

**THE CRISIS IN BĀBĪ AND BAHĀ'Ī STUDIES:
PART OF A WIDER CRISIS IN ACADEMIC FREEDOM?**

Denis MacEoin

Bad reviews, like death and taxes, come to us all. But whereas we can hire undertakers to box up our mortal remains and accountants to plead with the faceless minions at Cumbernauld, it falls to ourselves to respond to the bad reviews. Good manners and, indeed, self-interest—for which of us has not written our share?—suggest that it is better, on the whole, to ignore them: there are better things to do with one's time. But sometimes the bad reviews are just a bit too unfair or misleading to be left alone.

For someone like myself, working in an apparently esoteric but increasingly important field, the dilemma is particularly sharp. The bulk of my academic work has been concerned with two religious movements originating in Iran—Babism and Baha'ism. Not vastly important topics in themselves, I hear you say. But with the recent burgeoning of interest in Iranian Shi'ism, they seem likely to attract more and more attention from Islamicists. Baha'ism in particular is a growing movement, whose size and paradigmatic qualities recommend it as a fruitful field of study for sociologists of religion and scholars in religious studies generally.

The biggest problem with Bābī/Bahā'ī studies at the moment is that the entire field is dominated by practising adherents of the Bahā'ī movement. All the big names—Momen, Smith, Amanat, Cole, Lambden—are Bahā'īs of long standing. Not that that is a bad thing in itself: the work of all these individuals is, broadly speaking, of a very high standard. Where the problem comes in is that, myself excepted, there are no non-Bahā'īs writing seriously on the subject.

This means that there are few balances or objective criteria operating within the field. More narrowly, it means that there is no-one out there capable of making intelligent and informed estimates of the accuracy, originality, controversiality, or significance of the work that is being produced. Unconscious (and conscious) distortions, diplomatic silences, woolly generalizations, plain exaggerations, misstatements of fact, significant omissions—all can (and often do) pass unobserved and uncommented.

This can be particularly frustrating for the lone wolf like myself on whose shoulders falls the responsibility to challenge received opinion. The field of Bābī and Bahā'ī historical and textual studies is one in which controversies abound. Inevitably, the non-Bahā'ī researcher will disagree with at least some Bahā'ī accounts or interpretations of the movement's history and doctrine (otherwise, he would, presumably, join the movement).

If there were dozens of non-Bahā'īs working in the field, some sort of broad consensus would no doubt emerge. But, as a solitary worker, I cannot create a consensus of one. My fellow-workers in the field—the Bahā'īs, that is—by virtue of their allegiance to a single ideology, have their own ways of arriving at a consensus. And it takes little imagination to see what sort of problems that may lead to.

Being the only person expressing any informed view about Babism or Baha'ism that differs from or at times openly contradicts officially-sanctioned Bahā'ī opinion carries with it several penalties. One, quite obviously, is a sense of isolation. No Bahā'ī will espouse one's views in print—although plenty will take up their pens to condemn them. No-one else is in much of a position to offer praise for an original thought or criticism that is not ideologically motivated. So it is easy to feel out on a limb and left with largely negative impressions of one's own work.

This much can be suffered in silence. But it can become unusually galling when certain Bahā'īs—some of them academics—seek to undermine one's published work using tactics that few people outside the field are in a position to appreciate or question. There is no-one out there to rise to one's defence, so one is forced to take on the critics alone—and after a while it begins to look more like an inability to take criticism than a legitimate reaction to partisan sniping.

The most recent attempt to portray my work on Babism and Baha'ism as inadequate, biased and unreliable has appeared in a review by Juan Cole, a Bahā'ī academic from Michigan University, published in a recent volume of this *Bulletin*, (14 (1988), pp.230-1). The review is devoted to a compilation of essays on Bābī and Bahā'ī studies (*In Iran: Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī History* vol.3), but almost a third of it is given over to a discussion of my own contribution, 'Hierarchy, Authority and Eschatology in Early Bābī Thought'.

Cole's first paragraph on my article presents an *ad hominem* argument that feels out of place in an academic review. He reveals that I was a Bahā'ī 'for thirteen years' (it was more like fifteen, in fact) and after leaving the movement began to write bitterly about it. Leaving aside Cole's somewhat loaded use of the term 'bitterly'—I would have preferred something like 'critically' or 'with less than fulsome praise'—I find myself troubled by his motives in dragging this fact so far to the forefront of his discussion.

All the other articles discussed by Cole were penned by convinced Bahā'īs. It should be clear that they too have their biases (in some cases apparent, in others less so). But Dr. Cole chooses to single out my bias for special comment, treating the other contributors as ordinary academics whose convictions are immaterial to their work. And, of course, he omits to mention the important fact that he is himself an active member of the Bahā'ī community.

At this point, Cole's argument becomes somewhat subtle. He states that I now say I am 'an objective non-Bahā'ī' but argues that I am in reality 'still very involved in the subject emotionally' and 'about as objective as a former spouse after a messy divorce'.

Not only is this argument somewhat offensive, but even on the simplest level, I find its logic flawed. I have to assume that those Bahā'ī scholars who have remained committed to belief in the religion are also 'involved in the subject emotionally'. As a matter of fact, in most cases I know they are. So, in the end, Cole's argument really cancels itself out. Or is there an ever-so-faint suggestion here that Bahā'īs have a healthy and respectable sort of emotional involvement that is a positive asset in academic work, whereas someone as

misguided as myself can only possess rather nasty and clouding emotions?

But let me return for a moment to the statement that I now give myself out as 'an objective non-Bahā'ī'. This is genuinely loaded and needs careful examination, chiefly for its methodological implications. The first point that has to be stressed is that I have never actually claimed the sort of absolute objectivity Cole seems to attribute to me. In an early article on the topic, I clearly stated: '... it is undeniable that my own rejection of the values and categories of the Bahā'ī system inevitably colours my thinking about it'. I have never sought to conceal my position *vis-à-vis* Baha'ism or the biases inherent in it.

But what Dr. Cole seems to be saying is that my lack of objectivity is so great as to disable and invalidate my academic work. This I have to dispute. If by 'objective' we mean 'attaining to a Platonic ideal of detachment', clearly I do not qualify. Nor, I suppose, does anybody else. But if the term is taken to mean that, like other academics, I endeavour to work with respect for the facts (and for the problems of determining them), with rigour, self-awareness, and a sense of fairness coupled with a critical temperament, then I would hope to be granted some credence.

Peter Smith, a Bahā'ī sociologist whose work is also represented in the volume under review, is someone whose work I have often praised for its general freedom from the many biases that, I believe, mar the work of many other Bahā'ī writers. In the preface to his recent introduction to the subject (*The Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions*, Cambridge, 1987), he states his aim of writing 'without conscious bias and with a general sense of questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions which form part of my background as a Baha'ī' (an aim in which, incidentally, I happen to think he has by and large succeeded).

Now, Cole seems prepared to take Smith at face value, for he nowhere suggests that his commitment to Baha'ism has unduly interfered with his academic approach. I, however, am not to be accorded this courtesy. Why? I rather think that, whereas Smith writes with respect for the facts yet in a vein that is, inevitably, openly sympathetic to his subject, I tend to concern myself more with the problems the facts throw up and to be more critical of Bahā'ī attitudes to those problems.

Why do I choose to do this? Partly because it happens to be the way I see things: it was, after all, a growing awareness of those problems that led to my withdrawal from the movement. But more importantly, I think, it is precisely because I am the only person in the field in a position to do it. If I were to stop writing on the subject (as Cole, Momen, and others have suggested I do), the field would be left entirely open to the Bahā'īs themselves. For obvious reasons, that would, I believe, be deleterious to serious scholarship.

It would, indeed, be deleterious for a less obvious but more critical reason, to which I have referred on more than one occasion and which it may be useful to repeat here. All Bahā'ī writers, whether academics or not, are obliged, on pain of severe penalties, to submit anything destined for publication, even in an academic journal, for approval by official Bahā'ī 'reviewing committees'. This approval may be withheld, or granted on condition changes are made. The system is not one of peer approval, nor is it designed to promote academic

standards; its stated purpose (as set out in official guidelines) is simply to ensure doctrinal uniformity and dignity of presentation.

While Bahā'ī academics like Dr. Cole remain willing to submit their work to non-academic bodies for approval, emendation, or even withdrawal, I have to regard it as my duty, whatever my own failings in the realm of objectivity, to continue to write critically on the subject.

Perhaps the matter should be left here, with Dr. Cole asserting my lack of objectivity and me insisting that I do my best to work within academic norms. That would, however, leave untouched a most disturbing use of what is, to all intents and purposes, a straightforward criticism of the actual content of my article. This is his contention, outlined in his second paragraph, that, in my recent work (including the piece under review), I tend 'to accept Azalī accounts of primitive Babism rather too uncritically'. What Dr. Cole means is that I have used a version of early Bābī history contained in sources belonging to the Azalī sect of Babism.

At the risk of getting involved in a technicality likely to be of limited interest to others, I would like to examine this statement more closely, chiefly because it contains the sort of argument that works by assuming ignorance on the part of the reader. It sounds good, looks convincing, and, since there are no non-Bahā'ī experts in the field, is likely to go unchallenged. The point is of little interest for its own sake, but it does serve as a lively example of the ways in which ideology can distort academic judgement.

Why the fuss about Azalī sources anyway? The simple answer is that the Azalīs were the rival sect of Babism with whom the Bahā'īs competed in the last century. Azalī sources are, for Bahā'īs, by definition corrupt and unreliable. This same accusation was also levelled at E.G. Browne, another non-Bahā'ī academic whose work has been much maligned over the years by the Bahā'īs, and the French scholar A.L.M. Nicolas. For many Bahā'īs, simply to use an Azalī source is to be uncritical.

Is Dr. Cole even fair in levelling this criticism? The facts are rather against him. The article under review is, in fact, the first of my published works in which I have made any extensive use of Azalī material at all (if we exclude from this definition early Bābī writings published but not written by the Azalīs in modern Iran).

More critically, it is worth actually looking at the ratio of Azalī to Bahā'ī works used as sources for the chapter he refers to. On the basis of cited references, I refer to Azalī works a total of twelve times, to Bahā'ī sources no fewer than fifty-four. Further, I refer to only three Azalī sources directly (as distinct from using quotations from other works cited in Azalī books), but to thirty-five Bahā'ī works. That does not seem to me to be the sort of balance one might expect from someone accepting Azalī accounts 'uncritically'.

What worries me more is that Cole straight-facedly admits that 'Bahā'ī MSS can be equally suspect'. As any historian knows, *all* sources are in some sense suspect, especially where partisan considerations and religious rivalries have played a major role in their creation. In the case of Bahā'ī versus Azalī works, Bābī historical studies are too much in their infancy to allow us to make any generalizations as yet as to their relative merits or demerits.

Certainly, I cannot see how anyone could hope to do any useful research on Bābī history without depending to some extent on Azalī material. If that occasionally leads to conclusions that some Bahā'īs find disquieting, it is up to them to demonstrate academically (and not emotionally) that the sources are faulty.

This point deserves to be taken a stage further, since it reveals a serious logical flaw in Cole's argument. It seems that, if I rely on Azalī works, I am to be regarded as 'uncritical'. Very well. But if as an alternative I rely on Bahā'ī sources (which are, broadly speaking, the only others available to me for certain periods), I am using materials which are, as Cole admits, 'equally suspect'. In that case, surely I am being equally uncritical. I cannot see how I am expected to get out of this dilemma other than by doing what I have, in fact, done—namely, to use both Azalī and Bahā'ī materials with as much critical finesse as I can bring to bear on them.

Let me look finally at Cole's claim that I tend to be 'unduly dismissive of the work on the Bābī and Bahā'ī faiths produced by scholars who happen to be Bahā'īs'. This is rather disingenuous. As Dr. Cole himself well knows, very few Bahā'ī scholars, whether in the West or Iran, have ever carried out research on the subject using modern critical approaches. Most Bahā'ī 'scholars' are essentially learned apologists, a fact underlined by their willingness to accept prior censorship of their work to ensure its conformity with official Bahā'ī positions.

I have certainly criticized (and shall continue to criticize) the work of *soi-disant* scholars who slavishly follow a party line while pretending to the world at large to represent the values of independent scholarship. Equally, I am and shall always be willing to speak highly of the work of those Bahā'ī academics who show themselves ready to adopt independent and critical positions—in evidence of which, I suggest Dr. Cole read my reviews of Peter Smith's recent study.

Now, where is this rather long-winded piece of self-defence getting us? I know it is helping me get some things off my chest that might otherside lead to my strangling the cat and, as a consequence, to my wife strangling me. But what about the ordinary Middle East scholar or Islamicist who has inadvertently ended up reading it and persevered this far? A little enlightenment about the state of Bābī/Bahā'ī studies, perhaps. Maybe some encouragement to get personally involved in research on the field, thereby introducing another balance into the equation. And possible a little insight into some problematic aspects of method in the study of religion.

If that were all, this rejoinder would scarcely have been worth writing. But I think that even more serious issues are involved. Readers of this *Bulletin* who also read the academic press will know something of the circumstances surrounding the termination of my lectureship in Islamic Studies at Newcastle University as the result of a decision taken by the Saudi Ministry of Education. According to the Saudi Assistant Educational Attaché, his superiors were disturbed that I was teaching, among other things, courses on Shi'ism, Sufism, and (to a much smaller degree), Babism and Baha'ism (as part of a course in the sociology of religious movements).

On the one hand, then, my teaching and research is disrupted by the sectarian disapproval of a hardline Sunni regime that disapproves, *inter alia*, of Babism, Baha'ism and Sufism and that holds the purse-strings of a British academic post. On the other, my integrity as an academic is questioned by Dr. Cole, as it has previously been questioned by other Bahā'īs, who happen to dominate the field.

Some years ago, in this country, the Bahā'ī authorities attempted to prevent a leading publisher from including a chapter by me in a compilation edited by a non-Bahā'ī academic. More recently, in the United States, their counterparts refused permission to a Bahā'ī publisher to publish anything written by me, regardless of content. A full-length study of sources for early Bābī history and doctrine, accepted and edited by that publisher, has now had its publication blocked on the grounds that the text is 'disrespectful' to certain holy figures. The chairman of the body responsible for the ban is a professor of history at Yale University.

This, if my instincts are right, is a confirmation of my basic moderateness as a scholar. It is also a cleft stick in which, if I am not mistaken, more and more unaffiliated academics may find themselves caught as the autonomy and disinterestedness of our university system are further undermined by outside bodies. In Newcastle, I was replaced as a teacher of Islamic Studies by a Saudi Muslim with no academic qualifications in the subject. In that same department last year, a professorial fellow was appointed to carry out research on aspects of the modern church in Britain: it was a stipulation of his appointment that he be 'a committed Christian'.

In the US alone, the Bahā'īs, as Dr. Cole attests in his review, rival the Quakers in numbers. They are, by my own estimate, the largest and the fastest-growing of the New Religious Movements. They have growing funds and a deep interest in the promotion of studies on their religion. Already, I understand that a few posts in Third World universities are funded by them. They have active quasi-academic associations in several countries, including a particularly effective one in Canada. It cannot be long before they seek, through conferences, publications and, finally, university appointments, to influence the course of academic work on their faith.

This is a path that has already been successfully trodden by the Unification Church (the 'Moonies') and criticized by a handful of academics such as Horowitz in the United States and Beckford in this country. The effects of cuts, loss of tenure, and government insistence on self-help are such as to render our institutions of higher education particularly vulnerable to such attempts to influence the tenor and direction of scholarship. Those of us who work in fields like Islamic studies (or Bābī and Bahā'ī studies) are particularly at risk. The vested interests involved are many and powerful, our defences against them weak and easily suborned. And if legislation is passed making blasphemy against any faith a punishable offence, it may soon be impossible to write openly about Islam, Baha'ism, or any other religion.

That is why I find Dr. Cole's review so disturbing. He is a serious, reputable and honest academic. He is also committed to an ideology that affirms that the truth is manifest. As Popper has often pointed out, the adherents of such

ideologies must inevitably conclude that those who fail to see or who dispute their truth do so out of moral perversity and a wilful urge to conceal it.

Reviews like Dr. Cole's are designed primarily to short-circuit a perfectly valid academic debate by introducing *ad hominem* arguments and red herrings (in this case, my use of Azalī sources). I respect Dr. Cole's right to defend his chosen beliefs from what he perceives to be distorted presentations of them. But he (and others) must learn to do so openly and in the context of apologetics, not under the guise of academic argument.