

BAHÁ'Í VALUES AND HISTORICAL INQUIRY

Musings on the Continuing Discussion of Ethics and Methodology

The popular conception of academic inquiry includes the notion that scholars must make a clear distinction in their work between facts and values. Science and religion - faith and reason - it is commonly assumed, must occupy wholly distinct, and even opposing, areas of human thought and activity. This popular view supposes that scholarship is or should be value-free, and that every scholar must strive to conduct his business without influence from his faith or values. Those Baha'is who hold this view are, therefore, naturally suspicious of any believer who starts out to make a scholarly study of some aspect of Baha'í history, assuming that he must discard, or at least suspend temporarily, his belief in Baha'u'llah and in the truths of the Revelation in order to pursue his work. They naturally view such an intention with alarm.

However, the dichotomy between facts and values, between faith and reason, has long since been discarded in modern academic circles. In the first place, it is recognized that no scholar is able, simply at will, to wipe himself clean of his values, biases, and moral judgments so as to pursue his work. Every academic historian recognizes that he, and all his colleagues, have biases that will affect their studies. The current view is that all human thought and activity is grounded in values, and there is no escape from this.

It is accepted among academics that values and value judgments are an integral part of all academic study, even in the so-called "hard sciences," such as chemistry, mathematics and physics. One cannot imagine physics, for instance without the choice of a significant line of research, the formulation of hypotheses, the evaluation of contradictory evidence, the judgments about the significance of partial data, the process of theory building, and so forth. All such basic activities are fundamentally based in human values and value judgments.

If values play such a role in the study of physics, the study of history provides an even more central role for them. The historian, after all, studies human beings: their actions, their intentions, their motivations. The idea that all this can be done without making judgments is, of course, preposterous. Any modern academic historian would find the notion of a "value-free history" laughable indeed.

The argument for the role of values in human history has been made particularly well by Professor Edward Hallett Carr, who, by the way, was by no means the first one to propose it. However, since his book What Is History? was published over twenty years ago and has become a popular textbook for undergraduate history courses in this country, and since it is used in these courses to debunk the popular notions we have mentioned above, it might be useful to refer to it. His views on the subject, while not unchallenged, can be taken to represent the current academic approach one might find in major universities today.

Carr notes in his book that there are an infinite number of data from the past which are available to us. Everything from the length of Napoleon's nose to the number of people killed in the Vietnam War falls into this category. The number of "facts" we can discover, even about the present, is unlimited. Obviously, all of these cannot be considered by the historian. The scholar must choose his subject, and then choose his facts, to make his work possible. This selection of subjects and facts is necessarily based on a system of values. Selectivity—even in our culturally determined realm of cognition—is the first place where values come into play. Carr goes farther to say, "The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy." And again, he maintains, "Historical facts. . . presuppose some measure of interpretation; and historical interpretations always involve moral judgments—or, if you prefer a more neutral sounding term, value judgments."

After denying that there are any "pure facts," Carr goes on to make the obvious, though often overlooked, point that the historian must use, as the sources of his history, documents which are themselves the products of human beings and so reflect their values, prejudices, etc. These documents are not accepted at face value, but must be weighed and evaluated by use of a different scholarly system of values. Therefore, it is the central work of history not merely to record what has been left behind by those in the past, but to evaluate it. Carr puts it clearly, "History means interpretation."

(All this is not to suggest that facts and values are the same things. They are different. Facts are the infinite number of sensory data which are available to us; values are the choices that we make concerning the importance, the usefulness, the meaning, and the moral worth of those data. However, both facts and values are integral parts of all human activity—from the simple act of cognition to the acceptance of a universal religious system. In any case, it is universally recognized among academics today that values and value judgments play legitimate roles in the study of history. Such a position is axiomatic to modern historical scholarship.)

In most cases, historians do not make their values explicit. But some schools of history have formulated open and systematic sets of values which they apply to the study of the past. Marxists are particularly vocal in this respect. They unapologetically declare that their study of history rests on a normative framework with explicit values concerning economic exploitation, the value of human labor, the goals of history, etc. They regard their work as one of the tools to be used in the struggle to expose false values and overturn the present world order. A Marxist interpretation of history is certainly respectable in academic circles. And as a result of its explicitly humanist values, it is immensely popular, as well.

Baha'i scholars who approach the study of history will also fall into the category of those who accept an explicit and systematic set of values. Baha'is have recognized the claim of Baha'u'llah to be the Manifestation of God for this age and they accept his teachings as the basis of their worldview. There is certainly no need

to make any apology for this as far as the academic world is concerned. But, the implication that such beliefs and values should have for the Baha'i scholar himself is a serious question.

It must be recognized that although the biases and values held by any scholar will have a profound affect on the character of his work, they are not themselves the objects of scholarly debate. Values do not admit to empirical proof or falsification. So neither the Baha'i scholar, nor his fellow believers, need have any fear that one's faith in Baha'u'llah is somehow threatened by scholarly pursuits. The acceptance of Baha'u'llah (as the source of one's values) is not something that can be proved or disproved on scholarly grounds. It is not properly a subject which would even arise in scholarly discourse. For the scholar of history, the question of the implications of his Baha'i identity for his academic work is a personal matter which must be worked out by the scholar himself, hopefully in discourse with fellow scholars of the same faith.

The question does not admit to a facile answer. Baha'is distinguish, for example, between the original, pure and uninterpreted teachings of Jesus as they were spoken and demonstrated by him two thousand years ago, and the development of Christendom and Christian doctrine through the centuries. Baha'is hold the explicit value that the pure teachings of Jesus were life-giving, divinely inspired guidance for the world, while the later developments hold no such status and are thought to have obscured the true teachings of Christ.

However, a moment's reflection will suffice to bring the scholar who sets out seriously to study the history of Christianity to the realization that this distinction is of no help at all to his work. This is for the simple reason that he has no access to the "pure teachings" of Jesus, and, therefore, he can never know what they were. The point might be made even more clearly by reference to the teachings of Buddha or Zoroaster, whose original teachings are even more obscure than those of Jesus. The fact is that the teachings of Jesus are available to us, insofar as they are recoverable at all, only through the writings and actions of his later followers.

Despite the fact that a Baha'i and, say, a Catholic might hold different values concerning Christian teachings and history, they must pursue exactly the same methods in their study of the history of Christianity. This is true despite the unique Baha'i values involved, since there is no possible way that these values can be applied to academic inquiry in this case. All that the scholar can do to recover Christian history, be he Catholic or Baha'i, is study the sayings and doings of men. These can only be approached through the evidence and documents which have been left for us—these also having been created by men. Reference to an unknown "perfect type" is of no help. One's conclusions from such a study will certainly be affected by one's values, but one's methodologies will not.

Now, when the Baha'i scholar turns to a study of the history

of the Baha'i Faith, he will not have to face quite the same problem of access to the original teachings of the Prophet. In the Baha'i Faith we have available to us many original documents written by Baha'u'llah. These documents form the basis of Baha'i belief. However, a study of these writings does not, in and of itself, constitute a study of Baha'i history.

Consider the following subjects: 1) the membership of the Baha'i Community of Los Angeles in 1932; 2) the rise of the Baha'i Faith in the West; 3) the history of the Baha'i Faith in Brazil from 1963 to 1973. The fact that we have access to the original Writings of Baha'u'llah will be of no help at all to the scholar who sets out to investigate these real subjects of Baha'i history. In his approach, he will have to pursue the same methods of inquiry that any non-Baha'i would. A study of the Holy Text does not constitute the study of Baha'i history.

It is possible to maintain, as a value, that the early actions of the Baha'is in America, for instance, should not be regarded as developments in Baha'i history, but rather should be seen as growth in the community's understanding of the Baha'i Revelation. This view would hold that the history of the Cause is guided by God, that somewhere in the Mind of God the Baha'i Revelation exists in perfect type, and that this form is gradually being made manifest on earth through a Divine Plan. No one could argue with such values on academic grounds.

But again, such a view would have no affect at all on the methodologies which the scholar must use to study Baha'i history.

Since he has no access to the Mind of God, he does not know, and can never know, what the "Baha'i Revelation" in its idealized form is. Therefore, all he can study are the doings and sayings of men as the developments of Baha'i history. He cannot study the Mind of God, nor can he make comparisons to an ideal which is unknown.

The academic student of Baha'i history can only study the actions of the Baha'is. It is these actions, along with the actions of the Central Figures of the Faith, which constitute Baha'i history. The early belief among Western Baha'is that 'Abdūl-Baha was the Return of Christ, the dissensions in the early New York Baha'i Community, the lessons of Ibrahim Kheiralla in his early American classes—these are all basic and important subjects of Baha'i history about which the study of the Holy Text may yield little or nothing. The Baha'i scholar has, in this respect, no special methodologies to pursue that differ from those of his non-Baha'i colleagues.

Even with reference to the Writings of Baha'u'llah, where they concern historical questions, the Baha'i may be in no different position than a non-Baha'i. The Baha'i Writings cannot always be taken literally—especially as regards questions of history. We know that all of the Prophets of God have spoken in metaphors and have geared their discourses to the understandings of their listeners.

Mirza Abu'l-Fadl, regarded as the most learned Baha'i scholar, addressed this question as early as 1900, in his book translated into English as *Al-Durar al-Bahiyih*, **MIRACLES AND METAPHORS:**

It is clear that the prophets and Manifestations of the Cause of God were sent to guide the nations, to improve their characters, and to bring the people nearer to their Source and ultimate Goal. They were not sent as historians, astronomers, philosophers, or natural scientists....Therefore, the prophets have indulged the people in regard to their historical notions, folk stories, and scientific principles, and have spoken to them according to these. They conversed as was appropriate to their audience and hid certain realities behind the curtain of allusion. (p.9)

In another passage he states:

It is well known that neither the Prophet Muhammad nor the rest of the prophets ever engaged in disputes with the people about their historical beliefs, but addressed them according to their local traditions. (p. 14)

From Abu'l-Fadl's point of view, which the reader is urged to review in its entirety, even when the scholar is presented with a direct quotation from the Writings on some point of history, he must subject that quotation to the same methodologies as he might use for any other source. This is because he cannot discount the real possibility that the verses revealed by Baha'u'llah might be interpreted figuratively, might have been spoken in the idiom of

the listener, or might have some other meaning that is not immediately obvious.

Juan Cole's article "Problems of Chronology in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom" (World Order, Vol. 13, #3, Spring 1979, pp. 24-39) provides an excellent example of the importance of doing this. Here Cole notes that Baha'u'llah's statement in Lawh-i Hikmat that Pythagoras and Empedocles were contemporaries of David and Solomon, while it follows the traditional Muslim dating, is an historical and factual error. It would be a mistake, therefore, for Baha'is to accept Baha'u'llah's statement at face value. Any Baha'i historian who did so would find that position untenable.

A similar point might be made about the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi, although they do not, strictly speaking, form a part of the Holy Text. Shoghi Effendi was not infallible in matters of Baha'i history. In a letter to an individual written on his behalf in 1944 by his secretary it is stated:

The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretations of the Teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc.

In a letter to an individual believer dated July 25, 1974, the Universal House of Justice made reference to an interesting incident concerning the Guardian's own methods of historical inquiry:

"The Guardian was meticulous about the authenticity of historical fact. One of the friends in Yazd wrote to him stating that the account given by 'Abdu'l-Baha in one of His Tablets about events related to the martyrdom of some of the believers in that place was in conflict with known facts about these events. Shoghi Effendi replied saying that the friends should investigate the facts carefully and unhesitatingly register them in their historical records, since 'Abdu'l-Baha Himself had prefaced His record of the events in His Tablet with a statement that it was based on news received from Yazd."

This is an important precedent. Faced with a clear conflict between the account of historical events as revealed in a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Baha and accounts from other sources, the Guardian instructed that the believers in Yazd should investigate the evidence from the other sources and record it. He did not instruct the believers to abandon the job of historical inquiry in the face of the Tablet.

Baha'i historians today, faced with similar problems of apparent conflict between information found in the Holy Texts and other evidence, will have to follow this same path. Statements of historical fact as they are found in the Writings of Baha'u'llah, or the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi, must be subjected to the same scrutiny that we would apply to any other source. The Baha'i historian must use his intelligence to sort out any conflict. He cannot simply assume that the statements

found in the Writings of the Faith are literally true. To do so would be to approach the subject of history blindfolded and to abandon the job of historical inquiry altogether.

In the absence of a living interpreter of the Writings of the Faith, which is the situation in which the Baha'i Community currently finds itself, no believer can assume that he understands the true intent of the Holy Text, no matter how obvious the meaning of a particular passage may seem to him. Our understanding of the Revelation must always be limited; our interpretation of any particular passage of the Text is always subject to revision, in the light of our own growing maturity, and in the light of future scholarly inquiry.

So, what are the unique approaches that a Baha'i historian will bring to his study of the history of his own religion? It seems to me that the answer is not yet clear. And it may very well be that there are no unique Baha'i methodologies. A resolution to this problem can only be worked out in time and through practice by scholars who face the question squarely.

However, part of the solution may lie in the realization that academic inquiry does not seek to determine Truth, with a capital T. Scholarship, especially history, is not equipped to take on questions of God, Revelation, and the like. Scholarship is not intended to determine values, and so does not threaten them. Baha'i scholars may maintain a firm conviction in the divine origin of the Baha'i Revelation and conduct their historical inquiries without feeling

that this value is somehow constantly under review.

Naturally, as we pursue a deeper study of the Faith, our understandings of the Revelation will change. But as fallible human beings, we know that all our understandings are only partial and temporary approximations of the truth. As Shoghi Effendi has explained, the more we study the Faith, the more truths we find in it, and the more we find that our previous notions were erroneous. But the fact that our ideas about the Baha'i Faith are continually subject to change need not threaten our commitment to it.

Naturally, as the Baha'i historian, or any other Baha'i scholar, pursues his work he must remain mindful of the spiritual duties of courtesy, wisdom, tolerance, etc. But these are also values. They are fully compatible with the pursuit of scholarly knowledge and are not threatened by it. Likewise, these values are subject to various interpretations and growing understandings.

In closing, we might note that the common understanding of academic pursuits is also tinged with a good deal of suspicion and fear. There is the curious view that scholarly inquiry somehow exposes the Baha'i who seeks a deeper study of his Faith to some special spiritual dangers, such as pride or loss of faith—as if ignorance somehow confers a spiritual protection. It is understandable that dead religions which are desperately guarding false and outmoded ideas and doctrines might have every reason to fear an enlightened scholarship. But for Baha'is, the deeper search for truth should only strengthen our faith. And, of course, arrogance,

pride, and loss of faith are not the monopoly of the learned. These are universal human failings that the ignorant are known to possess in great abundance.

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