The works of the most highly esteemed Baha'i 'scholars' from Gulpaygani* onwards would not pass muster for a moment in the wider world of scholarship, not because academics have somehow been corrupted by 'current thought' (which is, in any case, about as precise and meaningful a term as Ruhiyya Rabbani's 'modern architecture'), but because they lack even the pretence of rigour, of critical analysis, of open-mindedness, of balance and lack of obvious bias that is so essential in works of scholarship. Baha'i historiography from the earliest to the latest examples is consistently little more than hagiographical distortion and oversimplification, in which important facts are altered or omitted to conform to preconceived notions of reality and to a world-view divided between black and white, believer and unbeliever. Does this sound an unnecessarily harsh judgement? Read any classic of modern historical writing in any area, not least that of religious history, and then turn to the standard histories of the Baha'i faith. Look at the best examples of contemporary Christian theological writing, then consider the best that Baha'i writers have to offer. Is it really fair even to make a comparison?

The results of this appaling imbalance between what passes for scholarship within the Baha'i community and the products of modern scholarship in general, whether religious or secular in inspiration are extremely serious. It is difficult to envisage any meaningful debate in which Baha'i 'scholars' could, at present, readily participate as equals, certainly as long as they continue to subject themselves to the extraordinary limitations imposed by publications review. Baha'i writing is naive and undeveloped in the extreme and contrasts unfavourably with the great bulk of well-argued, carefully-written material produced in all fields of the humanities and sciences today. The level of sophistication of, let us say, Jewish or Christian scholarship is considerable and enables useful dialogue to take place. By way of contrast, the low level of attainment in Baha'i writing precludes anything like a meeting of equals. Comparability exists only with the productions of groups like Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, or Theosophists, with whom no useful dialogue is likely in any case. This is, of course, in part a reflection of the overall lack of intellectual sophistication within the Baha'i community at large, but it does not explain the failure of Baha'i academics, few though they may be, to contribute usefully to the heightening of quality in this area. The sad histories of World Order magazine and the Canadian Association for Studies in the Baha'i Faith bear eloquent testimony to this. The real reason must, I feel, be sought in the extreme pressure brought to bear on Baha'i writers by the reviewing process and in the obvious preference of the Baha'i administration for the unexceptionable, the bland, and the turgidly-written over the innovative, the controversial, and the carefully-worded.

Surely, someone will, no doubt, assert, the Baha'i faith accepts the essential harmony of science (or reason) and religion (or faith). Is that not, in the long term, a sufficient protection against the evils you describe? Are we not 'children of the half-light', and is it not unjust to be so hard on a system that has yet to mature? I can only reply that, if we have anything to learn from history (and a Baha'i cannot very well deny that such a thing is possible), it is that mankind cannot rely on the professed ideals of groups as a guide to how they will behave. The fact is that, when the matter is closely analysed, Baha'ism teaches nothing of the sort, nor does it encourage the active prosecution of an 'unfettered search after truth'.

Let us look first at the second of these principles. It is, according to the Universal House of Justice (letter dated July 18, 1979), supposed to be applicable to all believers -- that is to say, it is not, as I have often heard asserted, restricted to non-believers prior to their conversion (although I would assert that this widespread conviction reflects an accurate apprehension

* I realize the inclusion of Gulpaygani and others like him may be a little unfair since they wrote within the limits of a traditional system. But there is a point to be made with respect to contemporary Baha'i regard for such writers and their work

of how things really stand). How, in all honesty, can a system based on the revelation of absolute truth really permit its followers to engage in such a search throughout their lives? To be truly unfettered, genuinely independent, a scholar (or anyone else) must be free to question any proposition, any source of authority, any claim. What sort of independence is allowed by statements like this: 'His obedience to the covenant must be preserved, lest in the name of "true scholarship" he unwisely questions the foundation stones of the Faith e.g. the validity of the Guardianship, the Universal House of Justice, etc.'? The implication of this sentence (and a necessary one) is that "true scholarship" here must be understood as a mere 'cover' or pretence for something else, not, in other words, true scholarship at all. But what if it is true scholarship? What if, by the term (and the demands it entails) we really do mean a genuine kind of scholarship, something corresponding to the 'science' and 'reason' that are supposed to be harmonious with religion and faith? Is our criterion to be scientific or based on faith (or, rather, obedience)? Either we are talking here about good scholarship or we are not. But from the Yerrinbool standpoint, it is irrelevant, since daring to 'question', not academic or scientific integrity, is the criterion.

I have already argued that there is no fundamental clash between matters of faith and matters of reason since they relate, as it were, to different universes of discourse. But the Baha'i theory of revelation does not admit such a formulation, since the Manifestation of God is deemed infallible in all matters. This view is made clear in the following statement of the Haifa Research Department:

'It has become customary in the West to think of science and religion as occupying two distinct -- and even opposed -- areas of human thought and activity. This dichotomy can be characterized in the pairs of antitheses faith and reason; value and fact. It is a dichotomy which is foreign to Baha'i thought and should, we feel, be regarded with suspicion by Baha'i scholars in every field. The principle of the harmony of science and religion means not only that religious teachings should be studied in the light of reason and evidence as well as of faith and inspiration, but also that everything in this creation, all aspects of human life and knowledge, should be studied in the light of revelation as well as in that of purely rational investigation.'

This might be a reasonable point of view were it not for the fact that, despite the attempt to imply some degree of comparability between these twin areas, the Baha'i version of revelation invariably reserves for revelation the final say. When questioned, for example, about the Bab's placing of David before Moses in the chronological series, Baha' Allah replied that men must simply accept whatever is revealed by the Manifestation of God, without questioning (tablet in Ishraqat p.18). Speaking of himself, he writes that 'should he decree that water is wine or the sky the earth or the light fire, he is unquestionably right, and none may object or say "why" or "wherefore"' (Lawh-i ishraqat in ibid p.58). 'Whoso sayeth "why" or "wherefore" hath spoken blasphemy' (Iqan p.109). Similarly, ʿAbd al-Baha' writes of himself that 'Whatever the Centre of the Covenant says is correct. No one shall speak a word of himself' (Covenant of Baha'u'llah p.69). Shoghi Effendi claimed an infallibility confined to matters concerning the Baha'i religion, but in practice he made it very difficult for anyone else to disagree with him, even in extraneous matters, as evidenced in the following statement: '... the Baha'i Revelation... constitutes the ninth in the line of existing religions.... with intellectuals and students of religion the question of exactly which are the nine existing religions is controversial, and it would be better to avoid it' (Directives from the Guardian pp.51-51). In view of the belief that 'everything in this creation, all aspects of human life and knowledge, should be studied in the light of revelation', Shoghi Effendi's disclaimer of infallibility in matters 'outside' those touched on by revelation is clearly devoid of any real meaning.

Even if the possibility of questioning in certain areas were genuinely accepted, how easy would it be to put this into practice in any meaningful sense?

In Islam, it has been argued that the only individuals whom Muhammad had put to death (generally by means of assassination) were those guilty of the crime of sabb al-rasul, insulting the Prophet -- i.e. venturing to disagree with him. This same basic conception has continued within the Baha'i system (although assassination seems to have been abandoned in the modern period) and has extended to all levels. Publicly to question a Hand of the Cause or a Counsellor is to bring on one's head the greatest of opprobrium. Respect for authority rather than freedom to search after truth is the guiding principle of the modern Baha'i community.

How can the spirit of genuine scientific rationalism survive in such an atmosphere? In practical terms, what the Baha'i position amounts to is that religion and reason are in harmony so long as reason does not overstep its bounds, does not seek to contradict the infallible assertions of religion, which latter have no bounds, for do they not touch on 'all aspects of human life and knowledge'? It is a view which derives from the traditional Islamic perspective that religion is wholly rational (which is where ʿAbd al-Baha' borrowed the concept and the phraseology), but that religious knowledge is superior to human learning and must always have priority over it. If I am not allowed to question the statement that there were two Davids or (on a wider level) Shoghi Effendi's version of Babi and Baha'i history, if I am obliged to take these as 'given' facts or infallible 'interpretations', as incontrovertible starting-points upon which to base my research, what possible room can there be for scientific method? Does a dusty corner even remain? And how can I possibly hope to take part in discussion with other scholars if I rule out of court the very principles on which they work, if I claim the right to appeal at all times to a higher court, a court whose judgements neither I nor they may criticize?

Academic endeavour depends for its success on the willingness of all those involved to respect both its methods and its legitimately-argued conclusions, whatever their implications. Systems that enshrine absolute truths invariably block this process. My own experience as a Baha'i and an academic was that, whenever my conclusions agreed with those of accepted Baha'i opinion, they were extolled and held up for display as examples of the valuable place of scholarship within the faith; when, however, my data led me to conclusions at variance with the 'authoritative' versions of events or even with popular conceptions, I found myself condemned as one who had placed his head before his heart, and my work dismissed as a 'Trojan Horse' that threatened to introduce all sorts of impurities into the unsullied city of Baha'i thought. I did not 'understand' the Baha'i faith and its teachings, whereas my detractors, of course, understood it perfectly. It was at all times a situation in which the principle of 'heads we win, tails you lose' applied. There is no choice for those working within such a system but to do so on its own terms, for 'it would be untrue to his profession to make an assumption or draw conclusions which were contrary to the teachings in an attenpt to conform to current thought'. Is it not perverse and hypocritical that the same people who respected me as a scholar, as one versed in the writings and history of the faith, so long as I subscribed to their beliefs, now regard me as a sort of traitor, merely because I no longer so subscribe? How was it that Avarih's history of Baha'ism, once proclaimed by Shoghi Effendi as 'beyond any doubt the most graphic, the most reliable and comprehensive of its kind in Baha'i literature' suddenly was dropped like a hot brick following Avarih's defection from the movement? Had Avarih's personal change in convictions in some mystical way altered the content of the book? Was Shoghi Effendi's presumably infallible verdict as to its reliability and comprehensiveness itself devalued by Avarih's change of belief? An unfettered search after truth?

A related problem here is that of the popular argument that only a Baha'i (and an orthodox Baha'i at that) can claim to provide an entirely 'valid' presentation of his religion, that the non-believer (or ex-believer), by virtue of his inability to enter empathetically into the life of faith, is unqualified for such a task and that books or articles written by the latter are, ipso facto, devoid of perception, balance or verisimilitude. This is, of course, not a view restricted to Baha'is, although it has, I shall show, special application to their doctrinal position, and is widely used by them in attempts to have encyclopaedia

entries rewritten, text-books altered, and the views of scholars 'corrected' in order to conform to the official Baha'i perception of Baha'i faith and practice. The views of the Haifa Research Department, in particular, add up to the assertion that only a believer and, indeed, an orthodox, obedient believer, can hope to understand and express properly the verities of the Baha'i revelation. Although this view has obvious flaws from a number of viewpoints (it is clear, for example, that, while only a believer may be able to say what faith means at the subjective level, a non-believer may often be much better placed to investigate with objectivity how it may be implemented at the level of social action) I think it will be most useful to look at it from an alternative Baha'i perspective. It is clear that, from the orthodox Baha'i viewpoint, this argument does not (and cannot) hold true for other religions. It is fundamental to Baha'i theology that the followers of other faiths have misunderstood, corrupted, and distorted their originally 'pure' revelations and that a 'true' understanding of them can only be obtained from Baha'i sources. According to the Research Department, 'A Baha'i, through his faith in, this "conscious knowledge" of, the reality of divine Revelation, can distinguish, for instance, between Christianity, which is the divine message given by Jesus of Nazareth, and the development of Christendom, which is the history of what men did with that message in subsequent centuries; a distinction which has become blurred if not entirely obscured in current theology'. Apart from the questionable portrayal of 'current Christian theology', this passage brings us face to face once again with special pleading, with the claim to superior knowledge to which only those who have accepted the 'true faith' are privy. If a Christian should maintain that the heart of his religion lies in the Resurrection or a Muslim assert that Muhammad was the 'Seal of the Prophets' in the literal sense, no Baha'i could possibly accept that that would be an authentic expression of either Christianity or Islam. Is it not time that mankind washed its hands of such dangerously arrogant notions?

Perhaps the impossibility of carrying out serious, independent academic work within the confines of such a system is best illustrated by the pernicious policy of publications review. How can someone who wishes to preserve his self-respect and the respect of others as a scholar possibly submit to such a process, as so many do? One of two situations if possible: either the reviewing panel concerned will be made up (as is usually the case at present) of individuals lacking any expertise in the scholar's field (as a sociologist, historian, etc.) or lacking his detailed knowledge of his specialized area of research, in which case it would be presumptious and futile for them to sit in judgement on his work. Or the panel will consist of qualified academics who may choose to disagree with the author, but who, if they have any humility at all, will be willing to accept that theirs are just alternative opinions and that the author has every right to disagree with them in his turn, if he so wishes. The only point of such a system, it appears to me, is to ensure the doctrinal purity of all Baha'i writing, with the result that large numbers of ideologically unexceptionable materials are churned out, none of which have any scholarly value, while serious attempts to examine important issues from a critical viewpoint are suppressed.

It seems to me inevitable that suppression of thought of this kind will continue within the Baha'i system. By its very nature, scholarship involves the frank and free examination of those issues that are most controversial, because it is precisely these issues that will provide the keys to the most interesting, the most significant theories. Problems, not tiny matters of fact, are what matter most, in history as much as in physics. But problems are just what the Baha'i leadership wants to avoid. The flock of believers must be protected, cocooned from controversy. Hence the publication of books like Momen's The Babi and Baha'i Religions, in which concerted attention is given to endless trivia, new materials are presented that tell us next to nothing about the most crucial issues, and a bland avoidance of controversy conceals the fact that not an inch of real progress has been made towards a fresh analysis of the real problems of Babi and Baha'i history. Hence the publication of only those passages of the Kitab al-aqdas or the writings of the Bab that are certain not to cause distress

to the Baha'i masses, who would probably abandon the movement in large numbers if they knew what those writings really contained. In its paranoid fear of dissent, the reviewing process stands as the forerunner of a much more thorough-going system of thought control. Against such a system, we must oppose with the utmost vigour the principles of untrammelled intellectual freedom -- a genuinely 'unfettered search after truth' -- and man's inalienable right to dissent.

'...we not only owe our reason to others, but we can never excel others in our reasonableness in a way that would establish a claim to authority; authoritariansim and rationalism in our sense cannot be reconciled, since argument, which includes criticism, and the art of listening to criticism, is the basis of reasonableness. Thus rationalism in our sense is diametrically opposed to all those modern Platonic dreams of brave new worlds in which the growth of reason would be controlled or "planned" by some superior reason. Reason, like science, grows by way of mutual criticism; the only possible way of "planning" its growth is to develop those institutions that safeguard the freedom of this criticism, that is to say, the freedom of thought' (Popper, The Open Society and its Enemies Vol.2 pp.226-227).

Perhaps it will be objected that the system of review exists largely to protect the innocent mass of simple believers from well-intentioned but misdirected criticism of faith from their more learned or articulate coreligionists. The House of Justice has placed particular emphasis on this principle, stressing the need for scholars to 'remember the many warnings in the Writings against the fomenting of discord among the friends' and speaking of the writings of 'certain individuals' that would 'understandably cause alarm in the breasts of the most tolerant of believers'. This age-old principle has been invoked by political and religious establishments down through the ages (and most often in the present day) to justify the suppression of alternative views. The mass of believers may be (and are) fed an endless diet of mindless pap, of hagiography and myth, of self-aggrandizing rhetoric (and second-rate rhetoric at that), of scarcely-literate exhortation -- but God forbid that they should be led to question any of this by coming into contaminating contact with original or critical views. One can only admire the tactic adopted by the House of Justice -- it serves to inspire feelings of guilt in the minds of those tempted to express their opinions clearly and openly, for few of us actually wish to cause distress to others, while, at the same time, it conveys a warm sense of collusion and tactful mutual understanding -- 'we all know, you and ourselves, that the masses need cushioning from the deeper truths to which we are privy; we regret the restrictions this must impose upon you, but we are sure you will understand its necessity and cooperate with us in keeping your own counsel'. It is the first step towards co-option, the classic method of controlling dissidence by embracing it the better to remove its sting and lull it to sleep. To suborn is easier than to destroy and, in the end, much more successful.

In his brilliant novel of the 'Benevolent State', One, David Karp illustrates this point in the following dialogue between Wright, a government official, and Lark, the state's chief inquisitor:

'"Yes, I'll admit that the State's plan has been very shrewd. Yet there's been a new factor of crisis -- a rather modern factor. It was growing rapidly until it was struck down by this State -- our benevolent State. I'm speaking of the intellectual -- the person you call a heretic -- the individual. The concept of individualism has been growing for a long time, sir -- it now has earned the right to be called a crisis matter. I think in seventy-five years you'll find that it's grown enormously. And the harder the State squeezes its citizens into the mould, the more heretics will appear. They'll grow rapidly and they will include the thoughtful, the gifted, the honest, the brave, the moral. In short, the best elements of the society will be arrayed against the State. That's what's going to happen in seventy-five years, sir, and this State, inflexible as it is, will break."

'"Yes, Doctor Wright," Lark said, pleased with Wright almost as if Wright were his protege, a protege who had performed brilliantly, "that's exactly what I told the Commissioner. That's why he's allowed me two weeks in which to rid Burden of heresy. You see, if we can take the intellectuals, the people you so poetically call the thoughtful, the gifted, the honest, the moral, the brave" -- he paused, smiled -- "did I get the sequence right? -- and enchant them into conforming, we'll have whipped the last crisis. That's why Burden must be reclaimed. If Burden can be purged of his heresies, then we can purge anyone of his heresies."' (pp.120-121)

In the Baha'i case, there is, once again, more than a little special pleading. No such strictures are raised against the work of Baha'i pioneers among, let us say, Hindu villagers, demolishing centuries-old systems of belief in order to replace them with the new, improved doctrines of Baha'ism. Far from discouraging questioning, unfettered searching, the Baha'i teacher must do all he can to chivvy his potential converts into challenging the authority of his priests, the validity of his world-view, and the desirability of remaining within his ancestral system. The Baha'i missionary effort takes, as ever, precedence over the feelings, the convictions, the beliefs of the unconverted: all in a spirit of love and understanding, of course, but nonetheless wholesale in its intention.

I mentioned earlier the existence of Baha'i scriptural texts that uphold the place of the scholar in society. Perhaps it will be instructive to examine how one particular aspect of this original position has actually been developed and is being further developed within the Baha'i system. In the Kitāb ʿahdī, Baha' Allah refers to the 'scholars' and 'rulers' of his faith, identifying them by the Arabic terms ʿulama' and umara'. Early texts from the period of Baha' Allah and even ʿAbd al-Baha' suggest that they understood ʿulama' here much in the sense the word was actually used in Islam, with the important distinction that legislation on novel matters (istinbat) was now confined to the house of justice (or, in certain cases, to the ʿulama' with the approval of this body -- see ʿAbd al-Baha', letter cited Fadil-i Mazandarani Amr wa khalq, Vol.4 p.300). I would suggest that the situation as envisaged in such texts is really quite a simple one: anyone suited by ability and training to become a scholar was free to do so, but he would not, as such, possess legislative or judicial authority (as had been the case in Shiʿi Islam). Things were fairly open and there seemed tremendous room for development. This situation changed radically with the interpretation put forward by the Universal House of Justice*to the effect that by the umara' of the faith was intended the elective half of the Baha'i administrative organization, and that by the ʿulama' was meant the Hands, Counsellors, and other appointed members of the system. The implications of this interpretation are far-reaching and, I think, little appreciated. Leaving aside the rather simple observation that, in my own experience, the most significant feature of the 'learned' side of the Baha'i administration at present is the conspicuous absence in it of anyone even remotely qualified for that epithet, I would draw attention to the inevitable result of such an identification. Evidently, religious scholars in Baha'ism are to be appointed and institutionalized, and they are to include among their chief functions the propagation of the faith and the elimination of heresy from its ranks. If anyone imagines for a moment that such a system is designed to foster independent, meaningful scholarship at any level, he is pitifully ignorant of history and human nature. Perhaps even more significant is the effective creation here of what amounts to a Baha'i clergy, differentiated from other clerical establishments only to the degree that the latter are differentiated one from the other. Claims that the Baha'i faith has no clergy are, I would argue, based on Islamic criteria which maintain precisely the same thing with regard to the faith of Muhammad. In that sense, the Baha'i faith has, like Islam, no sacramental priesthood, but it manifestly possesses a clergy and, indeed, one whose authority is inextricably linked with that of the putative Baha'i state system (the umara'). Conformity rather than brilliance is inevitably the guarantee of success within such an establishment (and if anyone thinks that people do not want to succeed within Baha'ism, he is naive in the extreme). For

*Letter to Continental Boards of Counsellors and National Assemblies, 24 April, 197

academic freedom of any kind to exist within the confines of such a system would require daily miracles of the first order

Perhaps none of this would matter very much if scholarly concerns were essentially irrelevant to the wider preoccupations of society. But such is not the case. Scholarship cannot take place within a vacuum, any more than society can survive in any meaningful sense without its scholars, writers, painters, composers, and all others who contribute in one way or another to the culture that may be said to form its greater life. When scholarship is stifled or, what is often worse, transmuted into an imitative, sterile process of passing on received wisdom, when the sharp edge of critical debate is blunted by censorship, be it overt or hidden, when new or difficult ideas are seen as disturbing rather than exciting or stimulating or even provocative, then society is in great danger. Attitudes towards academic freedom are indicative of deeper and wider beliefs as to the nature of social and political discourse, and I believe that the consensus of Baha'i opinion on such matters reflects more basic features of the Baha'i view of society.

I think I am right in stating that the Baha'i dream of a new world order in which all men will live as one under a single government, believing in a single faith, adhering to one basic set of principles, loyal, obedient, orderly, is nothing more than yet another version of the ages-old utopian vision of a perfectly-ordered, perfectly-controlled, little-changing society from which all destabilizing influences will have been forever banished. For such a system, the greatest of all threats is that of dissent, be it political, religious, moral, philosophical, or simply intellectual, and all projected utopias, from that of Plato to that of Lenin, have incorporated measures to suppress or neutralize dissenting opinion. The Baha'i system is one of the most extreme in its proposed methods of social control: there are to be no parties -- only one party, that of the true faith, whose institutions will provide the organs of both the legislature and the executive, will be permitted; dissenting views may be punished, in mild cases by removal of the right to vote or be elected, and in extreme cases by total ostracism from society; such views may also be controlled by the overriding right of the government to insist on prior approval of all publications and broadcasts, even in the case of poetry and music; disturbing opinions can be effectively muzzled by insisting that they be presented only through the 'proper channels' and in what is deemed appropriate, respectful, and reassuring language; the 'channels' through which complaints are allowed to be made about the administration are themselves part and parcel of the administrative system, and refusal to work through them will itself be deemed evidence of bad faith and disaffection.

New and creative ideas are, by their very nature, disturbing. They threaten to unbalance the status quo, to challenge received opinion, to raise doubts in men's minds and hearts. The history of thought shows time and time again how the proponents of such ideas have been received by society -- with scorn, censorship, imprisonment, even death. This is not to suggest that the reverse is always true, that their controversial character makes ideas innovative or creative. But the link is undeniable. Without dissent -- radical, vocal, far-reaching dissent -- men and society stagnate and all the best things wither from within. In retrospect, we hail as pioneers and geniuses those who were, in their own day, reviled and cast out. We even elevate radicalism to the status of a prime social virtue, while remaining suspicious of radicals in our own time. Religious history, more perhaps than any other area, shows example after example of this. And yet, in spite of century upon century of experience to the contrary, there still rise up those who wish to create the final, ultimately stable, ultimately perfect society, from which the very need to dissent will be absent. They wish to build a world so perfect that to be unhappy or dissatisfied in it would in itself be a sign of mental or spiritual sickness. It is that sort of society that the Baha'i community wishes to see established, a society from which there can be no escape except death or insanity.

To go further here would, I fear, be to digress too far from the topic under discussion. But I have not introduced these themes gratuitously. There are real, live connections between attitudes to intellectual freedom and attitudes to all other freedoms. 'A state must persuade its citizens to accept the premises on which it exists and functions. In some cases persuasion is quite simple, in others, difficult. But it must be accomplished with every citizen -- particularly the intellectuals' (Karp, One, p.108). All utopian systems start out with one major flaw: they cannot admit that things can go seriously wrong within them, that the revolution may have taken a wrong turning, that the slate, once wiped clean, may yet again need cleaning. The Baha'i cannot admit that divine guidance is not always present in the 'onward progress' of the faith, in its setbacks as much as in its triumphs, any more than the Marxist can admit that events do not always reveal the process of an ineluctable march of history, the working out of a remorseless dialectical movement. Once established, such a system is fatal to all who come within its orbit, for the act of criticism reaches to its very raison d'etre and challenges its right to exist. Within such a system, only the second-rate, the tawdry, the unoriginal, the uncomplaining, the suborned, can survive or hope to flourish. To ask too many questions, to reveal too many inconsistencies, even to use language other than the officially-approved 'safe-speak' of platitudes and cliches, is to step out of line and to incur the wrath of those who wish to preserve the illusion that all is well. There will, of course, always be room for a few token intellectuals, allowed just so much rein, encouraged to raise answerable questions and, perhaps, to answer them, paraded as evidence of the freedom the system allows (which is, of course, absolute, real freedom, contrasted with all other freedoms), and ultimately co-opted as its best and most obedient servants.

These are not trivial issues. The freedom and happiness of the human race depends today, more than ever, on our ability to tackle the questions of how to combine maximum dissent with minimum social and governmental control, of how to work for the material betterment of men without destroying their spiritual and intellectual integrity as human beings, of how to develop diversity within society while eliminating from it the causes of strife and prejudice. These questions cannot be answered within closed, totalitarian systems. They can only hope to be solved where men are free to change and direct their lives as they themselves see fit, to make their own laws and rule themselves through their own institutions, to question and, if need be, abandon rules and dogmas and systems under which they do not wish to live. If we have any task as intellectuals, as scholars, as academics, as teachers, it is to preserve and to strengthen those freedoms, to foster the rational tradition and the open society it enables to exist, to act as society's first defence against irrationality, authoritarianism, and totalitarian systems of thought and belief.

Much of the foregoing will, I fear, prove offensive to some readers, perhaps to most. It will seem to them that I have set out deliberately to present a picture of the Baha'i community, its administration, and its motives that bears no resemblence -- or at best a very distorted one -- to what they conceive to be reality, that personal feelings have warped my own mental image of these things, and that it is this image, rather than a more empirically faithful one, that is reflected in these pages. Perhaps that is true: I am scarcely well situated to evaluate the conditioning effects of my own subjectivity. But that is equally true of most Baha'is who may read these pages, perhaps, in some ways, more true, for their thoughts are shaped less by their own perceptions than by the mould of a system. In the end, it is all a matter of differing perspectives, none of them wholly true to an assumed empirical reality, in which case all parties must, at least, recognize one another's right to their own ways of seeing things. In a sense, the view held by most Baha'is of their faith is a vital part of that faith and may not prove an insignificant factor in shaping its future trends. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that, although never made widely public, there

do exist within the Baha'i community many different perspectives, and it would be foolish to ignore these. It must also be acknowledged, in all fairness, that ex-Baha'is and 'non-Baha'is' in general may have valuable perspectives to contribute to any internal discussion, even if these are -- as mine tend to be -- highly critical in tone and content.

Nevertheless, offense is easily caused, not least because criticism of the system may seem to imply criticism of those who live and worship within it; but I, for one, would wish to avoid that implication in the main. Baha'is are, as a whole, no worse and no better than the generality of mankind, certainly the generality of religious communities. They are, in my own quite long experience, warm-hearted, sincere, well-meaning people, whose long-term aims reflect a genuine love for humanity and a well-developed religious disposition. They have, of course, their weaknesses, their limitations, in common with other small religious groupings. There are among them possibly disproportionate numbers of the crankish, the unstable, the socially and psychologically unsure -- such movements have a way of attracting such people. There are also among them very well-adjusted individuals, some outstanding men and women who would do credit to any community. They are not, as individuals or a group, noticeably authoritarian, given to expediency, fanatical, or exclusive. And yet Baha'ism as a system can be and often is all these things. There is, in other words, a conceptual gulf of sorts between the perceptions and feelings of Baha'is and the actual working out of religious and political aims within the movement -- which both contains the individuals (and, in one sense, is them) and exists independently of them (and, in this sense, dictates how they should be and act). There are also important -- and more problematic -- conceptual gulfs between what the majority of Baha'is (particularly in the West) believe and what the Baha'i scriptures (much expurgated and bowdlerized in translation) teach. In this sense, I feel that large numbers of sincere people are, unknown to themselves, working and sacrificing for aims sometimes the diametrical opposite of those that they themselves cherish. There is no room here to enter into the possible complexities that an analysis of this situation would entail -- suffice it to draw attention simply to the common problems that originate in the tendency to identify with a cause ('my nation', 'my party', 'my religion') against one's own interests or the interests of other people.

It is a mistake to judge a movement by the intentions or even the behaviour of its followers. That much is accepted in Baha'i circles when observers are reminded not to judge the faith by the often imperfect acts and even opinions of the believers. The reverse is also, unfortunately, true. We may not judge the Catholic Church by the Inquisition or the sale of indulgences, but equally we cannot allow the presence of a Teresa or a Francis to blind us to the often sordid realities of Church history. The development of communism provides us with one of the most pertinent examples of this dilemma. Marx and his early followers (and many modern communists) were (and are) deeply and genuinely committed to the ideals of freedom and equality for all men, to the dream of creating a perfect future world, from which the evils of tyranny, poverty, hunger, political repression, and so forth, would be fully eliminated from human society. And yet communism in practice has proved to be the greatest threat ever posed to the freedom and dignity of man. I do not wish to draw a direct parallel here with Baha'ism, for there are obvious differences at many levels, but I do wish to insist on the reasonableness of a perspective that ignores, however painfully, stated ideals or individual or mass sincerity, in order to extrapolate from other factors the possible future trends of a system. As a scholar, I cannot allow ad hominem appeals to the goodness or sincerity of major figures or to the laudable motives of their followers to deflect me from a critical examination, based on sociological, philosophical, or other criteria, of textual or empirical data that may lead to conclusions about Baha'ism radically different to those of official propaganda. To have to proceed in such a manner is not always an easy or pleasant task (and it was certainly a cause of profound distress to me over a period of several years), but it is unavoidable if the demands of honesty and rigour are to be met, if, indeed, any meaningful 'independent search after truth' is to be carried on.

What is, perhaps, a more serious problem is raised by Baha'i history. I have already referred to the fact that modern Baha'is are willing to recognize imperfections in the contemporary community (attributing these to external pressures,

to the status of 'children of the half-light', and so on), and I am ready to accept that, to a limited extent, there is some recognition that other imperfections have existed in the past. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that the historical perspective tends to be more idealized in proportion to the distance travelled back into the past. There are several reasons why this should be so, all largely connected with a fundamental religious tendency to conceptualize a past 'sacred time' which is capable of sacralizing present 'profane time', but I believe one important motive to be the need to insist on past righteousness as a token, a pledge of good intent for the future. The revelatory periods of the Bab and Baha' Allah, and the patristic eras of ʿAbd al-Baha' and Shoghi Effendi must, therefore, be shown in the best possible light. As a result, the mundane events of Babi and Baha'i history are mythologized and the figures connected with them transformed into participants in a cosmic drama, either as saints or devils. What had been grey and ambiguous becomes sharply black and white. Thus, writers like Marzieh Gail can speak without blushing of 'the drama of contrasts between the cowering, puny figure of Subh-i-Azal and the inspiring, majestic personage of Baha'u'llah'. Even the mildest suggestion that things might not have been quite so sharply contrasted, that human beings, including Mirza Husayn ʿAli Nuri Baha' Allah, are infinitely complex and ambiguous creatures, that a mundane reality underlies the myth is taken to be tantamount to espousal of the cause of the 'forces of darkness'. Thus, for example, a reviewer writing about an academic article on behalf of the Canadian Association for Studies in the Baha'i Faith attacks the author for referring to 'covenant-breaker' sources as primary (and, therefore, of historical importance), not because these are really secondary or forged or otherwise improperly termed 'primary', but because they are mere 'babblings of a crazed covenant-breaker' or 'total trash'. I have a remarkably strong feeling that the reviewer in question had never read even a single word of this 'total trash', and I am sure that, even if asked, he would have refused to do so.

More serious, perhaps, is the marked tendency in Baha'i historical writing to achieve mythologization by depersonalizing the events of history. The perfect example of this is Ruhiyyih Rabbani's The Priceless Pearl, which tells the reader virtually nothing about Shoghi Effendi as an individual (let alone as a man or a husband), but great amounts about Plans, administrative developments, goals, and so on. It is as if we have moved, not just from history to hagiography, but from hagiography to what we might call 'systemography'. The same features are evident in Ugo Giachery's equally badly-written and turgid Shoghi Effendi, most of which seems to be devoted to buildings ('architectonography'?). More disturbingly, a distinct pattern can be discerned in the volumes of The Baha'i World: beginning as fairly interesting records of people and events connected with the Baha'i community, these yearbooks have degenerated remarkably, becoming less and less useful as vital, living historical sources. Articles in them are increasingly sanitized and devoid of immediate historical content: they represent considered, retrospective views of events and concentrate on impersonal, almost abstract developments -- plans, campaigns, conferences, legal documents, bye-laws, charters, formal and somewhat stale presentations of Baha'i belief. Individuals enter these pages as the subjects of trivialized obituaries or in the fashion of Ruhiyyih Rabbani's seemingly interminable and tedious journeys through Africa. The articles on 'Hands of the Cause' in volume 13, for example, could be about robots or organizations for all the human detail provided. The genuinely mundane has receded far behind a veil of pious abstraction, and future historians will find themselves much handicapped if they should be forced to rely on such publications for their source material.

In this area, the scholar faces a particular threat and has a major role to play. He has to recreate, as far as he can, the people and events of sacred history, even if, by so doing, he is forced to divest them of much or all of their sanctity. In doing so, he faces almost intractable difficulties and is certain to encounter more than a little hostility -- myths have a powerful hold over those that believe in them. But he may do a great service, not only to the academic community or the public at large, but to the Baha'i community itself. By turning it back to face the realities of its own history, to understand its roots more intelligently, he may help it come to terms with its present situation and to find ways of developing in the world that are consistent with that

situation. It is really not for me to suggest the possible consequences, theological and otherwise, of such a change in perspective -- that will be for believers, whether historians or not. But I will suggest that these consequences may be radical and far-reaching, that they may transform the lives of many by bringing back a sense of the real that had been displaced by empty idealizing. For myself, I remain pessimistic about the outcome. I think it more likely that larger and larger numbers will desert the Baha'i movement the more its true historical and doctrinal face is revealed, and that this, in its turn, will lead to deeper and deeper retrenchment on the part of the guardians of the orthodox faith. But I am willing to accept that I may be very wrong and that others have a right to be, even if only tentatively, optimistic and to continue the struggle I myself abandoned some years ago. I would be relieved and refreshed to learn one day that they were right and that Baha'ism could yet prove a force for good in a world sorely in need of goodness. If 'Baha'i scholarship' is ever to have any meaning, it will be in the furtherance of that end. The odds are against it. But you all have my support in your struggle to change them.

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