

Baha'i Scholarship: Definitions and Perspectives

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Scholarship: Definitions and Perspectives, bahai-library.com.

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published in Bahá'í Studies Review 3:2

London: Association for Bahá'í Studies of English-Speaking Europe, 1993

The first part of this talk will explore definitions of Bahá'í scholarship and then I will end by discussing perspectives. Many of the problems and heated debates about Bahá'í scholarship are because of the failure to make a distinction between two different aspects of Bahá'í scholarship. This distinction is between polemical scholarship and the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith. Polemical scholarship is a type of scholarship which promotes a particular position, specifically designed to advance a cause, whereas the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith is supposedly neutral and has no particular aim other than finding out the truth.

Polemical scholarship can, of course, be both for and against the Bahá'í Faith, but in this presentation, we will concentrate on polemical scholarship supporting the Faith. The scope of such polemical scholarship is very wide and ranges all the way from intensive deepening to Bahá'í polemic. Intensive deepening would involve, for example, examining the texts and producing compilations on different subjects, whereas Bahá'í polemic would be more concerned with writing defences of the Faith against attack or introductory works on the Faith.

The importance of the distinction between this polemical scholarship and the academic study of the Faith is that both are commonly referred to as Bahá'í scholarship and consequently many misunderstandings occur. I will therefore make an attempt to explain the differences in approach between these two types of Bahá'í scholarship.

The point about polemical scholarship and, in particular, intensive deepening, is that it only researches the texts. In other words, it looks at the Bahá'í scriptures for everything and doesn't go outside them. It hopes to find all the answers to whatever questions are being asked within the scriptures themselves.

In contrast, the methodology of the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith is that everything is explicable from the outside, that any text or episode in Bahá'í history is explicable from the external circumstances. Everything has an explanation in terms of psychology, sociology, economics or whatever. An example of the extreme of these two positions may clarify the difference. Extremes often give a better picture of the differences between the two. The extreme of polemical scholarship is to be very inward-looking and to be what you might call simplistic by only looking at the Bahá'í scriptures themselves.

On the other hand, the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith is based on a methodology that is basically irreligious, in the sense that it is methodology which assumes that God does not intervene in the world. All that happens in the world has a previous cause which can be identified and can fully explain that event. Whatever episode or text you are looking at has an explanation that is grounded in history, culture, sociology, economics, psychology, or all of these different disciplines. Thus the academic methodology is irreligious in the sense that it does not allow for God to intervene in history, whereas the polemical type of scholarship assumes that everything comes from God in the first place and thus is ultimately explainable in religious terms.

An example may make my meaning clearer. You have been asked to give a talk to a group of feminists at a University on the Bahá'í Faith approach to the status of women. If you were taking the polemical approach, you would perhaps look up all the texts you could find that mention the words 'women' or 'handmaidens'. Nowadays a computer index will produce long lists of such quotes at the stroke of a few buttons. These quotes could then be organised into ways that link up with each other and a talk can be gradually created which flows from one quotation to the next. That would be the basis of your presentation. You may perhaps read what other Bahá'ís have written on the subject of the status of women and that may give you a few other ideas. But basically the approach is that you look firstly at the texts and hoping to create an answer to this particular subject. The problem with that approach is that very often it leads to a talk that will be very unsatisfying to an audience of feminists. You will probably make a presentation that will come across as stating that Bahá'ís believe in the equality of men and women. The audience will yawn and say "Yes, what else? We already accept all that, we want something more." You'll get a polite hand-clap and that will be it.

If you are using the academic approach, the starting point will be to research contemporary feminist literature. What are the major issues that concern feminists? What sort of literature is being written at this present moment? What is there in the Bahá'í Faith that corresponds with this literature? For example, one of

the issues that is being discussed in feminist literature is the issue of how our present social structures tend to be based on values of power and domination, either on the individual or group level, and how this enhances the position of men. Whenever you have such a power-based social structure, it tends to lead to men dominating. So there has been a lot of discussion on how you can produce social structures that are not based on power and domination. If you happen to know that this is what feminists are interested in, there is much Bahá'í teaching that deals with that area; but this will not be found by looking up the Bahá'í scriptures under the subject of women, but rather under the subject of Bahá'í administration and the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. We have much to contribute on this issue: the development of a pattern of society that does not depend on the domination of one group over another; that is non-hierarchical in nature; and where power and authority is not given to individuals. All these factors are very interesting to feminists because they are looking at these kinds of patterns of society as a way of answering the question, "How can you create a kind of society where men will not always be automatically dominant within that society?" If you are aware that this is the kind of question that feminists are interested in, then answers exist in the Bahá'í Faith, but unless you know what interests them, you are not going to find those answers.

There is therefore a difficult position where two approaches present themselves in researching the Bahá'í position on an issue - one that is based on an irreligious methodology but produces interesting insights, and the other that only explores the Bahá'í writings and may produce simplistic answers. As a personal note I may add that whenever I have researched an area and read the non-Bahá'í literature and then come back to the Bahá'í literature, it has provided me with many insights into the Bahá'í material which I would not have gained by just studying purely the Bahá'í texts themselves.

I would suggest that in order to research a subject, as with all other issues, the best approach is to take a middle course between the two extremes. We should not get trapped into the extremes of the academic methodology which aims at removing all religious impulses from society. In other words, we should avoid focusing only on the academic perspective which assumes that there is nothing in religion other than man-made phenomena. On the other hand, we need to be sufficiently aware of what is going on in the academic field and in the world outside to know what are the issues being discussed, in what way they are being discussed, and thus have an impression of possible areas of interest from a Bahá'í perspective. So we have to find a balance between the two opposing or contradictory viewpoints.

We must develop a presentation of an issue that would satisfy the most

conservative of Bahá'í audiences and is perceived as a true presentation of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, which does not rely entirely on speculative thinking and individual interpretation. It also has to capture the interest of a non-Bahá'í audience by discussing the current or fashionable issues--the academic world, like every other part of the human world, goes through fashions.

The Bahá'í scholar has several criteria to satisfy.

The first challenge is to satisfy yourself personally that you have done the scholarship to the best of your ability. Secondly, you have to satisfy the Bahá'í community that your scholarship is a true representation of the Faith, one that most Bahá'ís would agree is a presentation of the Faith that is consistent with the texts and being interpreted in ways to which most Bahá'ís would not object. At the same time, the academic audience must be considered. What you present must conform to their criteria of thorough research and a reasonable use of sources.

Having dealt briefly with definitions, I want to discuss the dangers of the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith. Among them is the exposure that you will receive to an environment in which the values of everyone around you are completely different to yours. The criteria and assumptions of the academic world are completely irreligious, the methodology is based on the assumption that God does not intervene in history and does not reveal himself. All human phenomena can be fully explained by sociology, psychology, economics, cultural factors, and therefore anything that has happened can be accounted for. For example, the Bábí movement in Iran can be traced back to the Shaykhis and Isma'ilis, and to all the various religious movements that existed in Iran in the past. One could investigate how all these historical, social and religious elements converged, and explain the factors that led to the Bábí movement. There is no need to bring God into the equation at all. This is how the academic world thinks and it's very easy, if you are actually in that world all the time, to slip into that mode of thought. It's a natural mode of thought to slip into. There are very brilliant minds all around you producing work based on these assumptions and very soon it also becomes reality for you. If everyone else around you has a certain set of assumptions which they accept is truth, it becomes very easy for you to slip into the same sort of thinking. This is not just a theoretical concern, it's a very real concern. Bahá'ís have gone into the academic world and have ended up thinking this way and separated themselves from the Bahá'í community to one extent or another. Therefore I think it is a very real problem, a very real concern if one is considering going into an academic career where the main focus of your studies will be the Bahá'í Faith. I think it is something you should think about, bear in mind, and watch out for.

The question of Bahá'í scholarship or scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith is one which is going to be increasingly important in the future. We will inevitably start to have more attacks on the Faith, as we come out of obscurity and into the limelight. It then falls to Bahá'í scholars to defend the Faith against attacks and produce presentations of the Faith for all the various peoples who will request them. It is very important for Bahá'ís to position themselves so that they will be the ones who are asked about the Faith.

The standards and assumptions of the present day world tend towards asking for the opinion of "experts" in a particular area for information about it. Therefore, if people want to know about the Bahá'í Faith, they turn to "experts" on the Bahá'í Faith.

If you are in the unfortunate position of not having any Bahá'ís who are in the academic world, when people such as journalists, editors of encyclopaedias, or people writing books on religion want information about the Bahá'í Faith, they turn to people who perhaps are not particularly friendly towards the Bahá'í Faith but are nevertheless perceived as experts on the Bahá'í Faith.

It is therefore very important for Bahá'ís to position themselves in the academic world, to be known as experts on the Bahá'í Faith, so that when people want information on the Bahá'í Faith, it is Bahá'ís that they come to. This is the nature of the world in which we live. People assume that experts know, and that experts will give an impartial view of the subject in which they are specialists. The problem is that experts are not neutral. I have never known an expert who was an impartial observer; the very fact that they are an expert means that they have a passion about the subject. So it is illogical to consider them as impartial and dispassionate. To take an historical example, E.G. Browne is considered to be one of the greatest academics on Iran that there has ever been. But he was extremely passionate on every area he went into, not just the Bahá'í Faith, but also on the Constitutional Movement. There was almost no area of Iranian life that he wasn't passionate about, and that's what made him a great scholar. He was sufficiently interested in all these things that he was quite happy to stay up hours at night and research them. He did not regard it as a nine to five job, it was an eight in the morning until midnight job as far as he was concerned which is why he was a great scholar.

Experts are never impassionate. They are never neutral observers. They always have some viewpoint. They always have some particular bias in the way they think about a subject. Unfortunately if we as Bahá'ís do not place ourselves in the position of being the acknowledged experts on the subject in the academic world, then other people will and may not present the Faith in such a favourable light. Because

they are the experts, they will be asked to write the encyclopaedia articles on the Bahá'í Faith; they are the ones to whom journalists will turn for information whenever there is something to say about the Bahá'í Faith; they are the ones who will be asked to write chapters in books and so on. Therefore it is very important that we position ourselves, including the Bahá'í community as a whole, in this role of experts in the academic world and occupy the academically respected positions and posts.

The means to this end will vary for different individuals - not everyone needs to study Arabic and Persian in order to become a Bahá'í scholar. There have been some who have done that and have done it reasonably successfully but it is by no means the only way of doing it, particularly if you do not happen to be good at learning languages. You do not have to go down that particular road, there are all sorts of different areas which you can study and which will eventually lead to the same sort of result. For example, at the moment we have almost nobody in the field of religious studies, which is a growing field in the academic world with new university departments being created. Very few Bahá'ís, as far as I know, are in that field, studying it, becoming experts and relating it to the Bahá'í Faith.

There are all sorts of other areas which Bahá'ís can research and become experts. It is difficult at the moment to relate fields such as economics to the Bahá'í Faith, because, although the Bahá'í Faith has teachings that have an economic bearing, there has not been sufficient research into Bahá'í economics so that Bahá'ís can become experts within the academic world. However these fields will develop within the next fifty to a hundred years and there is no reason why people cannot perhaps make a start; it will just be that more difficult.

There are many other fields which Bahá'ís can research and thereby make an impact locally among ordinary people; areas such as feminist thought, development issues, racism, etc. where there is much discussion and many groups which have nothing at all to do with the academic world. To enter that sort of field, one can read the literature, become aware of the issues. In this way one will be a scholar of feminism, for example. Then one can go along to these groups and have something interesting to say to them because one is aware of what they are thinking and what issues concern them. It is quite possible for someone who does not hold an academic post to participate in this process but it must be done thoroughly. It is no good just reading one book on feminism; one has to read a large number of books, including recent material so that one has a sense of what the current thinking is and what is being debated presently. At first it may be best to go along to some meetings, keep silent and listen to what is going. Gradually one can begin to contribute. The number of areas is virtually limitless

and interested Bahá'ís should follow their own interests.

It's much better to follow a path that is in line with one's own talents and inclinations than to force oneself into something that one is not going to be particularly good at. If you are not good at languages, don't force yourself to study Arabic, which is a very difficult language to learn anyway. Go into a field where you have talent and can make progress, eventually aiming to become an authority in that area.

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