

The Baha'i Societies Conference on the 'Academic Study of the  
Baha'i Faith.'

The University of Warwick (Coventry,  
England), February 19-20th. 1983.

A number of Baha'is engaged in the academic study of their faith were invited by the British National (University) Baha'i Societies Committee to speak about their work at the University of Warwick over the weekend February 19-20th 1983. In all five lengthy sessions were held each being followed by questions and discussion-:

(1) Dr. Moojan Momen ( Saturday morning) spoke on the history of the academic study of the Baha'i Faith and certain methodological and historical issues arising from such study. He spoke of 'two spheres' of the 'academic study' of the Babi-Baha'i religions, the oriental and the occidental, and made a distinction between the Baha'i and the non-Baha'i scholar in organizing his speech. In his review of the oriental academic or scholarly tradition Dr. Momen first spoke about the kind of training undergone in 19th century Iran and noted that the Babi-Baha'i 'academic tradition' is rooted in Shaykhism; most of the 'Letters of the Living' were former Shaykhis. The Bab wrote commentaries on certain suras of the Qur'an-though their form and style are illustrative of a break with the Islamic tradition-and some Babis composed polemical works in defense of the Babi Faith (around 1848-9)-these being the first-fruits of the Babi-Baha'i 'academic' or learned tradition.

Dr. Momen, in speaking of the oriental Baha'i scholarly tradition, noted its Islamic roots and spoke briefly about Nabil-i Akbar, Abu al-Fadl Gulpaygani, Fadil-i Mazandarani and Ishraq Khavari. The apologetic orientation of the works of these learned Baha'is was underlined and distinguished from modern western academic study. Their learned writings remain however, highly important sources of information of great value to future generations of scholars. Had they not put pen to paper valuable information would have been lost. They put highly important questions to Baha'u'llah and <sup>c</sup>Abdu'l-Baha and were the recipients of illuminating Tablets. In this respect their Islamic learning has yielded great benefits.

With respect to 'non- Babi[-Baha'i]' writing among orientals in the above connection Dr. Momen mentioned its polemical nature and thought it unworthy of detailed mention since he felt that it contributed little or nothing to the scholarly study of the Babi-Baha'i religions. Such polemic remains a 'growth industry' in present-day Iran.

In reviewing the history of western non-Baha'i study of the Babi-Baha'i movements Dr.Momen singled out Dr. Austin H.Wright's article, 'Bab und seine Secte in Persien (ZDMG, Leipzig, 1851) as the first article to appear in an academic journal.He went on to speak of the work of Gobineau,Les Religiones.. (Paris, 1865), Mirza Kazem-Beg, Bab i Babidui.. (St.Petersburg 1865 +Journal Asiatique Paris, 1 66) and others.The work of E.G.Browne was regarded as being 'more accurate' especially inasmuch as Browne 'revealed' the Baha'i dimension of the supposedly monolithic Babi phenomenon.He carried out important work in correctly identifying manuscripts and was the first to write about Baha'u'llah. A.L.M.Nicholas' efforts in translating certain of the Bab's major works was mentioned along with the fact that Shoghi Effendi thought highly of them.The work of such Russian scholars as A.Tumansky and V.Rosen is of importance and interest especially inasmuch as they were working with Baha'i materials.Tumansky, Dr.Momen stated, had not only translated Baha'u'llah's al-Kitab al-Aqdas into Russian but had written 'the best academic account of the Baha'i Faith to this day'.

Dr.Momen expressed the view that scholarship on the Babi-Baha'i religions 'died out' in the 1920's but spoke of a rebirth of interest among non-Baha'i scholars in the last '2-3 years'.

Next Dr.Momen spoke briefly about western Baha'i scholarship.He noted the difficulty of sorting out what might be considered 'teaching material' and what 'academic study' and went on to say a few words about the scholarly essays of the French Baha'i writer Hippolyte Dreyfus.The late Hand of the Cause Mr.Hasan Balyuzi was described as the first really scholarly writer since E.G.Browne. His important work has served to inspire a new generation of Baha'i scholars. In Dr.Momen's opinion the Canadian based Association for Baha'i Studies carries out important work but has shifted from its earlier more academic orientation. Many people are now engaged in Babi-Baha'i studies.Some have gained their Ph.D. It will however, take 5years or more before academic Baha'i studies begins to be more widely known and bears its fruits.There are signs of maturity and of a move from the writing of purely polemical or 'teaching' materials to more objective scholarship.This though is not to say that there is not much to be done in presenting the Baha'i Faith to the thinking world and making it truly relevant to the age in which we live.The thinking world will not be content with simplistic answers.Scholars must take the lead through their detailed study of the Baha'i writings.

Having sketched and commented on the history of the study of the Babi-Baha'i religions Dr. Momen spoke on some aspects of his view of the meaning of Baha'i scholarship. He first underlined the importance of Baha'i scholars breaking away from the notion that learning implies spiritual superiority. This false notion which has 'infiltrated the Faith as well' is pronounced in Christian and Islamic circles. 'In Islam', it was stated, 'learning made people focal points of imitation' (cf. the marja'-i taqlid in Shi<sup>C</sup>i Islam) such that respect was given to people purely as a result of their learning. Corruption, lust for leadership, power, wealth, etc., often resulted. Baha'u'llah has warned his followers to avoid these pitfalls though knowledge and learning are not condemned. It is service that is important. Individuals are often influenced by their environment. Any sense of 'spiritual superiority' must be absent from the Baha'i scholar. Respect for the learned has its place but should not be overdone. There are dangers in showing the learned too much respect. There is likewise, Dr. Momen continued, a danger in being antagonistic to learning out of a 'fear of the unknown'. This might lead to a retreat into unbalanced fundamentalism. If it is said, 'We have the writings, that is enough' there are 'dangers' in this attitude.

Dr. Momen finally turned his attention to the tensions which may result from Baha'is working within the western academic tradition. He felt unhappy with anti-religious reductionist approaches and mentioned the serious consequences this may have upon faith. Though he did not feel that the academic study of the Baha'i Faith should be discouraged he did exhort his hearers to think carefully about the pitfalls involved in such study. The university undergraduate should 'absorb the discipline' and the postgraduate student 'learn the methods of research'. It would, he stated, be better not to do postgraduate research into the Faith. The postgraduate student is 'not a free agent'. His findings will not be taken seriously in that he has not made a reputation for himself and may be unduly influenced by his supervisor. Baha'i scholars studying in universities would be well advised to do research in a discipline 'parallel to the Faith' and thereby establish their reputations in a field in which they will not be accused of bias. Later the field of Baha'i studies might be entered into. Those engaged in Baha'i studies it was also mentioned, have, as Baha'is, the duty to live the Baha'i life by attending feasts, etc., and keeping in touch with community activities. Doing this would prevent many problems. The values of the academic world are not the same as Baha'i values.

(2) Peter Smith ( Saturday afternoon) spoke about certain aspects of methodology and commented on issues arising from a sociological approach to Babi-Baha'i studies. He began by referring to the important question of the relationship between religious authority or religious claims and 'scientific knowledge'. The 'crucial issue'

of the relationship between 'revelation' and 'reason', 'science' and 'religion' is highly problematic and will not be solved by merely repeating the Baha'i principle of their 'essential harmony'. There are no easy answers. The 'reason' 'revelation' clash or relationship will not be solved by Baha'is alone. The question of 'religious authority' concerns members of all religious movements.

Smith went on to mention some of the 'ultimate sources of reference'. He referred in connection with the Bab's claims, to the notion that the power to reveal verses constitutes a proof apart from knowledge and the fulfillment of prophecies. In the Qur'an similarly, the claim is made that neither men nor jinn are capable of producing its like or of bringing a sura like it. Then there is the claim to be capable of working miracles. The miracle is again divorced from proof claims connected with knowledge. Such proofs or truth claims tend to make the rational approach to religion irrelevant. If authority resides in the 'fact of revelation' or the working of miracles it can be said that it 'doesn't matter whether or not authority clashes with reason'. In this way some of the problems involved in the 'revelation' - 'reason' relationship were highlighted.

Having said this— and much more besides—Peter Smith observed that within the 'paradigm religion' the claim to authority is central resulting in a tension with other sources of knowledge and authority. Baha'is should not blandly assume that this tension has been resolved for it is 'unlikely to be resolved in the immediate future'. They should be cautious in claiming that their Faith is a 'scientific religion'.

Peter Smith next turned his attention to the various 'approaches to Baha'i studies'. He mentioned—: (1) Detached positivism in which it is thought that man's apprehension of the world enables him to come to a 'single and unambiguous knowledge of things'. This approach was criticised. Scientific knowledge is not exactly cumulative but establishes itself through a series of 'scientific revolutions'. Though some sociologists have such a positivistic approach others have criticized it. (2) The humanistic hermeneutic approach. Here the observer or researcher attempts to understand the object of his enquiry with 'an eye to understanding the perspectives of the people involved'. (3) Honest polemic in which there is an awareness of 'scientific problems' and faith perspectives are not deliberately distorted. (4) Uninformed or mis-informed polemic which is of little value and often counter-productive. There are thus, it was added, two kinds of attacks on the Baha'i Faith, 'honest attacks' and 'dishonest attacks'. Covenant breaker material is largely 'dishonest polemic'.

At this point Smith turned his attention to issues central to the sociology of religion. At one time it was noted, in contrasting modern scientific knowledge with 'medieval religious concerns', religious thinkers claimed authoritative knowledge in all spheres. Then came the tension caused by the emergence of 'secular knowledge'. Gradually Christians abandoned the claim to be able to make scientific statements about the physical universe. The church 'lost out'. With the removal of the monopoly on knowledge came competing theories of knowledge. Religionists responded in a variety of ways. Some 'joined in' or became secularized— religion could be explained away in terms of psychological or sociological theories. Others reaffirmed traditional authority in defiance of secular theories, etc. i.e. certain Catholic thinkers or American fundamentalists. When the traditional world crumbles some insist that what was always believed is right. They turn their back on the modern world. A third category of people attempt to retrieve and uncover what exists in the religious tradition. The question 'What is it that I can accept?' arises. In a Baha'i context such questions are important or will have important consequences. There could be 'Baha'i fundamentalists' and those who are ready to 'bargain away' a part of religious knowledge or tradition. Many will ask the question, 'What elements of tradition need to be uncovered and retrieved?' In the Baha'i context it might be said that the essential element is the 'response to the existential call of religion' — the change of one's self.

The 'issue of the Baha'i Faith in the West' was also raised by Peter Smith. It was pointed out that the way in which people respond to religion is related to their 'social location' and the 19th century development of European and American 'control over the rest of the world' was outlined. In the 1890's the 'economic unification of the world' found realization and was accompanied by political and cultural domination. Around the same time religious teachers or missionaries from the orient, including Baha'is and Ahmadis, came to the West. The response to this western domination varied. Some tribal peoples looked for the eschatological overthrow of the 'whites' and rebelled. In Africa and elsewhere in the middle East a plethora of Mahdis appeared. Babism however, cannot be adequately explained as a response to Western impact in 19th century Iran as by N. Keddie. It is essentially a religious phenomenon. Yet the Baha'i Faith is related to European impact in Iran and the middle East in general. It represents, in part, a response to the question of the West and traditional religious values. The Baha'i Faith in late 19th century Iran was able to accommodate both deeply religious individuals and others who were greatly influenced by European values.

In response to a comment from a Baha'i present to the effect that people become Baha'is as a result of a 'heartfelt attraction' Peter Smith pointed out that most Baha'is are not profoundly religious—though there are a small minority who are deeply religious. Relatively few are 'converted' for religious reasons alone.

The question of persecution and violent actions against Baha'is was raised. In this connection Peter Smith mentioned that Iranian 'religious fanaticism' is not just 'religious fanaticism' but has a social and economic dimension.

In conclusion Peter Smith said a few words about the future of the Baha'i Faith, though he declined to suggest — in response to a question— what 'changes would make people accept the Faith in Europe'. He did though, suggest that the future of the Faith lie in the 'third world'.

(3) Stephen Lambden (Saturday afternoon) spoke on the subject of 'Deepening and the academic study of Baha'i doctrine'. He began by asserting that, like say Judaism and Islam, the Baha'i religion may be characterised as a "religion of the Book" in the sense that the locus of Baha'i doctrine is contained in scripture believed to be divinely inspired. The attempt to understand and experience the Baha'i sacred writings may be said to lie at the heart of the Baha'i concept of spirituality. Reference was made in this connection to passages in the Kitab-i Iqan and al-Kitab al-Aqdas. Yet, despite the importance of scripture in the Baha'i Faith, the scholarly study of the Baha'i writings has hardly begun. Many issues are raised by the academic study of Baha'i doctrine which are not commonly raised in the 'deepening situation' as usually experienced or indulged in by Baha'is.

After such preliminary remarks Lambden attempted to indicate some of the issues raised by the scholarly study of Baha'i scripture at the same time mentioning certain scholarly tasks which have yet to be carried out.

Textual criticism, it was first remarked, has hardly begun. Critical editions of the writings of the Bab and Baha'u'llah have not appeared. The nature (i.e. autograph or otherwise) and MSS source(s) lying behind printed editions is not usually indicated. No critical apparatus indicating variant readings -- bearing in mind the fact that Baha'u'llah not infrequently quotes himself in a different way--is set out. Much work needs to be done in collecting and collating MSS and expert knowledge of the handwriting and style of the Bab, Baha'u'llah, <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha and their scribes or secretaries needs to be developed. This is important in connection with the establishment of the authenticity or otherwise of Babi-Baha'i literature along with its dating, etc. Then also, there is the task of finding the original texts of many letters of Abdu'l-Baha, for example, that exist in English (or German, etc) translation.

In the deepening situation awareness of the nature of English translation, Lambden continued, is seldom present. Meanings are sometimes derived from the translation which are not indicated in the original Persian or Arabic. Reference by way of example was made to the line in Some Answered Questions (London, n.d. p. 113), "Adam signifies the spirit of Adam (روح آدم) and Eve his soul (نفس)". That Eve symbolizes the "soul" of Adam might be thought to mean that Eve represents Adam's immortal higher nature. A more accurate translation of nafs though, implies that Eve represents Adam's (man's) lower or possibly carnal nature which induced him (mankind) to 'fall' or enter the realm of materiality. Karim Khan Kirmani, the "third Shaykh" and an enemy of the Bab and Baha'u'llah, wrote a book entitled Kitāb-i Nusrat al-Dīn in 1266.A.H./1849-50.A.D. in which he, in the course of commenting on Gen 2:21f, states that woman (زن) is the nafs of man (مرد) in the archetypal world of humanity. That woman was created from the "left side" of man means that woman should be obedient to man as the intellect operating in the "right side" of truth should control the lower nafs of man (pp.18-19).

Brief mention was then made of the sometimes paraphrastic nature of Shoghi Effendi's translations. The fact that for Baha'is his translations represent interpretation was compared with the Targum of the Jews and the Greek LXX (Septuagint) translation adopted and believed to be divinely inspired by early Christians (along with the Massoretic text-- received Hebrew text). The point was then made that good translation requires an overall knowledge of many aspects of Babi-Baha'i history and doctrine and of its background, etc. As an example of a faulty translation borne of inadequate knowledge Lambden referred to a German translation of a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Baha to Ethel Rosenberg on the chronology of the Lawh-i Hikmat of Baha'u'llah (original text printed in Ishraq Khavari, Ed. Māida-yi Āsmānī Vol.2 pp.64-7). 'Abdu'l-Baha refers to the divergent chronologies in the various texts of the Pentateuch (Torah)--: (1) the Massoretic text, (2) the Septuagint (Greek, LXX), and (3) the Samaritan Pentateuch. The German translation has, not "Samaritan Pentateuch" (for تورات سامری) but "Sumerische Pentateuch" or non-existent "Sumerian Pentateuch". In the same Tablet there is reference to a certain هنری اسکات (apparently at first sight Henry Scott) who wrote a commentary (tafsīr) on the Torah. This person may in fact be two persons or a reference to an edition of the Bible Commentary of Matthew Henry (1662-1714) and Thomas Scott (1747-1821) which went through many 19th century editions.\*

\* This Commentary was probably known to 'Abdu'l-Baha through the writings of Maulana Rahmat Allāh Kairānawī (1818-1890) the author of the well known Izhār al-Haqq though this same writer also mentions the Pentateuchal commentary of the great Henry Wescott ( ) and I am now inclined to think that the reference in 'Abdu'l-Baha's Tablet to E. Rosenberg is to his Commentary. (Ed).

In the deepening situation, Lambden continued, little attention is paid to the chronology and Sitz-im-Leben ('setting in life') of the Babi-Baha'i Scriptures knowledge of which is essential in academic study. The meaning of certain Tablets is not at all clear outside a knowledge of the circumstances of its revelation, to whom it was addressed, and its place in the chronology of the writings of its author. The task of arranging the Tablets of Baha'u'llah in chronological order has not yet been achieved save in its barest outline. It is not always clear whether a certain Tablet belongs to the Baghdad, Adrianople or Akka periods or to which subdivision of these periods. The chronological order of Baha'u'llah's 'Tablets to the Kings' has not yet been worked out in detail. Much study of historical events and persons alluded to or mentioned in these Tablets needs to be carried out. In dating Baha'i scripture both internal and external data should be taken into consideration. Different Baha'i scholars have assigned certain Tablets to different periods. i.e. A. Taherzadeh in his The Revelation of Baha'u'llah and Ishraq Khavari in his Ganj-i Shayigan. The more detailed working out of the chronology of the writings of the Bab, Baha'u'llah and <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha as well as Shoghi Effendi will enable the developments in a 'progressively revealed' Baha'i Scripture to be studied and influences upon the minds of its authors to be registered. Divine Revelation, it was argued in passing, may be seen as a creative interaction between the authors of 'divine revelation' and 'interpretation' and their intellectual and social Sitz-im-Leben. The central figures of the Baha'i religion all read books and sometimes drew on the insights of their followers. Baha'u'llah for example, read the Bible in Arabic translation—probably a Christian version—quoting it in his Javahir al-Asrar (c.1860?) and a number of subsequent writings.

In the academic study of the Babi-Baha'i writings the background, historical context and general milieu must be considered. Shoghi Effendi called Baha'is to pay special attention to the Islamic roots of their Faith in order that they might gain an adequate understanding of its message. For the scholar attention should not only be paid to the 'orthodox' Shi<sup>C</sup>i roots of the Faith along with the Shaykhi influences but also to the possible impact of Sufi, Hurufi, <sup>C</sup>Ali Ilahi, Isma'ili and Druze ideas. Both Babi and Baha'i terminology it was pointed out shows the influence of Islamic movements generally labelled 'extremist'. Liberal Arabic thought in the modern liberal age as diffused throughout the Ottoman Empire as well as Iranian modernist thought and more direct Western influence upon the thought of Baha'u'llah and <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha should be investigated. Such study shows that care must be taken in claiming that certain seemingly modern 20th century perspectives were first voiced by the central figures of



the Faith. Before <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha, it was pointed out, spoke of the need for universal education and its being the same for boys and girls, a certain Rifa'a Badawi Rāfi<sup>C</sup> al-Tahtāwī (1801-73) of the first generation of Egyptian modernists had made the same points in his al-Murshid al-Amin li'l-Banāt wa'l-Banīn (Cairo, 1289.A.H./1872-3, pp.62ff,104,128,148,). Indeed, <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha was well read in such literature. It is possible to trace the origins of certain stories and ideas he mentions in his Tablets— he himself occasionally mentions their source. The "story of the dead dog" told of Jesus and his disciples by <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha, Lambden further asserted, is found in a poem of the Persian poet Nizami ( he devoted a whole poem to the story) and in Ibn al-<sup>C</sup>Arabi's 'Meccan Revelations'—which was known to Baha'u'llah and probably <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha also. Source criticism is an important scholarly task. The knowledge of the sources of certain themes and motifs in the Baha'i writings often throws considerable light on their meaning. It is not an 'heretical task' which is contrary to a belief in 'divine revelation'. Even a knowledge of the history or nature and development of literary forms can help in understanding the Baha'i Revelation. The form of the '7 valleys', as is well known, was much used by Sufi mystics and <sup>C</sup>Attar's 'Conference of the Birds' throws light on the meaning of Baha'u'llah's 'Seven Valleys'. But, more interestingly, the form of the individual 'Hidden Words' is that of the 'Divine Saying' or Hadith Qudsi in Islam some of which were collected together and called 'The Hidden Book of Fatimih' by Shi'ci Muslims the 'Hidden Words' once being so designated.

In concluding his lecture Stephen Lambden mentioned a few of the differences between 'deepening' and academic study—: (1) Deepening tends to revolve around well known and familiar or oft repeated themes and passages of scripture while academic study necessitates the study of lesser known— and often extremely important— or neglected topics and texts; (2) Deepening or those involved in it often consciously or unconsciously attempt to avoid deeper or controversial issues which cannot be ignored in academic study; (3) Deepening often fails to raise questions which academic study necessitates asking. i.e. obscure passages in texts such as the Kitab-i Iqan cannot be simply passed over in silence in academic study; (4) Academic study must concern itself with historical context or Sitz im Leben and 'source criticism', etc, though deepening need or often does not. Deepening though, need not be academically oriented but it would be better if its present level were improved.

(4) Todd Lawson (Sunday morning) from Montreal Canada who was visiting England in connection with his proposed post-graduate study of the Bab's writings, agreed to speak for a short while— without preparation— on the subject of

Tafsīr (Islamic Qur'ānic commentary) on which he had already undertaken post-graduate research with particular reference to the Qur'anic account of Jesus' crucifixion.

After outlining the history and nature of Islamic Qur'anic commentary, Lawson noted that Muslims have, on the whole, denied that Jesus was crucified or died on the cross (refer, Qur'an 4:155-162). Baha'is on the other hand, assert— and this is remarkable—the historicity of Jesus' crucifixion. Coming from a non-Muslim background western Baha'is are seldom aware of the innovatory nature and importance of the Baha'i position with respect to the crucifixion of Jesus

Qur'an 4:155f is quite ambiguous about the crucifixion and could be translated in various ways, the phrase shubbiha lahum being at the centre of the controversy. Early Muslim story tellers such as accompanied the invading Muslim armies attempted to make these verses meaningful to their hearers who wanted to be entertained with a good story. Qur'anic stories and verses were sometimes made meaningful by the 'on the spot' invention of expository tales. Addressing a Christian audience to which the Qur'anic verses and the phrase shubbiha lahum had to be made meaningful such story tellers seem to have taught that it only "appeared to them" (the Jews) that Jesus had been crucified and died on the cross. Some asserted that Jesus had not been crucified but that one of his disciples took on his appearance and was crucified in his stead. Quite fanciful stories were concocted. Yet, in the Qur'anic passage in question it is stated that "God raised him (Jesus) unto Himself". This created a problem and a story was invented to the effect that God raised Jesus up to heaven from a house before the crucifixion of another in his stead. These stories about Jesus' non-crucifixion became popular and may have their roots in the Christian gnostic tradition. They became crystallised in the Hadith literature though they are not always traced back to the Prophet Muhammad himself. The Qur'an commentator Tabari, after recording and discussing various traditions about Jesus' crucifixion, ends by saying 'And God knows best how it was'. By the 19th century however, it was practically an article of faith that Jesus was not himself crucified on the cross.

The first major Qur'anic commentator to look beyond the various traditions back to what the Qur'an itself says was Zamakhsharī (12th century A.D.). He argued that the grammar of the Qur'an does not support the substitution theories found in the Hadith literature.

---

The following is an extract of a Tablet of <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha to Mr. Thornton Chase translated by Mirza Ahmad Sohrab on June 8th 1911 referring to Qur'an 4:155f:

"In regard to the verse, which is revealed in the Koran, that His Highness Christ, was not killed and was not crucified, by this is meant the Reality of Christ. Although they crucified this elemental body, yet the merciful reality and the heavenly existence remain eternal and undying, and it was protected from the oppression and persecution of the enemies, for Christ is Eternal and Ever-lasting. How can he die? The death and crucifixion was imposed on the physical body of Christ, and not upon the Spirit of Christ." (Star of the West 2:7/8.p.13) (Ed).

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Razī also discarded the crude substitution theories. He argued that if God operated in this way Muslims could not be sure even of the fundamentals of their Faith. His views were however, forgotten or ignored though, Lawson also noted, the Brethren of Purity affirmed Jesus' crucifixion or the reality of his death on the cross.

Finally in connection with the subject of Jesus' crucifixion, Lawson raised the question as to why Muslims came to deny this event. He proposed that the denial of Jesus' death on the cross originated among the early Muslim story tellers in view of its 'entertainment value'. In the course of time it was understood to be the Muslim view by Christian writers such as John of Damascus and in the course of Muslim-Christian dialogue became the standard Muslim position. Soteriological concerns such as are entertained by Christians in connection with the death of Jesus were not uppermost in the minds of Muslims.

In concluding his brief talk Lawson referred to the Bab's commentaries on the Qur'an noting that tafsir is the 'most Muslim of all literary pursuits'. He stated that it is important to determine where the Bab stands in this tradition in view of the fact that the Bab often gives qabbalistic interpretations to Qur'anic texts--in, for example his commentary on the Surat al-Kawthar-- and that his tafsir is not exactly commentary as commonly understood, i.e. not exactly 'exoteric' or historically oriented commentary.

(5) Viva Tomlin (Sunday afternoon) introduced those present to the theological dimension of Baha'i studies. She read a paper designed to raise the kinds of questions which the student might encounter or should ask on the 'long journey' towards understanding the 'theology of the Baha'i Faith'. What, she asked, does it mean when it is said that we were created 'to know and to worship God'; does this involve the intellect? The emotions? Adoration? Why were we created to know God? Does this statement make sense? Is there a God?..etc. How do I find out about God? Many such questions were raised in the first part of Tomlin's paper.

'What is theology?' was also a question that was raised and discussed. Theology, Viva Tomlin pointed out, is vast and many-faceted. Classical theologians study the 'Word of God' which has been identified with Christ who has been identified with or represents the Godhead. They consider what God said 'in Christ' and the 'being of Christ' all of which has implications for man, etc. In the Baha'i Faith though, the central figure is not Christ but the 'Glory of God'. In the light of this we must ask many questions: 'Who is man?' 'Why was he created?', etc. The theologian may also ask why man and the creation

exist. Why? What is it all for? What is the reason behind the universe? Is life random or has it a purpose? If we make God our starting point for theological reflection then the questions arise; 'What is God like'? If God is transcendent how can we understand him and his purpose? What questions should we ask? Does the problem of God's transcendence mean that theology is a 'cry to the unknown' or an attempt to read an 'unreadable Book'? The theologian tries to read the 'Book' as God wishes it to be read. The 'Why?', and 'What?' and other questions are asked about God and man as well as questions about the future destiny of things.

Theology once embraced all spheres of learning offering authoritative answers to questions about God the universe and man. A primary source of affirmation was that God had made Himself known in history. Again though, 'What does this mean?' 'What does it mean to be a believing creature?', etc.

At several points in her paper Tomlin referred to herself as a 'liturgical theologian' or 'liturgical theologian / philo-theologian of liturgically derived doxology' which implies a love for the 'Word of God' in connection with worship and glorification. She also commented upon and listed many questions which the theologian might ask in connection with Baha'u'llah's 'Short Obligatory Prayer': What does 'I bear witness' mean? Does 'my God' refer to a personal God? If so what does 'to know and to worship' Him mean? What are the implications of 'to know and to worship (God)'?

Some attention was also given to asking questions about the source of authority implicit in or lying behind such texts as the 'Short Obligatory Prayer'. By what authority does the individual know that these are authoritative statements? Where are the manuscripts? etc...etc.. The 'Short Obligatory Prayer' originates with Baha'u'llah... These questions are important though the 'philo-theologian of liturgically derived doxology' is concerned primarily with the implications of belief or 'what is believed'.

In the course of the discussion following Tomlin's paper-- which I have only barely outlined here--the question of religious doubting arose. It was felt that doubts should be expressed openly and regarded as stepping stones to spiritual maturity. Much more attention should be paid to the open-minded consideration of and grappling with doubts.

#### Concluding note

This report only represents my own recollection of some of the ground covered and statements made by the speakers who addressed what turned out to be a wholly Baha'i audience of perhaps 50-100 persons. I may well have misrepresented the speakers at certain points or failed to record important statements. The event was, I think, successful. A comforting maturity and openness was shown by those present. Many thoughtful questions were asked only

a few of which are mentioned above. The organization was good and several persons expressed the desire for more such communication between those engaged in Baha'i studies and the Baha'i community at large.

Stephen Lambden

---

ANNOUNCEMENT OF FORTHCOMING BAHAI STUDIES SEMINAR

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

DEPT. OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES.\*

SAT. 17th AND SUN. 18th SEPT.

1983.

It is hoped that at this forthcoming Baha'i Studies Seminar papers will be read which fall into one of the following four (obviously loosely defined) categories:-

- 1) The study of Babi-Baha'i texts;
- 2) The study of Babi-Baha'i history;
- 3) The study of Babi-Baha'i doctrine;
- 4) The study of the Babi-Baha'i movements.

Offers of papers and enquiries should be addressed to either Dr. Denis MacEoin, Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, England, U.K., or Stephen Lambden (same address).

---

\* Venue and sponsorship subject to confirmation.