

# Some Thoughts on the Establishment of a Permanent Bahā'ī Studies Center and Research Institute

by Stephen Lambden

It is the purpose of these notes to initiate discussion on the question of the present state and future possibilities of Bahā'ī Studies; in particular the urgent need to set up one or more permanent Bahā'ī Studies Centers and/or Research Institutes offering a full- or part-time, two- or three-year scholarly course along Western academic lines.

Since the late 1960s a new generation of academically oriented Bahā'ī scholars have emerged in various parts of the world, most notably Europe, the United States, and Canada. As certain of these scholars are well qualified graduates of departments of Oriental, religious, or theological studies in Western universities and have acquired an expert knowledge in Bābī-Bahā'ī Studies, it would seem to be a good time to initiate discussion. It is also the case that a considerable number of Baha'is ardently desire to be trained in the scholarly approach to the study of their Faith, and that the emergence of the Bahā'ī Faith from obscurity necessitates the training of Bahā'ī scholars capable of dialogue with the academic and intellectual world.

It seems to me that the setting up of a Bahā'ī Studies Center and Research Institute (BSCRI) could quite easily be accomplished in the West. It might have a small (2-4) full-time teaching and research staff dedicated to furthering an academic Bahā'ī scholarship. Ideally, a BSCRI should have its own library and premises and be funded by the Bahā'ī International Community. But it might initially be linked with an accredited Western university. Apart from conducting scholarly research, a full- or part-time scholarly course could be offered to suitable students.

Serious attention should be given to the question of scholarly Bahā'ī Studies by the Bahā'ī International Community for a multitude of reasons— these cannot all be fully discussed here.

First, it should be borne in mind that at present no full-time funding or research facilities exist for individuals who wish to serve their Faith in a scholarly capacity and that no institutions exist that adequately consolidate and coordinate the emergent academic Bahā'ī scholarship. The Association for Bahā'ī Studies (centered in Canada since 1981 and originally the Canadian Association For Studies on the Bahā'ī Faith [established in

1974]) undoubtedly serves a useful and important function. It achieves important objectives, but differs in its orientation and terms of reference from the kind of BSCRI that would suitably consolidate and further an academically informed Bahā'ī scholarship. An academic Bahā'ī scholarship would best be furthered by academics trained in scholarly disciplines fundamental to the field of Bābī/Bahā'ī Studies, i.e.. Oriental studies and/or religious studies. There is often a great difference in scholarly terms, between an academically informed Bahā'ī scholarship and the scholarly writings of Bahā'īs trained in (for example) the sciences. This is to some extent illustrated by the interesting though academically inadequate responses of two Bahā'īs to Denis MacEoin's "The Bābī Concept of Holy War" (see *Religion*, 1982:12, pp. 93-129 and 1985:15, pp. 29-51.) If Bahā'īs wish to dialogue with academics who challenge apparently "orthodox" Bahā'ī perspectives, it will be necessary for them to foster an academic Bahā'ī scholarship. The field of Bābī/Bahā'ī studies on an academic level is a special and self-contained discipline. Oriental Bahā'īs, learned in the "traditional sense," generally operate intellectually within a different universe of discourse from Western-trained academics learned in Oriental / Islamic / Religious studies. Occidental Bahā'īs who have "read books" sometimes imagine themselves experts in matters religious, despite their ignorance of modern academic research and methodology and of Persian and Arabic languages.

My intention here is not to criticize traditional Bahā'ī learning, picture Bahā'īs (God forbid) as being uninformed, or unduly exalt a Western academicism, but rather to highlight the difference between a professional academic scholarship and general Bahā'ī intellectual standards. As time goes on, the Bahā'ī world will be increasingly in need of academically trained experts in Bābī/Bahā'ī studies. This for both internal and external reasons. The setting up of a BSCRI would go some way towards initiating and perpetuating a tradition of academic Bahā'ī scholarship.

In the field of religious scholarship, Bahā'ī intellectuals generally have much to learn and important tasks to undertake. Though, for example, a learned Bahā'ī "theology" of the problem of the plurality of religions has yet to be adequately articulated, Christian scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith have made important contributions. (See Cantwell Smith's *Towards a World Theology* [Philadelphia, 1981].) Internally speaking, Bābī/Bahā'ī studies is in its infancy and is likely to remain so unless steps now are taken to support and consolidate an emergent, academically informed

Bahā'ī scholarship. Many aspects of Bābī doctrine and history have not been studied. Many important writings of Baha'u'llah remain unpublished, unstudied, undated, and untranslated. Is it not a sad fact that Azais have published critical editions and facsimiles of Bābī texts, while Bahā'ī scholars generally remain unaware of even the existence of these writings? Is it not the case that Denis MacEoin, a non-Bahā'ī, is still widely regarded as the leading expert in Shaykhi and Bābī Studies and is raising issues that Bahā'īs have yet to consider? Much work remains to be done if the Bahā'ī community is to aspire to that intellectual integrity so beloved of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha.

A learned and academically informed Bahā'ī scholarship cannot befittingly evolve outside of the establishment of permanent institutions that will provide full-time teaching and research facilities. The field of Bahā'ī Studies needs to be organized and funded in a new, permanent and concrete manner. If steps are taken in this direction:

- 1) Informed Bahā'ī dialogue with modern intellectual and academic world would be possible;
- 2) The present generally low standard of Bahā'ī studies would be improved;
- 3) An intellectually mature Bahā'ī "theology" based on the findings of a academic scholarship would begin to emerge;
- 4) The international recognition of the field of Bābī/Bahā'ī studies and of the status of the Bahā'ī International Community by the academic and thinking world—now more or less non-existent— would be initiated;
- 5) Real and concrete links could be forged between "Baha'ī scholars" and external university and other institutions of learning;
- 6) Tensions between academically trained Bahā'ī scholars and certain segments of the Bahā'ī International Community could be lessened;
- 7) Bahā'ī intellectuals could be made to feel less alienated in that they would feel they have a role to play within the Bahā'ī community.

It will, I think, prove very difficult for these objectives to be achieved outside of the setting up of the kind of BSCRI envisaged, run on academic as opposed to deepening and quasi-propagandist lines. Relatively few Bahā'īs seek to be deeply informed about their faith. The number who are conscious of academic Bābī-Bahā'ī studies is pitifully small. It is not fashionable today for anyone to indulge in the academic study of religion at the expense of a more pragmatic and lucrative career. Influenced by modern secular

attitudes, many Bahā'īs tend to think similarly. Some have been seduced by a misplaced anti-intellectualism. Outside of very considerable Bahā'ī community support, it is likely to remain the case that few Bahā'īs will be ready to devote themselves to full-time Bābī - Bahā'ī studies and that Shoghi Effendi's long-cherished hope for a profound and coordinated Bahā'ī scholarship will remain unrealized.

The emergence of an academic Bahā'ī scholarship is not peripheral to Bahā'ī concerns, but absolutely essential. Unless something is done, there will be a proportion of "deepened" Bahā'īs but almost none capable of Bahā'ī dialogue with academically trained intellectuals.

Currently existing deepening, summer school, and other provisions for Bahā'ī study have generally failed to produce experts in matters religious, or persons aware of modern intellectual perspectives. Bahā'īs who (in Western universities) trained in Oriental Studies in the previous generation (largely Iranians) and went on to specialize in this area—few though they were/are—have generally avoided the challenge of academic Bābī-Bahā'ī studies. Within the Bahā'ī world today, however, a new generation of Bahā'ī scholars have taken up this challenge and are grappling with important issues. They need encouragement and support. How sad it would be if such individuals were moved to complain—in the words of a sixteenth century Muslim poet:

**I said to poverty: "Where dost thou hide?"**

**"In a scholar's inkwell," Poverty replied.**

The established world religions, many secular governments, and even numerically insignificant new religious movements provide facilities for scholarly and academic research. Religions old and new encourage, fund, support, and give great importance to internal scholarship. It is surprising in view of the numerical strength (4-5 million), international diffusion (about 112,000 localities), and rich legacy of Bahā'ī scripture and tradition that steps have not yet been taken by the Bahā'ī International Community to support internal academic scholarship and research.

## A brief response to possible Bahā'ī objections to the support of academic Bahā'ī scholarship and the establishment of a permanent Bahā'ī Studies Center and Research Institute.

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**OBJECTION:** Now is the time for the Bahā'ī world to concern itself with teaching; to proffer its message to mankind and develop its administrative institutions. Academic scholarship is something for the future.

**REPLY:** This kind of Bahā'ī sentiment is both understandable and widespread. It is not a false perspective, though it is often voiced by Bahā'īs who have little or no knowledge of what the aims, intentions, and purposes of academic scholarship are—individuals who have a limited perception of what Bahā'ī scholarship might contribute to the Bahā'ī world. To say that Bahā'ī scholarship is "for the future" is to say that detailed research into Bahā'ī scripture, history, and doctrine is currently irrelevant. It is to say that Bahā'īs who wish to study their Faith in detail are wasting their time— they should be "out teaching."

In the light of the plethora of Bahā'ī texts that underline the importance of the intellect and Bahā'ī intellectual life, it can hardly be said that Bahā'ī scholarship is a waste of time. A variety of authoritative Bahā'ī texts explicitly state that Bahā'ī administrative institutions should strive to promote and enrich the intellectual life of the Bahā'īs community. The Bahā'ī philosophy of "teaching" obviously must include the intellectual articulation of Bahā'ī perspectives. Academics and intellectuals also need to be "taught" or informed about Bahā'ī teaching.

The concrete support of Bahā'ī scholarship would have important consequences for internal Bahā'ī deepening and external Bahā'ī teaching. It would serve to enable certain individuals to be more adequately informed about their own Faith and enable them to befittingly communicate it to others. It would also equip individuals to "defend their Faith" against distorted and hostile misrepresentations—which are increasingly of a detailed nature or such that the non-expert in Bābī/Bahā'ī history and doctrine cannot hope to discuss or refute. Experts and academically trained Bahā'ī scholars are needed to discuss and communicate research findings that clarify "obscure questions" and to throw light on doctrinal and other issues that trouble individuals or Bahā'ī communities.

Quite apart from the concrete benefits that the support of academic Bahā'ī scholarship can now offer, there is also the point that studying religion is ontologically valuable and important—it is important, in other words, in its own right and for its own sake as an expression of the creative human spirit. It should not be necessary to justify the academic study of the Bahā'ī Faith on other grounds. Bahā'ī scholarship should be viewed as an integral part of Bahā'ī community life. As human beings, Bahā'īs have intellects and should use and develop them to the full. It is obvious that the scholarly study of religion is important, inasmuch as the lives of countless individuals are determined by their religious beliefs and practices. It can be extremely intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually stimulating, and it demands a high level of empathy, insight, imagination, detachment, and honesty. The contemporary decline of interest in religion has perhaps influenced Bahā'īs more than any would care to admit in terms of obscuring the importance of religious studies in general, and Bābī-Bahā'ī studies in particular. So-called "concrete careers" or business success become all important, to the detriment of the alleged ephemerality of the study of religion—even to the Bahā'ī Faith itself.

Another reason why it is imperative that Bahā'ī institutions begin to support Bahā'ī Studies in a concrete manner—the sooner the better in this connection—is that it is becoming increasingly important that Bahā'īs understand the history, nature, and teachings of the great world religions. As time passes, the Bahā'ī dialogue with, for example, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and Muslims will take on new dimensions and become more and more informed. Academically trained experts on the history and teachings of these religious traditions will be needed: Bahā'īs who are capable of informed dialogue with leading intellectuals.

The standard of the Bahā'ī approach to the world's great religions is, at present, intellectually very poor. Secondary Bahā'ī literature designed to convert the Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians, etc., has left much to be desired. The errors of fact are many and the apologetic stance dated. Intellectuals who read this literature are frequently horrified by the low standard of Bahā'ī scholarship. The writers of such tracts are often devoted and well-meaning Baha'is who have not had the benefit of informed academic training. In no language does there exist an informed Bahā'ī approach to contemporary Jews, Muslims, or Christians. The Bahā'ī literature is, for the most part, dated and inadequate. Outside of the promotion of Bahā'ī scholarship, this situation is

unlikely to improve. The establishment of Bahā'ī studies institutions would go some way towards educating Bahā'īs such that informed dialogue with other religionists becomes possible. The support of Bahā'ī studies cannot be left for the future, as if the internal and external articulation of Bahā'ī perspectives is divorced from scholarly research.

**OBJECTION: The establishment of an "Institute for Bahā'ī Studies" would lead to a Bahā'ī intellectual elite.**

**REPLY:** This, I think, (and I have heard it voiced on several occasions) is quite an absurd objection. No scholarly or academic institution for higher study can exist without applying the principle of selectivity. Some individuals are better suited to specific academic pursuits than others. Everyone cannot be a nuclear physicist, or brain surgeon. Not all Bahā'īs desire, or would be good at, religious studies—even those who take religious studies degrees can differ markedly in ability. Not all Bahā'īs desire to be "Bahā'ī scholars" or engage in a disciplined approach to Bahā'ī studies. Not all Bahā'īs would be willing or able to face the challenge of studying their own Faith; to achieve the necessary balance of empathy and objectivity.

Though selectivity is inevitable, this has nothing to do with elitism. Bahā'ī scholars are simply Bahā'īs—no better and no worse—who study their faith in a systematic manner. Those who might graduate from a course in Bahā'ī studies do not become anything; they are not entitled to say "I am a Bahā'ī scholar, I am special" (God forbid), or anything else. They are nothing other than Bahā'īs who have attempted to study and understand their faith in a disciplined manner. On a spiritual level they may emerge "no better than anyone else," since the scholarly study of the Bahā'ī Faith is not necessarily the same as "deepening." In actual fact the scholarly study of one's own faith can be an extremely humbling experience. One has to admit—often frequently—that one did not know about or understand Bahā'ī teaching or history as well as one might have imagined. One makes mistakes and has them exposed. Far from giving the student any sense of belonging to an elite, it should be that he or she becomes more aware and tolerant of others and of human limitations. Bahā'ī scholars are not priests or anything comparable. They have no authority as individuals at all. Their detailed studies do not qualify them to guide others spiritually. They are simply fallible members of the Bahā'ī community who,

for one reason or another, have decided to study their Faith in detail. They do not constitute an elite.

**OBJECTION:**

**The academic approach to Bābī/ Bahā'ī studies is an inappropriate one.**

**REPLY:**

This possible objection is based on a misunderstanding of the "academic approach." The academic approach is neither directly designed to promote nor destroy faith. There may be academics—both Bahā'ī and not—who seem to challenge faith positions, but it is often the case that what are challenged are uninformed and premature crystallizations of a supposed "Bahā'ī orthodoxy." Scholars sometimes, by virtue of their detailed researches, come up with Bahā'ī perspectives that are new; and it is not infrequently the case that textual support for their theories is discovered— scriptural texts are found, not generally known or published, that confirm their detailed research.

Conscious of the fact that the academic approach is not incompatible with apologetics and theology ("faith articulating itself) each of the great world religions sponsors institutions that take an internally academic approach. Bahā'īs have nothing to fear about taking an internally academic approach. If Bahā'īs wish to establish institutions of higher learning that are respected for their academic integrity, it is imperative that they understand and adopt an academic stance, it remains to the future for Bahā'ī scholars and theologians to work out the kind of academic approach that is best suited to Bābī/Bahā'ī studies. It seems to me to be certain, however, that an inhibiting "fundamentalist" position will not equip Bahā'ī scholars to enter into adequate dialogue with the thinking world or befittingly articulate their Faith.

**OBJECTION:**

**Are there not already learned Bahā'īs and Bahā'ī scholars who are capable of fulfilling Bahā'ī intellectual needs? Why bother with an institute?**

**REPLY:**

While there are learned Bahā'īs and Bahā'ī scholars, there is no institution designed to promote and coordinate academically informed Bahā'ī scholarship and no full-time course which caters to the need of younger Bahā'īs who desire to undertake a

detailed study. A definite gap exists. Furthermore, many of the learned Bahā'īs and Bahā'ī scholars have no real training—if any at all—in the academic study of religion. The academic study of religion is a specialized discipline. Knowing a lot about the Bahā'ī Faith seldom equips a given individual to enter into academically informed religious debate. The proposed center or institute would promote this kind of scholarship; students would be trained in Bābī/ Bahā'ī studies according to the best contemporary methodologies surrounding the study of religion. This would lead to new intellectual developments within the field of Bābī/Bahā'ī studies. If Bahā'īs are to keep up with modern developments in the study of religion, it is not enough to fall back on the generality of "learned Bahā'īs." If Bahā'īs are to enter into dialogue with modern intellectuals they must be academically informed.

A learned Bahā'ī may know a great deal, for example, about the Bahā'ī notion of "progressive revelation," but this does not mean that he or she could contribute in an academic manner to the contemporary debate about the possibility of an emergent "world theology." A Bahā'ī scholar may be learned in the Bahā'ī interpretation of the Bible, but may be completely unable to understand or evaluate the methods and findings of modern Biblical scholarship. Such examples could be multiplied. The setting up of an Institute on academic lines would produce scholars who might make important contributions to key contemporary concerns.

The number of learned Bahā'īs who have been trained in the study of religion remains very few. The proposed institute would go some way to increasing their numbers and raising Bahā'ī intellectual standards. No matter how well qualified a Bahā'ī might be in such fields as medicine, chemistry, physics, engineering, psychology, or economics, this does not mean that such studies would make him or her a good student of religious subjects. Many Bahā'īs regarded as learned are learned in areas other than Bābī/Bahā'ī studies. Bābī-Bahā'ī studies is a self contained and specialist field. As such it needs to be fostered and developed. Learning in an area peripheral to Bābī/Bahā'ī studies does not mean integrity in Bābī-Bahā'ī studies is automatic.

In brief, because contemporary Bahā'ī deepening and study does not lead to academically informed and expert knowledge in Bābī-Bahā'ī studies there is a need to establish academically oriented research and teaching institutes. Oriental Bahā'ī scholarship tends to polymathism rather than systematic analysis and is generally uninformed by modern scholarly methodologies. Occidental Bahā'ī "deepening" is usually

teaching oriented and unaware of a plethora of texts in Arabic, Persian and other languages central to the more scholarly approach. I am not suggesting that deepening should be scholarly research, but trying to highlight the differences between them. Though there is some context, Bahāī deepening is generally as different from academic research as the Christian Bible study group is from a university Biblical studies course. Many questions seldom if ever raised in a Bahāī deepening are fundamental to scholarly research. Texts and documents, Bahāī and non-Bahāī, which are crucial for academic research are relatively unimportant in the deepening context.

### Bahāī Scriptural Quotations on the importance of Bahāī scholarship

"There are certain pillars which have been established as the unshakeable supports of the Faith of God. The mightiest of these is learning and the use of the mind, the expansion of consciousness, and insight into the realities of the universe and the hidden mysteries of Almighty God.

To promote knowledge is thus an inescapable duty imposed on every one of the friends of God" ('Abdu'l-Baha, passage cited *Selections From the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha* [Haifa 1978], p. 126).

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"It seems that what we need now [1949!] is a more profound and coordinated Bahāī scholarship in order to attract such men as you are contacting.

The world has—at least the thinking world— caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Baha'u'llah over seventy years ago, and so of course it does not sound 'new' to them. But we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly to such men!"

(From a letter dated July 3, 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer).

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"The Cause needs more Bahā'ī "scholars— people who are not only devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the peoples of the world."

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 21 October, 1943).

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"What he [Shoghi Effendi] wants the Bahā'īs to do is study more, not study less. The more general knowledge, scientific or otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahā'ī teachings more deeply." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 5 July, 1947).

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Bahā'ī scholars and writers will, no doubt, gradually appear, and will, as promised by Baha'u'llah, lend a unique support to their Faith." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi cited in *U.S. Bahā'ī News*, no. 102 [August 1936], p. 2).

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"As the [Bahā'ī] Cause develops it will need more and more people who are really versed in their branch -of learning and who can interpret the [Bahā'ī] teachings to suit the facts." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in *Baha' i Youth: A Compilation*, p. 14).

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"What the Faith needs, even more than teachers, is books that expound the true significance of its principles in the light of modern thought and social problems."

(From a Letter of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer dated 6 May, 1933, cited in *Unfolding Destiny* [London 1981], p. 431).

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"... the majority of Bahā'īs, however intensely devoted and sincere they may be, lack for the most part the necessary scholarship and wisdom to reply to and refute the claims and attacks of people with some education and standing."  
(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 25 September, 1942, cited *ibid.*, p. 439).

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"Scholarship has a high standing in the Bahā'ī teachings and Bahā'ī scholars have a great responsibility to a growing, divinely-guided world society ..."  
"Bahā'ī scholarship is of great importance in the development and consolidation of the Bahā'ī community."  
(From a statement from the Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice on Bahā'ī Scholarship [1979]).

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"The Supreme Body [The Universal House of Justice] has informed us [the International Teaching Center] that it believes that both the International Teaching Center and the Boards of Counsellors can render valuable services in the field of Bahā'ī scholarship by encouraging budding scholars, and also by promoting within the Bahā'ī community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others."  
(From a letter of the International Teaching Centre dated 22 March, 1981).

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