CONVERSIVE RELATIONALITY IN BAHÁ’Í SCHOLARSHIP: CENTERING THE SACRED AND DECENTERING THE SELF

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Dissatisfaction with current Bahá’í scholarship’s fit with the needs and interests of the Bahá’í community has triggered a desire for more relevant and vital methods of scholarly Bahá’í study. Such methods could help in the development of Bahá’í communities; in bringing the powerful ideas, themes, and concepts in the Bahá’í teachings to the attention of the world’s leaders of thought; and in deepening individual understanding of the Bahá’í teachings.

Susan B. Brill’s important and provocative article “Conversive Relationality in Bahá’í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self” addresses this desire, arguing that we should reject the traditional academic methodologies of scholarship based on discourse, argument, and debate. In its place, she recommends a “conversive” model of Bahá’í scholarship that avoids “contentious and oppositional... debates [which preclude] the consultative notion of individuals working together to gain new insights and resolutions about a specific issue” (12). Conversive implies both “conversation and conversion—language and scholarship that is potentially transformative of ourselves and others.”1 She wishes us to avoid the pitfalls of a “scholarship” that imposes its perspectives on others rather than consultatively learning from them. Conversive scholarship, she argues, is both consonant with the consistent urgings of Bahá’u’lláh that we “center” ourselves in service to God and humanity and in keeping with recent developments in philosophy and critical theory.

A central strength of the article is its examination of the often arbitrary and prejudicial aspects of thought and research methodologies that lay claim to rationality or objectivity. Rationality and objectivity, critical thinking has shown, are often names for the programmatic pursuit of objectives not necessarily in everyone’s best interest. In light of Bahá’í teachings about consultation and recent understandings of the sometimes oppressive aspects of “objective” and “rational” thought, we should consider abandoning the traditional confrontational debatable, argumentative styles of discourse and move towards conversive styles that preclude an artificial distancing and scholarly elitism evoked in the name of an unobtainable objectivity. I think that many of us agree that there is a need for such a shift.

Two aspects of this argument, however, partly veil its considerable merits. One is the extent to which it parallels the acrimonious “cultural wars” raging in modern American intellectual circles. Central to these “wars”—often bitter debates concerning postmodernism, poststructuralism, cultural relativism,

1. Susan B. Brill, private communication to author.
multiculturalism, feminism, post-colonialism, and a variety of related topics—are disagreements about the role and nature of objectivity and rationalism. The highly controversial attack on rationalism at issue in these debates is here used to buttress arguments for convervative scholarship, weighing it down with one of the more divisive arguments of modern academic practice. The other aspect is the extent to which it downplays or rejects the importance of rationality and objectivity—of central importance not only for the modern natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, but for the sciences and traditions of other cultures as well. Both aspects are at odds with the need to avoid contentious debates. Also, both might be misinterpreted to imply an anti-scientific stance. Accordingly, in this comment, I will try to show that the convervative method of scholarship is supported by—and in harmony with—the viewpoint of modern science.

The modern scientific tradition, born of Islam and brought to adolescence in Europe, has achieved its maturity on a worldwide stage. Its vision of knowledge as inseparable from experience and practice has proven almost inexhaustible as a source of new understanding and shows no sign of losing its vitality. Its successes in the material realm are unprecedented, and similar successes are expected to occur in the social sphere as well. The democratic willingness of modern science to make knowledge available to all is ending the era of elites empowered by the control of information.

Science is endorsed by the Bahá’í writings in the strongest terms. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, speaking at Stanford University in 1912, characterized it as “the illumination of the world of humanity” and the “cause of eternal honor to man.”2 He urged us to “put all [our] beliefs into harmony with science...”3 Speaking of science at Columbia University in 1912, he said that “the philosophical conclusions of bygone centuries, the teachings of the prophets and wisdom of former sages are crystallized and reproduced in the scientific advancement of today.”4 Shoghi Effendi described science and religion as the “two most potent forces in life.”5

What, then, are the essential steps of the modern scientific method? Drawing from my experience as a physicist and from historical and philosophical studies of science, I suggest the following.6 The first step is to ask a question—to pose

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6. William S. Hatcher describes the scientific method as “the systematic, organized, directed, and conscious use of our various mental faculties in an effort to arrive at a coherent model of whatever phenomenon is being investigated” “Science and the Bahá’í Faith,” Bahá’í Studies 2 (1977): 32. Julio Savi, analyzing the Bahá’í writings, suggests that they describe a scientific research method that “is a deliberate, conscious, repeated, organized and systematic use of the cognitive powers” wherein “certain standards of inner integrity of thought and behaviour are observed” The Eternal Quest for God (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989) 8.
a problem. Next is to search systematically for answers. Three basic steps are typically used in the search and may be repeated many times in any order. These steps are: (1) gathering information (evidence, data), (2) speculating (theorizing), and (3) testing the validity of speculations by comparing hypotheses and their implications with available information. Information is gathered from experience, reliable reports, discussions and interviews, or more exactingly from specifically designed experiments. Speculation (theory) includes trying to find cause and effect relationships, attempting to draw out general rules from available information (induction), and trying to find specifics from general principles (deduction). One “loops” through the whole process until answers are obtained. This should not be thought of as a dry formal procedure: it often involves an intensely spiritual sense of quest for understanding along with a deep involvement in and interest about the subject of study.

The above description is not fully adequate unless we take into account the role of both community and diversity. First of all, science is a community endeavor that requires both shared effort in the establishment of new truths and the use of previously obtained findings. Scientific “truths” are only those that have been examined by and met the acceptance of the relevant scientific community. In a similar vein, what counts as evidence and information about the world is only reliable, shared, and public data. Private experience, subjective impressions, and unrepeatable one-time events are ruled out.

Diversity plays several roles. On one hand, it serves the need for a wide variety of different types of expertise, i.e., specializations. Physics, for example, broadly classifies researchers as either theorists or experimentalists, but it has many other subdivisions as well. On the other hand, different skills, insights, and temperaments are needed if a full and sufficiently varied picture is to emerge. A variety of differing possible explanations increases the probability of obtaining the sound fit of a scientific model to data. Physics, for example, places a premium on the role of young, unprejudiced thinkers unfamiliar with and dissatisfied about accepted ways of seeing things.

Using this abbreviated description of how modern science works, we can outline some of its implications for scholarship and compare them with the author’s recommendations. First of all, overcoming the limitations of a self-centered point of view is of central importance, in agreement with her suggestions. This is done by striving for an objectivity that eliminates personal or cultural biases, by testing suppositions and hypotheses against public events, by maintaining a critical stance, and by continually probing and testing even well-accepted hypotheses. Modern science consciously distances itself from discourse traditions that ascribe authority to canonical texts and authoritative personalities. Similarly, it avoids abstruse metaphysical systems not amenable to testing. Unexamined and uncontested ideas, say, ideas inherited from the past
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or simply from society at large, are not considered to have authority. The need for objectivity directly leads to the need for diversity and community effort, and requires that participants must be willing to learn from each other. These implications are strongly supportive of the author’s recommendations.

The social sciences directly study such topics as communities, peoples, cultures, habits of thought, and social institutions. Social science methodologies must have many of the qualities that the author recommends to us. It is true that in comparison to the natural sciences, the social sciences are new and sometimes see through the distorted lens of ethnocentric cultural biases. But it is also true that many of its leading practitioners have been at the forefront of efforts to eradicate such cultural biases or to confront them, bring them into the open, and examine their effects. In fact, many of the concepts that the author recommends as important for Bahá’í modes of study come from sociology, anthropology, or ethnology. To be objective in the study of societies, peoples, cultures, or ways of thinking, not only must we interact intersubjectively with others to find out how they think, act, and believe, we must also become aware of our own prejudices and preconceptions. As social scientists have made clear, such interactions require mutual respect, consultative communication, and a recognition of the role of intersubjectivity.

Of course, the impact of science is not always positive. Its prestige and nearly universal acceptance has created problems. A serious problem is scientism, or what I call the imitation of science. I define this as the tendency, quite widespread, to adopt the colorations of a scientific objectivity and rationality without employing science’s methodologies, traditions, or procedures of rigorous justification. I believe that imitation of science, science poorly done, or science in its initial stages of development are the causes of much of the criticism leveled against science by responsible critics. An egregious example of the imitation of science is the assumption of modern Western thinking that it enjoys a superiority on the basis of its scientific, rational, and objective character. Modern secularism, especially in the academic world, firmly holds to this prejudice. One is tempted to say that the self-image of much of technically advanced society is predicated on its vision of itself as practicing a scientific, and therefore culturally superior, mode of being. Modern criticism eagerly attacks this self-image.

The Bahá’í writings offer a powerful corrective to this self-elevating tendency. Consider the broad definition of science that Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá employ. Bahá’u’lláh describes Socrates as having a “profound knowledge of such sciences as were current amongst men” and speaks of the

7. See, for example, Jack Goody, The East in the West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
8. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).
people of Persia as having once been “unrivalled in sciences and arts.”

Clearly, the sciences referred to here cannot be the modern ones. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further describes science as being the result of “the power of intellectual investigation . . . characteristic of man.”

How can this mean other than that science is universal and can be found wherever humankind applies its “power of intellectual investigation”? From the principle of the oneness of humanity, we can conclude that the endowment responsible for science is (and has been) possessed by all peoples in all nations. Therefore, we should not think that only the sciences of the modern West merit attention and praise. Rather, if we are to be true to the universal spirit of the Bahá’í Faith, we should be respectful of the science and knowledge traditions of all the peoples of the world.

The paragraph above, so preliminary as it is, is certainly inadequate as a basis for speculation. Nevertheless, it encourages several lines of thought. If we accept that most (or all) people have sciences independently of whether they have written them down in a fashion we think appropriate, then we could greatly increase our understanding by learning of them. Of course, two veils immediately present themselves: one is the great prestige of Western thought, coupled with its tendency to overshadow and displace other modes of thinking (which sometimes leads to the elimination of entire knowledge traditions). The other veil is that, like Western thought, the world’s science traditions (in the general sense that we are using the term) are riddled with chauvinism, ethnocentrism, superstition, and myth. These veils can impede progress, but they need not derail it. If my supposition is correct that the Bahá’í Faith encourages a respect for all the “science” traditions of humankind, then it gives us a glimpse of the great potential of Bahá’í scholarship: it can provide the framework for a world “intellectualism” that embraces the thought of all peoples, be it oral or written. The Bahá’í Faith unites both science and religion, so such a world intellectualism would not denigrate religious thinking as do the currently predominant Western modes of thought.

Summarizing, the intent of my argument is as follows: I believe Susan Brill’s arguments for a better, conversive Bahá’í scholarship to be a kind of “wake-up call.” We should, I think, more seriously consider Bahá’í scholarship as a vital endeavor that should be responsive both to the needs of our diverse Bahá’í communities and our responsibilities as servants to Bahá’u’lláh. If we are to realize the potential of Bahá’í scholarship, then we must respond to the distinctive concerns of Bahá’í teachings in a way that allows them to guide our efforts. At the same time, we must be wary of embracing methods that conflict with Bahá’í standards.


What I have tried to show in this comment is that the insights that the author has brought to bear are strongly valid from the standpoint of modern science. Science, because of the great importance given to it in the Bahá'í writings and in the world at large, provides a good model for how scholarship can be effectively conducted. Central to that model is a concern with rationality and objectivity that strives to overcome personal and cultural prejudices and to see with unbiased eyes. The modern sciences, I argue, are consultative and "conversive" in their methods, building their successes on a diversity of perspectives and specializations. But, I argue, the Bahá'í writings speak also of science in a more general sense: as the fruit of humankind's rational facilities. If we are true to this broader perspective on science, we can gain entrance to a much fuller and broader vision of reality than modern Western scholarship has to offer. In doing so, and in giving free rein to a "conversive" scholarship, I believe that we would be taking an important intellectual step towards the Bahá'í goal of a unified humanity.

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