

Report of the Baha'i Studies Seminar on Baha'i Scholarship .
held at the Momen residence, 26-27 January 1983.

An informal seminar, loosely oriented around Baha'i scholarship ,
was held at the home of Moojan and Wendy Momen in Biggleswade
(Beds.England) over the weekend of January 26-27 1983.The participants
were-:

Dr.Moojan Momen (MM)	Robert Parry (RP)
Dr.Wendy Momen (WM)	Stephen Lambden (SL)
Todd Lawson (TL)	Viva Tomlin (VT)
James Taylor (JT)	
Harry Docherty (HD)	

Session 1 (Saturday morning).

This first session was oriented around Dr.Denis MacEoin's paper Problems of scholarship in a Baha'i Context in Baha'i Studies Bulletin Vol.1.No.3. (December 1982),pp.44-68. MM opened the discussion by summarizing his own feelings about MacEoin's perspectives.These he has written up for this issue of the Bulletin (see below,pp57 - 65)and need not be set down again here. Lively discussion followed MM's preliminary remarks about MacEoin's paper. Several participants felt that MacEoin so elevated occidental academicism as to leave little room for the 'theological' or 'intuitive' side of Baha'i scholarship.The question of the Baha'i reviewing process was then briefly discussed.Reference was made to Shoghi Effendi's words in The World Order of Baha'u'llah (2nd Rev.Ed.Wilmette,Illinois, 1974),p.9, " I need not enlarge at the present moment upon what I have stated in the past..that the present restrictions imposed on the publication of Baha'i literature will be definitely abolished"(written Feb. 27th., 1929).This passage,it was felt, indicated a future move away from authoritarianism.MacEoin's pessimism about future Baha'i 'totalitarianism' was thought to be extreme.WM pointed out that the attitude towards review in this country (UK) had become more liberal in recent times. JT spoke of the changing attitudes within society towards sex and of the embryonic nature of the Baha'i Cause— there will,he felt,be a move towards greater liberalism.TL wondered just when this move towards greater liberalism would be made: 'When will the review process be abolished?' .There will be a stagnation if there is not soon a greater liberalism.MM then commented, ' The administration does not exist for the benefit of scholars but for the whole Baha'i community.Scholars must bide their time for the benefit of the community'. WM added that the progressive scholarly element within the Baha'i community 'drags the administration along' and pointed out the great

service Denis MacEoin had done in this respect. He was referred to as a 'key liberalizing factor' and one who has helped to widen the attitudes of the British NSA. TL then stated that 'other NSA's do not have this liberal attitude'. MM responded by setting forth his view that scholars should not 'kick against the administration' but 'approach it positively in such a way as to enlighten the whole community.' 'But when', TL asked, 'will the present attitude towards (Baha'i) review pass away?' MM replied by saying that 'It is already passing' and argued that it has to do with the evolution of the Baha'i community from 'sect' to 'church'. TL then observed that many Baha'is have 'strong personalities' and that 'totalitarian attitudes' should not be simply 'put up with'. MM again responded by arguing that too much liberality within the Baha'i community-- which might lead to a 'loss of control'-- would not be healthy. That some people leave the Baha'i community as a result of supposed 'totalitarianism' is inevitable.

The 'Baha'i principle' of the 'independent investigation of truth' was next briefly discussed. It was felt that this 'principle' applied particularly to the spiritual search for the Manifestation of God.

The nature of Shoghi Effendi's history writing called forth several comments at this point. It was generally agreed that a greater awareness of the non-infallibility of Shoghi Effendi in this area should be fostered in a tactful manner. HD thought this would be difficult to achieve in the light of 'ingrained ideas' about the infallibility of Shoghi Effendi. MM noted that the Universal House of Justice had pointed out the non-infallibility of Shoghi Effendi in the sphere of history and mentioned that it would take time for the community to learn about and come to terms with this 'established fact'. Scholars however, should be careful about the way they correct certain historical errors in say God Passes By. There is no evidence for 'intentional fabrication'.

MacEoin's assertion that Avarih's Kawākib.. was dropped by Baha'is was criticised. It has been available in Iran and elsewhere after his excommunication. Shoghi Effendi's use of 'covenant breaker sources' was also mentioned in passing as was his alleged failure to set forth in his God Passes By the militant nature of Babi jihād. Several participants felt that Shoghi Effendi had not radically toned down Babi militancy.

In connection with textual authority and 'absolute truth' RP asserted that it is the 'truth underlying things' that is important for many Baha'is. VT also drew attention to the centrality of the Baha'i experience and the theological dimension of the content of revelation. SL though, argued that the

Baha'i Faith is a 'religion of the Book' and that the experience of it cannot be divorced from the content of revelation.

Session 2 (Saturday afternoon)

This session consisted of a discussion of points made by MM in his unpublished paper, Scholarship and the Baha'i Community.

The inability of rational scholarship to penetrate the 'heart of religion' was underlined by several participants. Whether or not 'concepts' mirror the 'heart of religion' was debated. RP pointed out that faith has a non-conceptual aspect which scholarship cannot reach. MacEoin criticises Baha'i propositions and 'leaves out' the 'experiential element'. MM in this light argued that the publication of Baha'u'llah's al-Kitab al-Aqdas would not result in a 'mass apostasy' inasmuch as 'most Baha'is do not relate to their Faith in terms of doctrine'. RP then added that religious truth is essentially something to be 'lived in time' and not a 'frozen reality'; 'concepts do not capture what religion is all about'. There must be an awareness of the 'limitations of concepts'. SL again expressed the opinion that the concrete conceptual dimension of the Baha'i Faith cannot be spirited away in the hope of solving concrete doctrinal problems. The Baha'i experience is partly an experience of concepts or doctrines.

In connection with the 'dangers of Baha'i scholarship' mention was made of the need for humility and spirituality. The Baha'i scholar should not consider himself superior to his fellow believers. An academic knowledge of the Baha'i Faith, it was felt by most participants, should be accompanied by that spiritual knowledge and confirmation that is a result of meditative deepening. A distinction was made between academic study and deepening. VP however, held that her academic theological work was not divorced from spirituality. SL agreed that academic study might at times foster spiritual insights or lead to spiritual experiences. RP stated that there can be a 'concept experience'. MM stressed the need for academic study to be supplemented by spiritual reflection on the Baha'i Faith. Time should be set aside for prayer, meditation and deepening. JT stated that the simple believer is often more spiritual than the accomplished scholar and TL referred to the example of Abu al-Fadl Gulpaygani who is said to have been converted by a simple Baha'i but who yet attained great humility. The point was also made by TL that since 'work is worship' academic research is also a form of worship. MM added that it must be 'work performed in the spirit of service'.

The problem of scholars losing a balanced perspective of the Baha'i Faith in its wholeness was next discussed in the light of the scholarly focus on doctrinal details. An introverted and abstracted focus on detailed

problematic issues can lead to a loss of Baha'i perspectives. HD thought that scholars who had this problem were like people who take a clock apart but forget how to put it back together. Association with other Baha'i scholars would be a safeguard against this danger of loss of perspective. MM asked, 'Is this the problem?' and RP asserted that it is a problem and referred to the fact that there are very few if any references to Buddha or Krishna 'in the Tablets'. There are concrete problematic issues which need to be considered by Baha'i apologists.

Session 3 (Sunday morning)

A number of issues relating to Baha'i scholarship were discussed in this session. The question of 'Baha'i bias' in scholarly work and the appropriate Baha'i approach to scholarship were considered. Then, in connection with what constitutes the 'field of Baha'i scholarship', some remarks were made about what topics might at this stage be usefully studied. Reference was made to the history of the Baha'i Faith in Russia (TL) and to the importance of an analysis of the mystical aspects of the Baha'i revelation (MM) as well as to the need for a study of the Baha'i Faith and Eastern religions - Hinduism and Buddhism (RP). It was felt that a seminar on the mystical dimension of the Baha'i Faith would be useful; perhaps oriented around Baha'u'llah's Seven Valleys .

Session 4 (Sunday afternoon)

The relationship between the Baha'i scholar and the Baha'i community was discussed in this final session. MM opened the session by proposing that the Baha'i community has the responsibility of allowing the scholar the freedom to undertake research and providing him with a 'spiritually encouraging environment'. Baha'i scholarly activities are relevant to the community and must therefore be encouraged. WM added that it is an obligation of the Baha'i administration to provide a forum for legitimate discussion. TL spoke of the problems of the relationship between Baha'i scholars and the Baha'i administration outside the UK where a more liberal atmosphere prevails. He felt that Baha'i scholars should not be too passive towards administrative institutions which attempt to suppress Baha'i scholarship in an unreasonable manner. WM noted that the administrative bodies are traditionally conservative and should be 'stimulated' by Baha'i scholars.

This session ended with a lengthy debate about the importance of the Baha'i scholar keeping in touch with and leading an active Baha'i community life as a safeguard against scholarly introversion and loss of faith. It was agreed that the Baha'i scholar should lead a balanced Baha'i life. The Baha'i engaged in academic research should be both a scholar and a Baha'i.

Stephen Lambden.