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I have read with considerable interest Steve Lambden's 'Thoughts on the Establishment of a Permanent Baha'i Studies Centre and Research Institute' and wish to congratulate him for having set out so lucidly a proposal which appears to merit serious attention in the Baha'i community. I wish him luck in his efforts to generate sympathy for his scheme and hope sympathy may in the end lead to concrete support in the form of adequate funding for the enterprise. In general, I find myself in agreement with most of his observations, although I have reservations about what seems to me to be an overly elaborate and unduly directed syllabus proposed for a three-year course in Baha'i studies. I have no doubt that, were such an institute to be set up, it could serve a valuable function and contribute a great deal to the development of this field as well as to the enrichment of the intellectual life of Baha'is as a whole.

I do, at the same time, have one or two more general reservations the expression of which may help to clarify some of the problems that may be engendered by the establishment of such an Institute and, perhaps, assist in the formulation of more precise plans for the development of academic work in this area. Perhaps my most general observation is that the growth of Babi and Baha'i studies has always suffered from something of a tension between Baha'i perceptions of the status of Baha'ism and the actual, mundane situation of that religion. It is, I think, important to bear in mind that the notion that Baha'ism is a 'world faith' is an ontological assumption for adherents rather than a statement of observable or meaningful fact. Even if we accept the highest current estimate of Baha'i world membership as standing at 3 to 4 million (a figure which, for various reasons, I believe to be exaggerated, perhaps as much as twice the true figure), we still do not have a religious group of any greater size or significance than the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. In historical terms, Baha'ism is a very new and untried phenomenon, with no significant literary, artistic, architectural, political, social, philosophical, theological, or legal achievements to its credit; it has never been the religion of a state or region or the basis for a civilization; and its spread has been the result of conscious, somewhat forced planning (assisted by modern transport and communications) rather than natural or sustained growth. I do not say any of this to be disparaging. In its own terms or in comparison with other new religious movements, Baha'ism has been extremely successful, and I see no reason why it should not continue to be so for at least a little while to come.

But it is obvious that there are acceptable reasons for doubting whether it makes sense -- for the outsider at least -- to try to put Baha'i studies on a par with, say, Buddhist or Islamic studies, or to attempt to fit Baha'ism as a major component into general courses on world religions or as part of a contribution to the development of a 'world theology'. By that standard, general world religion courses would be bursting at the seams with an endless array of small religious traditions claiming parity with the major faiths. I have often in the past expressed my concern about the rather artificial (and, I think, misleading) efforts of Baha'i institutions to have their faith introduced into schools on a par with the established religions of major ethnic minorities. At my harshest, I would describe it as something of a con trick which seeks to take advantage of general public ignorance about the true status of Baha'ism in the world as a whole. Certainly, it is, I am sure, true to say that most scholars even now would approach the Baha'i faith (in its widest sense, as embracing Babism -- something I would on other grounds dispute) from two principal angles: 1) historically, dealing only with the Babi period (up to the 1870s, perhaps), within the context of modern Shi'ism, Islamic reform, or 19th-century Iranian or Middle East history; and 2) sociologically, as a new religious movement (with rather less attention to the question of origins). Those concerned with broader studies of world religions would still be perfectly justified in giving it only the most perfunctory attention, if any at all. All this may, of course, change quite a

lot in the next 50 years or so, but for the present I believe a down-to-earth appraisal of the situation is the one most likely to lead to useful results. Even I, who am very far from promoting Baha'ism as a major topic, find difficulty in convincing colleagues that it is a subject worth considering in any depth at all.

None of this need, of course, have very much impact on purely internal studies, but it does, I think, have to be taken seriously into account in any attempt to foster relations with the academic world outside the Baha'i community or to incorporate Baha'i studies into the framework of religious studies as a whole. A realistic view of how things stand will do more to encourage a positive attitude on the part of outsiders than any amount of what will be seen as pretension or self-delusion about status and comparability. In a situation where even well-established and important minor religious traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, or Shintoism are not well provided for, one cannot expect to bring Baha'i studies deep inside the mainstream of religious studies.

This is, in itself, something of an argument in favour of the establishment of a wholly internal institution designed to train Baha'is in the academic study of their faith. There are, however, problems with such a proposal. At present, the structure of the Baha'i administrative system is such that there would seem to be virtually no room for direct vocational training leading to a career within the Baha'i organization itself. Even if those institutions of the Baha'i faith most in need of religious experts (as opposed to computer programmers, managers, or accountants), by which I mean the Auxiliary Boards and Counsellors (and perhaps some of the Haifa-based agencies, such as the Research Centre), in their capacity as Baha'i *Culama'*, were to develop along more clearly professional lines in the near future, the ethos of appointment would seem to be such as to preclude structured training for the explicit purpose of recruitment into a specific branch of the leadership cadre. The implication that an Institute such as that proposed by Steve might lead to some sort of careerism within the Baha'i administration would, I think, provoke wide opposition in Baha'i circles. It is, of course, eminently arguable from an internal Baha'i perspective that professionalism is at least as desirable in the ranks of the 'religious' leadership (dare one say 'clergy'?) as in the more mundane areas of Baha'i administration, but I shall leave such a debate to those more intimately concerned with it. Another problem with a wholly internal Institute is that, for Baha'i youth to undertake a three-year course in what would effectively be a form of seminary training, would prove of little or no direct benefit to them in choosing and pursuing careers in the outside world -- not an irrelevant consideration in the current economic climate. Inevitably, such an Institution could prove to be a viable proposition only for those with the funds and alternative career options (or family backing) to make it workable.

From an academic viewpoint, the idea of a Baha'i-financed and Baha'i-directed Institution raises serious questions. My own experience in the Baha'i community and what I know of the current activities of bodies like the Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha'i Faith (who managed, for example, recently to hold a conference on 'The Baha'i Faith and Islam' without the participation of anyone who had actually carried out original research in that field) make me skeptical about the chances for such an Institution to be accorded genuine academic freedom consonant with the standards deemed necessary in any secular establishment of higher education. It would be only natural and understandable for Baha'i institutions, were they to finance an operation of this sort, to seek to control the content and direction of courses and research, much as they currently control publications on Baha'i subjects. They are, after all, in the business of converting the world to their faith, not encouraging the dissemination of contrary opinions or doubts. I do not see how such an objection can be realistically circumvented. The mere espousal of the principle of academic integrity would not, of itself, reassure outside academics that control of some sort would not be exercised (as evidenced by the highly tendentious career of CASBF). Even established universities face serious problems concerning academic freedom in the case of externally-funded appointments (my own lectureship at Newcastle, funded by Saudi Arabia being a case in point -- there are current fears that it

may be terminated on the grounds that I carry out and supervise research into 'non-Islamic' topics -- i.e. Shi^cism, Shaykhism, Babism, and Baha'ism). Those who hold the purse-strings must, in the final analysis, influence (however unconsciously) the direction and tenor of research and teaching. One has to ask whether the funding bodies would view with equanimity such possibilities as courses taught by someone like myself or a percentage of Baha'i students withdrawing from the faith or the publication of a journal or books likely to contain material that would not be passed by a Baha'i reviewing panel. Only institutions with no direct stake in the subject taught can hope to remain unconcerned by potentially divisive or damaging developments like those I have mentioned.

It seems to me that a more realistic proposition at the present time would be the creation of a centre for Babi and Baha'i studies (thus differentiated) at a department of religious studies in a reputable western university. This could be done by the provision of funds for, let us say, one lecturer and one research fellow, as well as library facilities and funding for publications, including a journal. Such funding would have to be given absolutely and without strings of any description, ideally in the form of an outright endowment to the university in question, with no stipulations whatever concerning the appointment of incumbents, the content of the library, or the review of publications. It would take some courage on the part of whatever institution (or individual) provided the funds to set up such a centre, but their faith in such a venture would, I believe, be amply rewarded by a reciprocal faith in the teaching and research carried out there.

It seems to me that an essential prerequisite for discussions leading to the establishment of such a centre will be the recognition on the part of Baha'i officialdom of the difference between critical academic study of the Baha'i religion and unacademic hostile comment. If it can be accepted that academic work on religion must entail some degree of controversy and even at times lead to trenchant criticism of established positions and dogmatic assumptions, but that this is crucial to genuinely independent and intellectually valid research, then the possibility of a centre staffed at some stage only by non-Baha'is (just as a centre for Islamic studies might well have no Muslim staff on occasions) might appear less threatening (or less conspiratorial) than it possibly does at present. It is a two-sided affair. If the Baha'i leadership wishes Baha'ism to be taken seriously in academic circles and wants to introduce it into university curricula on some level, it must come to terms with the fact that this can only really be done by taking the academics themselves seriously and according them the respect they deserve as professionals doing their job as they best know how.

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It really boils down in the end to a question of professionalism. Steve has already alluded to the fiasco of the Afnan/Hatcher critique of my article on Babi holy war. What was crucial to that whole situation was the fact that it involved two amateur scholars wading into a controversy they were unequipped to handle (but which they/they knew a lot about), using a thin veneer of scholarship as a mask for what were essentially fundamentalist motives, ending in the production of a naive attack on a professional study which, whatever its merits or demerits, accuracy or inaccuracy, was based on a thorough investigation of complex source materials. As I state in my response, the Afnan/Hatcher article performed a serious disservice to the cause of scholarship in the area, whether by Baha'is or others, to the extent that it would implicate the former in its polemical motivation and fundamentalist methodology, and discourage the latter from involvement in a field of research which could lead to unpleasant situations of that kind. Only a thorough-going professionalism can help allay the fears raised by ill-informed critiques such as this or the earlier Baha'i attacks on E.G. Browne.

I do not think my suggestion precludes Steve's idea for a Baha'i Institute in its own right. The two proposals would be parallel approaches to a complex problem. Steve proceeds from a position of optimism with regard to the growing status of Baha'ism as a faith and a community, I take a more cynical view of the importance and future prospects of the movement. To that extent, the purposes Steve has in mind might best be served by an internally-run seminary-style institution (similar to others established in recent years by adherents of other new religious movements, such as the Unification Theological Seminary, the Religious Science School of Ministry, and the Dharma Realm Buddhist University);

more secular academic ends would be met by the provision of some teaching and research in a single establishment under non-Baha'i control, attracting both Baha'i and non-Baha'i students. It is, of course, possible that one of the results of such a division would be that the Baha'i Institute would become more theologically-oriented and the outside Centre a more strictly religious studies operation, but I think such a demarcation is implicit in the situation. I know Steve wants to create a Baha'i Institution that would conform to the highest academic standards, but, as I have argued in two earlier articles in this Bulletin, there would be tensions between such an aim and the aims of Baha'i scholarship as seen, for example, by the Haifa Research Centre.

In closing, perhaps I can reverse Steve's basic concern about the lack of academically-trained Baha'i scholars (a concern which I nonetheless endorse) by drawing attention to the fact that, as things stand, I am still the only non-Baha'i scholar engaged in full-scale research and writing on Babi or Baha'i subjects. Until larger numbers of outsiders can be persuaded to enter the field in a serious way (even if only to the extent of two or three major publications), there must remain an imbalance the effects of which will continue to be deleterious to the proper development of the subject. I feel this particularly acutely because of the reception my work receives in certain Baha'i circles. Were there to be a wider non-Baha'i scholarship on the subject, it would be more difficult to dismiss some of my theories and approaches as my own personal eccentricities or the results of personal animus: there would be a wider context into which my work could be fitted, as in the case of any other academic subject. And that in itself would, I venture to say, prove a major step forward the process of making Babi and Baha'i studies take their place, however minor, in the full spectrum of scholarship.