

Distinguishing Truth

INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

One of the most confusing and stressful issues facing people on a daily basis is distinguishing what is true. How do we know if what we read, what others say, or for that matter, what *we* think is right, is true or not? Is there an agreeable criterion by which Bahá'ís determine truth? Is inspiration valid? Do such things as astrology, psychic powers or the occult have any place in resolving truth?

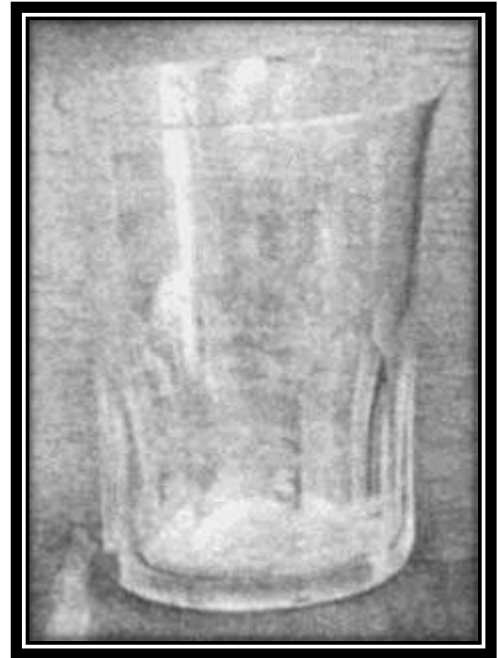
Nearly all disagreement and conflict in the world exist because people differ so in their accepted means of determining what is true. Religious fundamentalists declare their interpretation of Sacred Scripture is the basis of truth. Philosophers proclaim that reasoning or logic is the only way. Scientists reply that the only way to know things is through scientific evidence. Some cultures declare that the truth is taught through the lessons of their ancestors. Some people merely state that if they can't perceive something through one of the five senses, then it doesn't exist as a truth. Others might say that one knows the truth by listening to their "gut", or their feelings, or their first impression. So how do we know as Bahá'ís? How will we proceed as agents for the unification of humankind if we are unable to agree upon some kind of criteria?

"Another new principle revealed by Bahá'u'lláh," wrote 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "is the injunction to investigate truth — that is to say, no man should blindly follow his ancestors and forefathers.

Nay, each must see with his own eyes, hear with his own ears and investigate the truth himself in order that he may follow the truth instead of blind acquiescence and imitation of ancestral beliefs."

"Bahá'u'lláh has announced," continued 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "that the foundation of all the religions of God is one, that oneness is truth and truth is oneness, which does not admit of plurality. This teaching is new and specialized to this Manifestation."¹

Thankfully, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, and the interpretive writings and talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, give us the standard to distinguish truth from error and superstition. Let us explore with thoughtfulness and detachment the following sacred Verses, that we might all become transformed and fulfill our purpose in drawing nearer to God.



A tea glass of Bahá'u'lláh

"...partake of the living waters of truth from the cup of Thy Revelation and Thine inspiration." — Bahá'u'lláh

OBJECTIVE: *A look to the horizon...*

Facilitator

Review the following objective with the participants:

The objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths regarding the Bahá'í criteria for distinguishing truth.

¹ PUP, p. 454

THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the water of life...*

Facilitator

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations that follow, one at a time as described below.

1. **READING:** *A drink from the cup of guidance...*

Two volunteers take turns reading the quotation out loud so it is read twice.

2. **CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*

PARTICIPANTS: To better understand certain words used in the quotation, take turns with the following:

- A. Choose a word from the quotation and state it for the whole group to hear. (Like a fun game – pick a word!) Then...
- B. Read out loud the sentence that contains the **word** you selected, **while substituting for that word**, its given phrase, definition, or synonym from the boxes below the quotation.

Repeat A and B above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words.

3. **FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*

Take turns stating each basic fact or truth you can find in the quotation about Bahá'í criteria for distinguishing truth.

QUOTATIONS: *Within the meadows of Thy nearness...*

1. *First and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding. His purpose in conferring such a gift is none other except to enable His creature to know and recognize the one true God—exalted be His glory. This gift giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation.*
(*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 194)

conferred: graciously granted
creatures: creation of humankind
discern: perceive, recognize, or clearly make out
enable: provide the means and opportunity for
favors: privileges or rights granted out of kindness

foremost: of the highest importance
recognize: formally accept and acknowledge
truth: actual facts of what is right and real
understanding: rational and intellectual powers to distinguish truth from falsehood

2. The first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the duty incumbent upon all to investigate reality. What does it mean to investigate reality? It means that man must forget all hearsay and examine truth himself, for he does not know whether statements he hears are in accordance with reality or not. Wherever he finds truth or reality, he must hold to it, forsaking, discarding all else; for outside of reality there is naught but superstition and imagination.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 62)

accordance: agreement or conformity
duty: moral obligation
examine: inquire into carefully, inspect closely, and test for evidence of
forsaking: turning away from completely [and]
hearsay: talk and opinion of others; rumor
imagination: the creation of beliefs which are not real or true

incumbent: imposed as a responsibility
investigate: make a systematic inquiry and examination
naught: nothing
reality: what is actual and true to life
superstition: unreasonable or irrational beliefs, acts, or practices resulting from ignorance
truth: actual facts of what is right and real

3. Proofs are of four kinds: first, through sense perception; second, through the reasoning faculty; third, from traditional or scriptural authority; fourth, through the medium of inspiration. That is to say, there are four criteria or standards of judgment by which the human mind reaches its conclusion.

...the four criteria or standards of judgment by which the human mind reaches its conclusions are faulty and inaccurate. All of them are liable to mistake and error in conclusions. But a statement presented to the mind accompanied by proofs which the senses can perceive to be correct, which the faculty of reason can accept, which is in accord with traditional authority and sanctioned by the promptings of the heart, can be adjudged and relied upon as perfectly correct, for it has been proved and tested by all the standards of judgment and found to be complete. When we apply but one test, there are possibilities of mistake. This is self-evident and manifest.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 253-55)

accord: agreement and conformity
adjudged: decided or ruled upon
faculty: power of the mind
heart: "... the recipient of the light of God and the seat of the revelation of the All-Merciful..." (GWB, p. 186)
inspiration "What is inspiration? It is the influx of the human heart. But what are satanic promptings which afflict mankind? They are the influx of the heart also." (PUP, p. 22); "Inspiration is in conformity with the Divine Texts, but imaginations do not conform therewith." (TAB, Vol. 1, p. 195)

medium: receptive power
promptings: moving suggestions
proofs: evidences of truth
reasoning: intellectual or logical thinking
sanctioned: validated and approved
sense perception: the faculty of perceiving by means of the sense organs (sight, touch, taste, sound, and smell)
standards: established models
traditional authority: inherited, established, or customary patterns of thought, action, or behavior imposed by religious, political or social leaders

4. How shall we attain the reality of knowledge? By the breaths and promptings of the Holy Spirit, which is light and knowledge itself. Through it the human mind is quickened and fortified into true conclusions and perfect knowledge. ...all available human criteria are erroneous and defective, but the divine standard of knowledge is infallible. Therefore, man is not justified in saying, "I know because I perceive through my senses," or "I know because it is proved through my faculty of reason," or "I know because it is according to tradition and interpretation of the Holy Book," or "I know because I am inspired." All human standards of judgment are faulty, finite.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 22)

breaths: inspiration; "Inspiration is in conformity with the Divine Texts, but imaginations do not conform therewith." (TAB, Vol. 1, p. 195)
criteria: standards by which judgments or decisions are made
defective: imperfect; inadequate
divine: God given
erroneous: a failure or deviation from the right course or proposed standards
faculty: ability or power
faulty: defective or erroneous
finite: bound by limits
fortified: with it strengthened and secured
Holy Book: the Holy Books of past religions
Holy Spirit: the active presence of God in the human heart; "The Holy Spirit is the Bounty of God and the luminous rays which emanate from the Manifestations." (SAQ, p. 102)
 According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, evidence of the Holy Spirit's influence in the heart of man is feelings and expressions of "love", "peace", "unity", "happiness" "joy", "ecstasy", ☞

"affinity", "agreement", "loving cooperation", "kindness" and "brotherhood".
human: that belonging to the finite intelligence and powers [type of]
infallible: without error; not liable to deceive, mislead, or disappoint
inspired: "What is inspiration? It is the influx of the human heart. But what are satanic promptings which afflict mankind? They are the influx of the heart also." (PUP, p. 22)
know: am aware and understand what is true
knowledge: understanding what is factual and true
light: emanating spiritual knowledge and goodness
perceive: am aware and understand
promptings: moving suggestions
quickened: caused to be more brilliantly active
reality: true and actual facts
reason: logical thinking
standard: model or criteria
standards: independent models or criteria
tradition: handed down beliefs

5. God made religion and science to be the measure, as it were, of our understanding. Take heed that you neglect not such a wonderful power. Weigh all things in this balance.

... Put all your beliefs into harmony with science; there can be no opposition, for truth is one. When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles — and then will mankind be united in the power of the Love of God.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 145-46)

balance: way of judging and deciding
conformity: bringing into accordance or agreement
discords: active disagreements or conflicts
dogmas: established opinions or doctrines based on assumptions rather than reasonable evidence
harmony: agreement in facts and opinions
measure: system, basis, or standard for comparing the amount or degree
neglect not: are not careless to give due attention and respect to
one: indivisible; not admissible to multiples
opposition: objection or resistance
reason: the sane and sound use of the intellectual powers
religion: the Revelation of God to humankind

science: knowledge acquired from the systematized rational study and experimental exploration of natural phenomena
shorn: deprived or removed
superstition: unreasonable or irrational beliefs, acts, or practices resulting from ignorance
take heed: be attentive and mindful
traditions: inherited, established, or customary patterns of thought, action, or behavior
truth: the actual facts of what is right and real
understanding: rational and intellectual powers to distinguish truth from falsehood
unintelligent: unwise or ignorant [sort of]
weigh: consider carefully by balancing opposing factors or aspects in order to reach a choice or conclusion [of]

6. Any religious belief which is not conformable with scientific proof and investigation is superstition, for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond. Religious teaching which is at variance with science and reason is human invention and imagination unworthy of acceptance, for the antithesis and opposite of knowledge is superstition born of the ignorance of man. If we say religion is opposed to science, we lack knowledge of either true science or true religion, for both are founded upon the premises and conclusions of reason, and both must bear its test.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107)

antithesis: directly opposed
bear: be supported by
conformable: in accordance or agreement
correspond: be in conformity or agreement
essentially: of its innermost essence
imagination: the creation of beliefs which are not real or true
invention: ideas created in the mind that are false
investigation: systematic inquiry and examination
premises: stated or assumed matters previously set forth as the basis
proof: tried, tested, or proven evidence
reality: what is actual and true to life

reason: the sane and sound use of intellectual powers
religion: the Revelation of God to humankind
science: knowledge acquired from the systematized rational study and experimental exploration of natural phenomena
scientific: of, or relating to, a systematized rational study and experimental exploration
superstition: an untrue belief
test: critical examination or requirements to prove conformity
true: that which conforms to the essential reality [of]
at variance: in disagreement

7. Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism. All religions of the present day have fallen into superstitious practices, out of harmony alike with the true principles of the teaching they represent and with the scientific discoveries of the time.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 143)

despairing: hopeless condition [of]
fly: succeed
harmony: agreement with fact and opinion
intelligence: ability to learn, understand, and know
materialism: preoccupation with the material world as the source of well-being and happiness
principles: basic governing truths and standards
quagmire: difficult, uncertain, and entrapping condition
religion: the Revelation of God to humankind
religions: the various systems of belief, faith, and worship developed from the Revelations of God

science: knowledge acquired from the systematized rational study and experimental exploration of natural phenomena
slough: moral degradation and spiritual dejection from which one cannot free oneself
soar: rise or ascend to a more exalted level
superstition: unreasonable or irrational beliefs, acts, and practices resulting from ignorance
superstitious: ignorant and unreasonable
teachings: specific beliefs, ideals, and truths

8. Therefore it is imperative that we should renounce our own particular prejudices and superstitions if we earnestly desire to seek the truth. Unless we make a distinction in our minds between dogma, superstition and prejudice on the one hand, and truth on the other, we cannot succeed. When we are in earnest in our search for anything we look for it everywhere. This principle we must carry out in our search for truth. Science must be accepted. No one truth can contradict another truth.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 136-37)

accepted: willingly regarded as true and proper
contradict: assert or imply the opposite of
distinction: real difference
dogmas: established opinions or doctrines based on assumptions rather than reasonable evidence
earnest: a serious and intent mental state
earnestly: seriously
imperative: commanding; mandatory
prejudice: unfounded preconceived opinions and judgments

principle: basic governing truth or standard
renounce: give up and abandon
science: knowledge acquired from the systematized rational study and experimental exploration of natural phenomena
succeed: attain the desired intention or goal
superstition: unreasonable or irrational beliefs, acts, and practices based on ignorance
truth: that which conforms to the essential reality

9. *Every one of Them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of His Truth unto every one in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. They are the Manifestations of God amidst men, the evidences of His Truth, and the signs of His glory.*

(*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 50)

evidences: outward signs that furnish proof
glory: emanating brilliant and splendid divine light
Manifestations: great Prophets Who reveal the Words, and exhibit the signs and qualities
realms: places or spheres of reality

signs: indications of the existence and presence
Standard: authorized model, example, and criterion
Them: the Manifestations of God
Truth: essential and right reality
Way: rightful and true expression

SHARING: *A breath from the spirit of inspiration...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to complete the statements below. When everyone has finished, have each person share, in a round, the one thing that was most outstanding or inspiring and how it made him or her feel. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

The one thing from the quotations that was the most outstanding or inspiring to me was _____

It made me feel _____

Explain _____

SOME QUESTIONS: *A gentle breeze from the testing winds...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to answer the following questions. They can usually find answers in the quotations just studied or in the introduction. When everyone has finished, review the questions, then share and discuss the answers.

1. If something is *not* true or real, then it is _____ or _____.
2. Which of the following are acceptable ways of distinguishing truth for Bahá'ís?

<input type="checkbox"/> a. through science alone	<input type="checkbox"/> h. through sense perception alone
<input type="checkbox"/> b. through inspiration that is in conformity with the Divine Text	<input type="checkbox"/> i. through ones interpretation of the Divine Text alone
<input type="checkbox"/> c. through religion that is in agreement with true science	<input type="checkbox"/> j. through reasoning that conforms to science and the Divine Text
<input type="checkbox"/> d. through reasoning alone	<input type="checkbox"/> k. through the mutual agreement of the senses, reasoning, traditional authority and promptings of the heart.
<input type="checkbox"/> e. through inspiration	<input type="checkbox"/> l. through the Revelation of the Manifestation of God
<input type="checkbox"/> f. through any religious tradition	
<input type="checkbox"/> g. through science that is in agreement with true religion	
3. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we can attain the reality of knowledge "by the breaths and promptings of the Holy Spirit." But the heart, He said, is susceptible to inspiration from either the Holy Spirit or from "satanic promptings." We can know the "inspiration" we are receiving is from the Holy Spirit only if it is in conformity with feelings and expressions of "love", "peace", "unity", "happiness", "joy", "ecstasy", "affinity", "agreement", "loving cooperation", "kindness" and "brotherhood". He also said it must be "in conformity with the Divine Texts." To be sure our understanding of the Divine Text is accurate, *it* must also conform with true science. So, distinguishing truth, even when we feel inspired by the Holy Spirit, still must be weighed in balance with _____ and _____.
4. Science, in essence, is the study of the true "nature" of creation. Bahá'u'lláh wrote: "*Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.*"¹ He also wrote: "*O people! I am come to you with a Revelation from the Lord, your God...*"² It is because "*the nature*" of creation, and "*the Revelation*" of religion are both of God, that harmony must exist between _____ and _____.

¹ TOB, p. 142

² GWB, p. 146

APPLICATION: *Showing forth divine light...*

Facilitator

Read through the following paragraph together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action. When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote: *“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action....”* Imagine how the Bahá'í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. Take turns sharing the possibilities. Begin your statements with: **“One could....”**

From your experience in this study class on distinguishing truth, describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...** _____

From a talk by 'Abdu'l-Bahá...

During my visit to London and Paris last year I had many talks with the materialistic philosophers of Europe. The basis of all their conclusions is that the acquisition of knowledge of phenomena is according to a fixed, invariable law—a law mathematically exact in its operation through the senses. For instance, the eye sees a chair; therefore, there is no doubt of the chair's existence. The eye looks up into the heavens and beholds the sun; I see flowers upon this table; I smell their fragrance; I hear sounds outside, etc. This, they say, is a fixed mathematical law of perception and deduction, the operation of which admits of no doubt whatever; for inasmuch as the universe is subject to our sensing, the proof is self-evident that our knowledge of it must be gained through the avenues of the senses. That is to say, the materialists announce that the criterion and standard of human knowledge is sense perception. Among the Greeks and Romans the criterion of knowledge was reason—that whatever is provable and acceptable by reason must necessarily be admitted as true. A third standard or criterion is the opinion held by theologians that traditions or prophetic statement and interpretations constitute the basis of human knowing. There is still another, a fourth criterion, upheld by religionists and metaphysicians who say that the source and channel of all human penetration into the unknown is through inspiration. Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.

In Europe I told the philosophers and scientists of materialism that the criterion of the senses is not reliable. For instance, consider a mirror and the images reflected in it. These images have no actual corporeal existence. Yet if you had never seen a mirror, you would firmly insist and believe that they were real. The eye sees a mirage upon the desert as a lake of water, but there is no reality in it. As we stand upon the deck of a steamer, the shore appears to be moving, yet we know the land is stationary and we are moving. The earth was believed to be fixed and the sun revolving about it, but although this appears to be so, the reverse is now known to be true. A whirling torch makes a circle of fire appear before the eye, yet we realize there is but one point of light. We behold a shadow moving upon the ground, but it has no material existence, no substance. In deserts the atmospheric effects are particularly productive of illusions which deceive the eye. Once I saw a mirage in which a whole caravan appeared traveling upward into the sky. In the far North other deceptive phenomena appear and baffle human vision. Sometimes three or four suns, called by scientists mock suns, will be shining at the same time, whereas we know that the great solar orb is one and that it remains fixed

and single. In brief, the senses are continually deceived, and we are unable to separate that which is reality from that which is not.

As to the second criterion — reason — this likewise is unreliable and not to be depended upon. This human world is an ocean of varying opinions. If reason is the perfect standard and criterion of knowledge, why are opinions at variance and why do philosophers disagree so completely with each other? This is a clear proof that human reason is not to be relied upon as an infallible criterion. For instance, great discoveries and announcements of former centuries are continually upset and discarded by the wise men of today. Mathematicians, astronomers, chemical scientists continually disprove and reject the conclusions of the ancients; nothing is fixed, nothing final; everything is continually changing because human reason is progressing along new roads of investigation and arriving at new conclusions every day. In the future much that is announced and accepted as true now will be rejected and disproved. And so it will continue ad infinitum.

When we consider the third criterion — traditions — upheld by theologians as the avenue and standard of knowledge, we find this source equally unreliable and unworthy of dependence. For religious traditions are the report and record of understanding and interpretation of the Book. By what means has this understanding, this interpretation been reached? By the analysis of human reason. When we read the Book of God, the faculty of comprehension by which we form conclusions is reason. Reason is mind. If we are not endowed with perfect reason, how can we comprehend the meanings of the Word of God? Therefore, human reason, as already pointed out, is by its very nature finite and faulty in conclusions. It cannot surround the Reality Itself, the Infinite Word. Inasmuch as the source of traditions and interpretations is human reason, and human reason is faulty, how can we depend upon its findings for real knowledge?

The fourth criterion I have named is inspiration through which it is claimed the reality of knowledge is attainable. What is inspiration? It is the influx of the human heart. But what are satanic promptings which afflict mankind? They are the influx of the heart also. How shall we differentiate between them? The question arises: How shall we know whether we are following inspiration from God or satanic promptings of the human soul? Briefly, the point is that in the human material world of phenomena these four are the only existing criteria or avenues of knowledge, and all of them are faulty and unreliable. What then remains? How shall we attain the reality of knowledge? By the breaths and promptings of the Holy Spirit, which is light and knowledge itself. [“The Holy Spirit is the Bounty of God and the luminous rays which emanate from the Manifestations.”]¹ Through it the human mind is quickened and fortified into true conclusions and perfect knowledge. This is conclusive argument showing that all available human criteria are erroneous and defective, but the divine standard of knowledge is infallible. Therefore, man is not justified in saying, “I know because I perceive through my senses,” or “I know because it is proved through my faculty of reason,” or “I know because it is according to tradition and interpretation of the Holy Book,” or “I know because I am inspired.” All human standards of judgment are faulty, finite.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 20-22)

¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *SAQ*, p. 108

ANSWERS: *Affirming treasures...*

1. superstition or imagination
2. b, c, g, j, k, and l
3. science and religion
4. science and religion

This study guide and many others are available as free downloads at www.bahaessentials.com