

Some Reflections on “Questions” and Bahá’í Studies

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Good evening. On behalf of the Association for Bahá’í Studies, it is my pleasure to welcome you to what we expect will be an energizing and enriching conference. We are thrilled that you are here. In its letter to the Association for Bahá’í Studies requesting that it organize this gathering, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States emphasized the need to focus young adult Bahá’ís on the “true meaning of Bahá’í scholarship.” Toward that end, this weekend is designed to initiate a conversation. It is our hope that a new discourse about learning—a dialogue about knowledge, service, and social action—can take root. But to do this, to ascend the “heights of excellence” asked of us by the Head of the Faith, all of us need to be involved; and so we have endeavored to provide opportunities to you this weekend to give voice to the issues and concerns that you deem important. While the conference program will help frame key ideas and concepts, we need you to raise questions—lots of questions! To encourage you in this regard, I want to spend a few minutes exploring the significance of questions in our Faith and its relationship to the theme of the conference.¹

Asking questions, searching for understanding and truth, is central to Bahá’í identity and the Bahá’í way of being. Questions, particularly difficult questions, serve to clarify and refine our thinking. We should welcome challenging inquiries for they provide us with the opportunity to examine the deeper implications of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.

It should be remembered after all that the name Masá’il (questions) on our calendar is a vital spiritual quality or attribute. Indeed, much of the corpus of the Bahá’í sacred texts and subsequent authoritative interpretations and guidance find their genesis in responses to questions. For example, the birth of the new Revelation itself is marked by an interview—Mulla Husayn’s questions of the Báb in determining whether the Báb was the Promised One; the Kitáb-i-Íqán—the central theological work of Bahá’u’lláh—was revealed in response to questions concerning Judgement Day and the claims of the Báb; an important supplement to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas—the charter of the future world civilization—was entitled “Questions and Answers”; countless other Tablets of the Blessed Beauty were revealed in response to questions from those seeking truth, solace and understanding.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá continued this practice, beginning with a profound commentary in response to a question about the meaning of an important Islamic tradition when he was

¹ The conference theme, “Ascending Heights of Excellence: Scholarship, Service and Social Action,” was drawn from the 8 May 1985 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’í Youth of the World: “Rejecting the low sights of mediocrity, let them scale the ascending heights of excellence in all they aspire to do. May they resolve to elevate the very atmosphere in which they move, whether it be in the school rooms or halls of higher learning, in their work, their recreation, their Bahá’í activity or social service.”

only a teenager;² and this was followed by thousands of epistles and Tablets to believers amplifying the teachings of His Father, conveying guidance and encouragement. Of course one of His most important works was *Some Answered Questions*. Many other significant writings of the Master such as the Tablets to August Forel and The Hague were written in response to questions.

The vast correspondence of Shoghi Effendi with individuals included responses to concerns about the work of the Faith, advice on how they might best serve it, and answers to questions about the Bahá'í teachings. This correspondence produced an immense treasury of guidance on a remarkably wide range of topics, providing an indispensable legacy for the emerging Bahá'í community. And today, as you know, the Universal House of Justice devotes an enormous amount of its time and resources to addressing the questions posed by believers and, increasingly, those who are not Bahá'ís. How often I marvel at the courage of some of those questioners and thank them that they wrote to the Master, the Guardian and the Supreme Body. One is indeed awed to see how a seemingly simple or unimportant question to the Head of the Faith results in a rich and illuminating exposition and elucidation of Bahá'í belief. So we are a community that holds the questioner in high regard—for questioning is a tangible expression of our belief in the independent search for truth. As Bahá'u'lláh states in the Aqdas, “Ask ye that which shall be of profit to you... for the portals of His tender compassion have been opened before all who dwell in heaven and on earth.”³ Furthermore, it is important to remember that Bahá'u'lláh abrogated the prohibition of the Báb that forbade questions being put before Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest. “The Lord,” says Bahá'u'lláh, “hath now relieved you of this prohibition, that ye may be free to ask what you need to ask...”⁴

In one of His Tablets, the Blessed Beauty offers this praise of an inquirer: “Thou hast done well to ask these questions, for the benefit thereof will be gained by thyself as well as other servants of God, both outwardly and inwardly. Verily thy Lord knoweth all things and readily answereth the call.”⁵ And in another response to a follower He said: “We noted the questions thou hast asked and will readily answer thee. It behoveth everyone in this Day to ask God that which he desireth, and thy Lord will heed his petition with wondrous and undeniable verses.”⁶

The fact that the Lord of the Age and the Lord of Hosts Themselves answered questions should give us perspective about our own attitude and demeanor toward those who put before us their questions about the Faith and its many facets. We might perhaps

² The tradition interpreted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was: “I was a Hidden Treasure. I wished to be made known, and thus I called creation into being in order that I might be known.” See *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, note 23, for an excerpt of this commentary.

³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993), paragraph 126.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 267.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

benefit by being slightly humbled and honored when presented with even a single question, however probing or uncomfortable that question might be.

Consequently, the answers we attempt to give to challenging inquiries, especially to those investigating the Faith, can reveal a lot about us—our optimism about the destiny of humankind, our openness, our adherence to principle, our belief in the harmony of scientific methods and religious insights, and our unmistakable commitment to the concept of the unity of the human family and its corollary precepts of justice and equality. For this reason, the approach and tone that we adopt both in providing answers and raising questions are of the utmost importance. Our questions and answers should be characterized by humility and courtesy. “Humility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power, whilst pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation,” Bahá’u’lláh warns.⁷ And “courtesy,” He admonishes, “is the prince of virtues.”⁸

The culture of the Bahá’í community is founded on an ethos of learning—we are learning through a process of action and reflection to apply the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh to the problems and needs of daily life. But we must recognize that our current understanding of these teachings is limited by social and temporal context, by the various conceptual frameworks that are now operative. Our understanding of Bahá’í precepts and their implications evolves over time. There are certain aspects of the Bahá’í Revelation that we cannot at the present moment fully comprehend. And those aspects of the Faith that we think are relatively straightforward and easy to explain probably have deeper dimensions that we would never conceive of. Even the most apparently mundane of Bahá’u’lláh’s laws and provisions are designed to liberate human beings from baneful and destructive behavior, and to do so across cultures and across time.

Our coming together here this weekend is, in a sense, concerned with a set of very basic questions that define and motivate human consciousness. How do we come to know things? How do we gain understanding about the nature and structure of reality—its purposes, its rationale, its essential characteristics? And what is our place and role in this reality? How do we shape this reality and how does it impact us? How do we integrate knowledge that flows from different sources and perspectives? Fortunately, our Writings provide many pointers in addressing these questions. In the short obligatory prayer, it is affirmed that an essential purpose of our existence is “to know”—or in Arabic “*irfán*”. “*irfán*” refers to that inner or spiritual knowledge that comes to us as a bounty of the Creator. It connotes spiritual insight or recognition of the Divine Reality. It stands in contrast to “*ilm*,” the Arabic term for what we would describe as acquired knowledge or scientific understanding that results from the use of reason and sensory perception. Such knowledge of the sciences is referred to by Bahá’u’lláh, “as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent.” That “*irfán*” and “*ilm*” are deeply connected is underscored by Bahá’u’lláh throughout His Writings. The Manifestations of God are simultaneously described as “They Who are the highest Embodiments of perception (*irfán*)” and “they Who are the Quintessence of knowledge (*ilm*).”⁹ In the Words of

⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 29.

⁸ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 88.

⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1983), p.3.

Wisdom, Bahá'u'lláh affirms: “The source of all learning (*‘ulúm—plural of ‘ilm*) is the knowledge of God (*irfán Allah*).”¹⁰ “Recognition” (*irfán*) of this ultimate source of knowledge, the opening verses of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* emphasize, is “the first duty prescribed by God for His servants.”¹¹

In light of this overarching purpose “to know,” human beings can be viewed as agents of knowledge. Bahá'u'lláh states: “In this day, all must cling to whatever is the cause of the betterment of the world and the promotion of knowledge amongst its peoples.”¹² The Master amplifies this point: “Let the loved ones of God, whether young or old, whether male or female, each according to his capabilities, bestir themselves and spare no efforts to acquire the various current branches of knowledge, both spiritual and secular, and of the arts.”¹³

The responsibility that the Writings place on us in this regard is quite demanding. The means and methods we use to gain and apply knowledge must be informed first and foremost by the principle of justice. It is the “best-beloved of all things,” the capacity of the human soul that allows us to discern truth through our “own eyes” and understanding.¹⁴ The Arabic term that the Guardian has translated as “justice” in the second Hidden Word is “insaf”, which literally means to “cut in half.”¹⁵ It thus implies equity or fairness. Hence, if we were to broadly define scholarship as the pursuit of knowledge, then it must be an endeavor that is balanced and fair in its assumptions, modalities of inquiry and conclusions. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá underscores: “In this day man must investigate reality impartially and without prejudice in order to reach the true knowledge and conclusions.”¹⁶ This notion of justice and balance clearly suggests that the process and fruits of scholarship must be characterized by a spirit of tolerance and openness.

There are obviously many other principles that bear on the acquisition of knowledge. For instance, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that “knowledge is love. Study, listen to exhortations, think, try to understand the wisdom and greatness of God.”¹⁷ And He says: “...every branch of learning, conjoined with the love of God, is approved and worthy of praise; but bereft of His love, learning is barren...”¹⁸ The Universal House of Justice has stressed that in our scholarly undertakings “we cannot separate method from spirit and character,” and has called upon every member of the Bahá’í community “to

¹⁰ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 156.

¹¹ *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 1. For more on this idea see Stephen Phelps, “Notes on Divine Philosophy;” and Frank Lewis, “Discourses of Knowledge in the Bahá’í Writings,” *The Bahá’í Studies Review*, 2001/2002.

¹² Bahá'u'lláh, cited in 26 November 2003 letter of the Universal House of Justice “To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the Cradle of the Faith.”

¹³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Compilation on Scholarship*, Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, 1995.

¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Arabic No. 2 (Wilmette: US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1985).

¹⁵ I am grateful to Mark Hellaby for this insight.

¹⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 75.

¹⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Star of the West*, Vol. 20, No. 10, p. 314.

¹⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1997), p. 181.

strive to develop and offer to humanity a new model of scholarly activity.”¹⁹ This suggests that knowledge can refer to facts, skills, ideas, spiritual verities and insights, qualities, values, methodologies and attitudes. By linking such an integrated notion of knowledge with action, Bahá’ís everywhere are learning about the process of social transformation, of what Shoghi Effendi calls the “society-building power” of the Faith.²⁰ The centrality of encouragement, of cooperative and consultative inquiry, of developing a unified perspective when assessing information and creating theories or models, and of rigorous and systematic approaches to knowledge-building, are some of the other key concepts that we hope to explore with you over the course of the next few days.

“It is incumbent” upon each of us, Bahá’u’lláh says, “to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action...That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race.”²¹ Yet, before we can act, we must develop understanding of what is “written,” and even before that, identify what “Books” we should gain knowledge from. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides direct assistance in this respect. He explains: “There are two Books: one is the Book of creation and the other is the written Book. The written Book consisteth of the heavenly Books which are revealed to the Prophets of God.... The Book of creation is the preserved Tablet and the outspread Roll of existence. The Book of Creation is in accord with the Written Book.”²²

In short, by knowing and understanding, we can act. And to act is to serve. “Thy day of service is now come,” is Bahá’u’lláh’s counsel to one of His devoted followers.²³ The direct linkage between knowledge and service is clearly identified in the Tablet of Wisdom: “He that riseth to serve My Cause should manifest My wisdom, and bend every effort to banish ignorance from the earth.”²⁴

The pursuit of knowledge is an essential expression of the human spirit. This quest for understanding encompasses the tangible and the intangible: from apprehending the laws of physical phenomena and the forces shaping social reality to arriving at insights concerning human purpose and action. Efforts to create, apply and diffuse knowledge define the very fabric of civilized life. From the theoretical to the technical, from the artistic to the moral, from the secular to the transcendental, the Bahá’í teachings explicitly affirm the multidimensional nature of the knowledge enterprise. In particular, our teachings emphasize the necessity of cultivating both the rational and spiritual capacities of the human race, of recognizing, in the words of the House of Justice, that “faith in God and confidence in social progress are in every sense reconcilable; that science and religion are the two inseparable, reciprocal systems of knowledge impelling the advancement of civilization.”²⁵ Our teachings thus assert a “unity in knowledge

¹⁹ *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá’í Faith*: Extracts from letters written on behalf of the Universal of House, 1999; and Universal House of Justice, letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 10 February 1995.

²⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1991), p. 194.

²¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 249.

²² From a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in B. Nakhjavání, *Response*, p. 13. *Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 1:436-7.

²³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 92.

²⁴ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 138.

²⁵ Universal House of Justice, 26 November 2003.

itself,”²⁶ and reject dichotomies that falsely set material understanding against spiritual insight or reason against faith.

Our belief in the harmony of science and religion tells us that what we directly learn from the Revelation is complemented by what we learn from the broader effects of the Revelation—from the advances in knowledge across all areas of human endeavor. These broad, transformative effects of His Revelation are alluded to by Bahá’u’lláh: “I testify that no sooner had the First Word proceeded...out of His mouth, and the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths.”²⁷ The new insights, discoveries and constructive forces of change now manifest in human affairs can all be traced to this mysterious, “vibrating influence” of the Creative Word. The emergence of the Most Great Peace is ultimately a consequence of these two domains of learning—science and religion—coming together in true unity.

Addressing the unprecedented, comprehensive nature of the Bahá’í Revelation, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

Praise be to God that the spirit of the Holy Writings and Tablets which have been revealed in this wondrous Dispensation concerning matters of major or minor importance, whether essential or otherwise, related to the sciences and the arts, to natural philosophy, literature, politics or economics, have so permeated the world that since the inception of the world in the course of past Dispensations and bygone ages nothing like it has ever been seen or heard. Indeed if an avowed follower of Bahá’u’lláh were to immerse himself in, and fathom the depths of, the ocean of these heavenly teachings, and with utmost care and attention deduce from each of them the subtle mysteries and consummate wisdom that lie enshrined therein, such a person’s life, materially, intellectually and spiritually, will be safe from toil and trouble, and unaffected by setbacks and perils, or any sadness or despondency.²⁸

So, it becomes clear that our desire this weekend to explore the diverse meanings, objectives and expressions of Bahá’í scholarship is a bit challenging. At best, we can make a modest attempt to begin a conversation and formulate probing questions. I hope that with these opening thoughts, some questions are already beginning to emerge.

²⁶ See Behrooz Sabet, “An Integrative Approach to Knowledge and Action:

A Bahá’í Perspective,” *Converging Realities* 1:1 (Switzerland: Landegg Academy, 2000)

²⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1998), p. 295.

²⁸ Shoghi Effendi, 13 January 1923 to the Bahá’ís of Adhirbayjan.