

Why Do Bahá'ís Emphasize “Independent Investigation of Truth”?

We all face two alternatives: Either we choose our beliefs or chance will choose them for us. “There is a time when we must firmly choose the course we will follow, or the relentless drift of events will make the decision for us.”

In a talk delivered in the United States in 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said:

Behold how the sun shines upon all creation, but only surfaces that are pure and polished can reflect its glory and light...it behooves us all to be lovers of truth. Let us seek her in every season and in every country, being careful never to attach ourselves to personalities. Let us see the light wherever it shines...If five people meet together to seek for truth, they must begin by cutting themselves free from all their own special conditions and renouncing all perceived ideas. In order to find truth we must give up our prejudices, our own small trivial notions; an open receptive mind is essential. If our chalice is full of self, there is no room in it for the water of life. The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong

is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity, and unity is necessary if we would reach truth, for truth is one.¹

The source and the essence of all virtues is love for knowledge and truth:

The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye.² Bahá'u'lláh

Love for knowledge and truth can only be attained through an unbiased and impartial search. To study the principle of independent investigation, we need to do some soul-searching. And a good way is to begin with this question: What would be my religion if I were raised in

- a Hindu family?
- a Christian family?
- a Jewish family?
- a Muslim family?
- a Buddhist family?
- an atheist family?

Most people admit that their religion would consist of whatever their parents taught them. What does this suggest? That most people are satisfied with, and regard as truth, what their ancestors believed and practiced. One's religion is thus determined by chance and often accepted without investigation. How many people do you know

who have impartially investigated even one of the world's great religions? And how many people do you know who are following a religion other than the one followed by their parents? To the conformist and closed-minded Jews of His day, Jesus said:

I am telling you what I have seen in *the Father's* presence, and you do what you have heard from *your* father. John 8:38

Should we be “Moonies” if our ancestors worshipped the moon, and “Sunnies” if they worshipped the sun, and “Stonies” if they worshipped stones? “Some people are like an anchor that lies always in the sea yet never learns to swim.”

Joe: What do you believe about God?

Moe: I believe what my church believes.

Joe: What does your church believe?

Moe: My church believes what I believe.

Joe: What do you and your church believe?

Moe: We both believe the same thing.

Psychologist Dr. Robert Anthony explains how our beliefs affect our behavior:

Once a person believes that something is true, whether or not it is, he then acts as if it were. He will instinctively seek to collect facts to

support the belief no matter how false it may be. No one will be able to convince him otherwise unless, through personal experience or study, he is ready to change. Hence, it is easy to see that, if one accepts something which is not true, all subsequent actions and reactions will be based upon a false belief...

The average person never comes near reaching his unlimited potential because he is living under the false assumption that he already knows the truth. He believes what his parents told him, what his teachers have taught him, what he has read, and what his religion preaches without actually proving anything for himself.³

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that religion is too important to be left to chance and imitation, that every individual should examine other religions and other ways of life, and then choose. Some people refuse to take even one step out of their comfort zone for fear of losing what they have. "An old man was standing on a crowded bus. A young man standing next to him asked, 'What time is it?' The old man refused to reply. The young man moved on. The old man's friend, sensing something wrong, asked, 'Why were you so discourteous to the young man asking for the time?' The old man answered, 'If I had given him the time of day, next he would want to know where I am going. Then we might talk about our interests. If we

did that, he might invite himself to my house for dinner. If he did that he would meet my lovely daughter. If he met her, they would fall in love. I don't want my daughter to marry someone who can't afford a watch.'" Fear of the unknown and attachment to one's own beliefs stifle curiosity and the courage to seek new spiritual horizons.

Did you hear about a man who invented a device for looking through a wall? Do you know what he called it? A window. Every soul needs a window to look out and to let light in.

No loss can come from seeking, from gaining knowledge and awareness. In fact, just the opposite is true: ***Every good comes from seeking, and every evil from not seeking, from closing the mind.***

True opinions can prevail only if the facts to which they refer are known; if they are not known, false ideas are just as effective as true ones, if not a little more effective.

Throughout history religious leaders have discouraged their followers from investigating other faiths. This enlightening statement from a Christian publication is an exception; it shows a radical change of perspective:

Have you ever thought or said, "I have my own religion. It is a very personal matter. I do not discuss it with others"? True, religion is very personal—virtually from birth reli-

gious or ethical ideas are implanted in our mind by our parents and relatives. As a consequence, we usually follow the religious ideals of our parents and grandparents. Religion has become almost a matter of family tradition. What is the result of that process? In many cases others have chosen our religion for us. It has simply been a matter of where we were born and when. Or, as historian Arnold Toynbee indicated, an individual's adherence to a certain faith is often determined by "the geographical accident of the locality of his birth-place."

Is it reasonable to assume that the religion imposed at one's birth is necessarily the whole truth? If you were born in Italy or South America, then, without any choice, you were probably raised a Catholic. If you were born in India, then likely you automatically became a Hindu or, if from the Punjab, perhaps a Sikh. If your parents were from Pakistan, then you would obviously be a Muslim. And if you were born in a Socialist country over the last few decades, you might have had no choice but to be raised an atheist.

Therefore, is the religion of one's birth automatically the true one, approved by God? If that had been the concept followed over the millenniums, many among mankind would still be practicing primitive shamanism and ancient fertility cults, on the premise that "what was

good enough for my ancestors is good enough for me.”

With the wide diversity of religious expression that has developed around the world over the past 6,000 years, it is at least educational and mind broadening to understand what others believe and how their beliefs originated. And it might also open up vistas of a more concrete hope for your future.⁴

Consider also the following statement from a Muslim author and scholar:

We are proud of ourselves because we know more about science and technology than our parents and ancestors. We readily accept what is better and more advanced than what our parents have had. Yet, many of us do not hesitate to follow our parents blindly in religion, even if it means doing something we do not fully believe in.⁵

By far the most important freedom is spiritual freedom. Every consequence is temporary except the spiritual, yet many ignore this God-given right. As psychologist Wayne Dyer notes:

We can respect and even appreciate the past and the ways of our ancestors. We can love them for having chosen to go their own way. But to be attached to having to live and think the way others before you did, because you showed up looking like them in form, is to deny yourself enlightenment. This is how people

and their institutions have controlled others for thousands of years.⁶

Take a look at all of the people who are fighting in wars around the globe today, and you see them suffering and dying in the name of tradition. They are taught that what their ancestors believed is what they must believe. With this logic they perpetuate the suffering in their own lives and in the lives of their assigned enemies.⁷

As a human being you were built to think for yourself. Your mind is going to rebel with anxiety...if you don't allow yourself the freedom to think up to your full...capacity.⁸

The laity are following their leaders; the leaders are following the laity. A French revolutionary once said, “There go my people and I must find out where they go, so I can lead them.”

Unquestioned conformity is perhaps the most common cause of ignorance. Most people follow the phantoms of their own culture. They walk in the ways of their own ancient ancestors. They choose their robes but not their religion; their fish but not their faith; their doctor but not their destiny. Whatever chance hands them, they accept. Whatever their culture gives them, they worship. Whatever their family tells them, they follow.

Christ repeatedly asked Christians to investigate the news of His coming. As demonstrated in the books *I Shall*

Come Again, and The Glory of the Father, He often used the word “Watch!” in place of “Investigate!”

What I say to you, I say to everyone: “Watch!” Mark 13:37

Be always on the watch...that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man. Luke 21:36

We must empty ourselves before we can be filled. We must leave all our preconceived notions behind. “The humble are the empty vessels God loves to fill.”

The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity...⁹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Knowledge is light; ignorance is darkness. When we stand in the dark we experience fear and anxiety, we imagine danger. As soon as light comes, our fear vanishes. Truth is light; it extends our vision and makes us free. Why then are so many afraid of the light? Why are so many afraid to investigate? “The secret of happiness is freedom, and the secret of freedom is courage.”

Knowledge of our spiritual destiny sheds light on our path even unto eternity. In life it manifests an enduring purpose, and in death it reveals the glimmering of eternal life. It takes away all fears.

Give me the liberty to know, to think, to believe, and to utter freely,

according to conscience, above all liberties.

Freedom of choice is one of God's most magnificent gifts. The consequences of the choices we make are enormous; we must make them with the utmost care:

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord...the curse if you disobey the commands. Deuteronomy 11:26-27

On the journey towards God, no one can blame others for his or her failure. No one can say, "My parents prevented me" or "My pastor misled me." God leaves the door open to all, and declares that He will accept no excuses from anyone:

See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

Christ (Rev. 3:8)

Truth unifies; falsehood divides. If we seek the truth with impartial and open minds, we will all discover the three unifying onenesses that are the essence and purpose of this book: **one God, one faith, one people**. Acknowledging these three onenesses will create a power that will transform our planet and its peoples. What prevents us from seeing this truth is the veil of false assumptions, fantasies, and illusions.

We all have our own share of illusions and false assumptions. The difference is how many, and how attached we are to them. The incredible power of

illusions comes from this: They hide from the one who holds them! We are quick to see other people's illusions, but not our own. Just as we get used to our own odors, we get used to our fantasies. As much truth is visible as we have minds to know and hearts to see.

1. Lample, Paul. *The Proofs of Bahá'u'lláh's Mission*, Riviera Beach, FL: Palabra Publications, pp. 5-6.
2. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 157.
3. Anthony, Robert. *Total Self-Confidence*, New York: Berkley Books, 1984, pp. 3-4.
4. *Mankind's Search for God*, Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1990, pp. 8-10.
5. Arik, Abdullah. *Beyond Probability*, 1992, p. 2.
6. Dyer, Wayne. *You'll See It When You Believe It*, New York: Avon Books, 1989, pp. 164-165.
7. Dyer, Wayne. *You'll See It When You Believe It*, New York: Avon Books, 1989, p. 163.
8. Dyer, Wayne. *The Sky's the Limit*, New York: Pocket Books, 1980, p. 37.
9. *Paris Talks*, p. 136.



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