

The Universal House of Justice
P.O. Box 155,
Haifa, Israel

58, Birdwood Road,
Cambridge, CB1 3SU
United Kingdom

20th April 1979

Dear Baha'i Friends,

I am extremely grateful to the Universal House of Justice and the Research Department, who, at a time when other matters must have been pressing heavily upon them, diverted their attention to the preparation of a response to the Report of the Cambridge Baha'i Studies Seminar.

The covering letter from the Department of the Secretariat, dated 3 January, 1979, was extremely encouraging in its tone and most welcome in its invitation to Baha'i scholars to consult about their problems with the Universal House of Justice.

The Memorandum itself also contained many interesting points and some extremely perceptive statements. I felt it a pity however that one or two points that had featured prominently in the report of the Seminar were passed over without comment by the Research Department. Among these these points was the statement made on pages 7 and 9 of the report that the Baha'i world was experiencing something of "a crisis in terms of consolidation and teaching" and "a general air of stagnation", as well as the possible role of scholars in resolving this situation. Another point was the need to dispel the notion current among Baha'is that there is only one "correct" view of the history and teachings of the Faith (see pages 13-16 of the report). I would have liked to have known what the Research Department thought about these points.

One of the points that the Research Department did touch on was the attitude and methodology to be adopted by Baha'i scholars in their researches. Unfortunately, it did not seem to me that the suggestions of the Research Department would be realistic in many cases for the present. Of course ideally, Baha'i ^{scholars should work from} viewpoints but, in practical terms, scholars working under supervision for Ph.D. degrees and in other similar situations are obliged to work from viewpoints acceptable to their academic supervisors and to their eventual examination boards. The adoption of an a priori stance of belief in Baha'u'llah would not be acceptable in most cases. Thus I think that in academic work just as in other situations such as when teaching the Faith to non-Baha'is, it is necessary to argue from a basis that does not involve a belief in Baha'u'llah. After all, one cannot expect that ^{an academic audience} to which much of this work will be

directed, will find acceptable a work written from a Baha'i standpoint. How much better if starting from an independent viewpoint, the Baha'i scholar still manages to arrive at conclusions similar to Baha'i ones.

Another point that the Research Department did refer to was the interaction between Revelation and Reason in the work of the Baha'i scholar. The Research Department did not however suggest any way of overcoming the problem that arises when, in any particular matter, it appears that Revelation is opposed to Reason. The current Baha'i view under the pressure of which Baha'i scholars work, seems to be that whenever this conflict occurs, Revelation which is God's revealed Truth must precede over Reason which is the product of the mind of fallible man. I would not, however, totally agree with this point of view since I think that it is both contrary to the Baha'i principle of the harmony of religion and science, and also ^{in itself} on fallacious reasoning.

It seems to me that both Revelation and Reason have an element of fallibility when applied to any specific problem. Thus the mind of man can never comprehend all of the facts of a situation and therefore no matter how well his mind works on the problem and how logically, this initial limitation always imposes a degree of fallibility on his conclusions. Revelation, on the other hand, starts with an all-encompassing knowledge of the Truth. However, the element of fallibility comes in when man attempts to apply Revelation to any given problem. In the absence of an infallibly-guided interpreter, which is the situation in the Baha'i world today, the application of any particular passage of the Revelation of the Bab or Baha'u'llah, or the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi, to a given situation or problem must be the result of fallible human interpretation. Indeed it is frequently found that when trying to apply the Revelation to ^{any} ~~say~~ given problem, a group of Baha'is will come to differing and even conflicting solutions based on various passages of the Sacred Texts. Thus it seems to me clear that in the present situation neither Revelation nor Reason can be regarded as being an infallible guide to the truth when applied to a particular problem. The meaning of the Baha'i concept of the harmony between Revelation and Reason seems to me to be the development of an understanding of the limitations of both approaches and an acceptance that neither may be right with respect to a given situation. In this way there arises harmony between these two forces without either dominating the other.

To take the conclusion of the above paragraph further, with particular respect to the Baha'i scholar, it seems to me that, given the equal validity of both approaches (Revelation and Reason) to a particular problem, there can be no objection to his using either one or the other or attempting a synthesis of both. What is intellectually dishonest is to decide beforehand, from religious considerations, what your conclusions are going to be and then to force the facts to fit your predetermined conclusions, giving the final result a sham veneer of scientific impartiality. This has unfortunately been done in the past.

There is, I feel, a tendency for many people in the Faith, some of them holding administrative positions to think that there should be a monolithic presentation of Baha'i teachings and principles. Such persons feel they have a duty to suppress all that they consider to be deviant modes of thought within the Faith. Often they will state that they heard such-and-such a statement from the lips of the Guardian himself-as though this gives a special authority to their point of view over and above the Writings of the Faith. It is unfortunately the Baha'i scholar who has to bear the brunt of the often very aggressive attempts by such persons to regiment the thinking of Baha'is into one narrow channel. Personally, I would like to see much less nervousness among Baha'is, and particularly in Baha'i institutions, about new and seemingly unorthodox views. If an idea based on Reason is brought forward which seems to be contradictory to the Revelation as we understand it at present, I would like to see less of a hysterical reaction to it, and more an attitude that we should let matters stand with the confident expectation that the issue will be resolved in the future, when further facts may be uncovered and our understanding of Baha'u'llah's Revelation may have evolved. I am in my own mind certain that some of what may today be considered heretical or unorthodox Baha'i thought will in the future be accepted by the majority of Baha'is.

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The above comments are not of course in any way/contravene the authority of the Universal House of Justice but are rather intended as thoughts on the subject of the freedom of self-expression which is guaranteed in the Faith.

Yours,

M. Momen