AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON "CONVERSIVE RELATIONALITY IN BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP: CENTERING THE SACRED AND DECENTERING THE SELF"

Commentators: Sandra S. Fotos, Stephen R. Friberg

I want to thank Drs. Sandra S. Fotos and Stephen R. Friberg for their thoughts on my essay "Conversive Relationality in Bahá’í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self." In their presentations, they discuss the ways in which their views of Bahá’í scholarship converge with and diverge from mine. As Bahá’ís, we understand the value of diverse opinions, for it is only through the processes of sifting and winnowing that we are better able to differentiate between those ideas and insights that hold the greatest meaning and value for us in any given situation. And such determinations will vary, as they ought, from person to person and situation to situation.

Dr. Fotos provides, in her commentary, a defense of Vygotskian analysis and Bakhtinian dialogism, along with her support of journal mentoring programs; and Dr. Friberg offers his defense of modern science whose model is centered in "a concern with rationality and objectivity that strives to overcome personal and cultural prejudices and to see with unbiased eyes." I found Fotos’s presentation and advocacy of journal mentoring programs quite compelling, and I certainly agree with Friberg’s concerns about the problems that accrue when "personal and cultural" distinctions take the form of prejudices. When aspects of ourselves and our worlds cloud our views and understandings, it is indeed important that we learn to see more clearly. However, in contrast to Fotos’s and Friberg’s positions, I feel that this can best be achieved through investigations that are conversively informed, intersubjectively relational, mutually transformative, and inherently spiritual.

Rather than starting out with the methods and theories of contemporary scholarship and science, my essay serves as an initial exploration into the ways in which Bahá’í-informed scholarship might take on new forms and move in new directions beyond the boundaries of scholarship as it is predominantly practiced today. The commentaries by Fotos and Friberg help me to see that my introduction to a conversive method in Bahá’í scholarship needs some additional explanation to describe more clearly what such a method is and how it works. While the space of a brief response is inadequate to provide a detailed description of this process, I hope that this response, conjoined with the original essay, will be sufficient to give readers a clearer view of the possibilities within a conversively informed scholarship.

Perhaps the most essential and distinguishing aspect of conversive scholarship is that the scholar knows something by being in relationship with it and that at the center of such a relationship is love. Bahá’u’lláh writes, "We fain would

---

hope that the people of Bahá may be guided by the blessed words: ‘Say: all things are of God.’ Bahá’u’lláh continues, explaining that “by this single utterance contending peoples and kindreds will attain the light of true unity.” Here it is important to note that Bahá’u’lláh says that “all things are of God” (my emphasis). He is not only saying that all peoples are of God, but that everything in creation comes from God. Therefore, any of our interactions with any element of creation must needs be informed by the profound awareness of its sacred place in creation. And, as I see it, this must also inform our scholarly perceptions and activities, for when we perceive through the lens of the sacred, recognizing the intricately interwoven strands of creation, we perceive and understand by means of the attractive powers of love and unity whatever it is that we seek to know.

This can easily be seen in regard to our fellow human persons in the world. When we look at someone with a spiritualized love, our understanding of that person is deepened beyond the more superficial and limited comprehension of mind. Here, I would like to refer readers back to the example, discussed in my original essay, of the photographer John Pack and his work in Navajo country. As Bahá’u’lláh tells his reader-listeners, “Knowledge is a light which God sheddeth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth...” It is important to note that a recognition and valuation of the role of the heart in the process of knowing in no wise devalues the powers of human intellect. In fact, the role of mind is thereby ennobled through its interrelationship with the powers of the heart. The mind is a precious gift from God, but I see it as a means towards the sort of knowing that occurs in our hearts. Our minds serve as our transmitters and organizers of information, but when that information is brought to the deeper levels of the heart, then our perceptions are deepened and purified through love. And such perceptions bring us closer to whatever we know with our hearts. This is knowing that is conducive of greater unity in the world rather than the sort of “knowledge” steeped in the vested hierarchies of institutionalized academic power that all too often pulls the world and its diverse persons apart.

The past twenty-five hundred years of Western scholarship have privileged mind, reason, logic, and objective distance between the knower and what is known. And over the years, a number of scholars and thinkers have raised concerns about the absence of feelings, emotions, imagination, and personal subjectivity in this process—most notably in the work of the nineteenth-century Romantics and contemporary advocates of subjective scholarship. In contrast to such academic debates arguing the precedence of mind versus heart, a convervative approach emphasizes the primacy of both mind and heart, noting that a truly deepened knowledge that is centered in the sacred comes through the

---

3. Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh 222.
working together of mind and heart in a process that is inherently transformative and that brings all more closely together with each other and with God.

Conversive scholarship involves a scholar stepping within and co-creating an intersubjective relationship with whatever it is s/he seeks to know. At the center is love and affection (human embodiments of the attractive force of the sacred), and the process is mutually transforming for all involved, with the inevitable result being a coming together in unity of all the diverse elements (human persons, animals, plants, planets and stars, etc.) that are involved in the endeavor. Such a process informs not only how we perceive and behave towards that which we seek to know but also our determinations about what constitutes meaningful and valuable knowledge. This means that fixity within a spiritualized scholarship lies in each scholar's centering her or his work within the sacred. Fixity does not lie in the "sacrosanct truths" of the Western tradition—be those in the work of specific theorists or in the rationality and objectivity of scientific method. Ludwig Wittgenstein stresses this very point throughout his Philosophical Investigations, "Here it is difficult to see that what is at issue is the fixing of concepts. A concept forces itself on one. (This is what you must not forget.)" (his emphasis). His final parenthetic comment underscores the importance he gives to our recognizing the problems that result when we rigidly fix our views in any concept (e.g., theory, idea, belief). What with the multiplicity of scholarly approaches and tools currently available, each scholar must determine for herself or himself whether or not different theories or methods prove useful for a specific endeavor. And through a conversive approach, such a decision would be informed by the intended aims of mutual transformation, realized unity and love, and closeness to God.

I appreciate the time that Fotos and Friberg have taken to share their thoughts on this matter, and it is quite clear that they join me in a sincere concern regarding the development of contemporary and future Bahá’í scholarship. Their commentaries and their own scholarly and professional work demonstrate this. I am also thankful that they have provided me with the opportunity to clarify my views further. Alas, the constraints of a short response necessitate the brevity that prevents a greater exploration of this topic. I am currently working on a much longer paper that may assist my fellow scholars in considering and visualizing radically new directions for Bahá’í scholarship into the future. For now, let me simply conclude with the words of the American Indian poet and storyteller Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma), as he questions the directions, intentions, and effects of much contemporary science and scholarship, "It is foolish to believe we have the power to lock process into a crystal or cube. For when we believe it is our will, we do not see icicles forming and we will never be enough awed." 7

SUSAN B. BRILL