

Insider and Outsider Scholarship in Bahá'í Studies

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It is difficult to know whether, in discussing this subject, one should remain within the framework of the immediate matter at hand: that of scholarship on the Bahá'í community; or whether one should take the discussion deeper to the foundations of the problems which of course have been discussed over the centuries in debates over the relative value of the mind as against the heart, the analytic approach as against the holistic one, Enlightenment rationalism as against Romanticism. I feel that we cannot focus in on the specifics of the discussion without at least acknowledging the wider context in which the debate occurs. Therefore I am going to briefly outline the wider issues involved before focussing on the specifics of scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith.

The academic study of religion, the history of religions, the field that in German is known as *religionswissenschaft*, is firmly and for very good reasons wedded to a methodology that is rationalist, materialistic and historically-based - in the sense that all phenomena are seen to be rooted in, and therefore wholly derived from, preceding phenomena. This is the basis of the world view - the *weltanschauung* - of the academic world. Academic outsider scholars live within this construction of reality, this universe of discourse, and like all other human beings, they take this socially constructed reality to be reality itself. They take the methodology of scholarship that they have constructed within this universe of discourse and which is fully validated within that universe to be the only valid methodology of scholarship. They privilege statements made within their universe of discourse over those made from within a different universe.

So what objections do believing or insider scholars have to this methodology of the academy? The brief answer is none. Most scholars think that this methodology when applied with

rigour, flair and fair-mindedness produces knowledge of the greatest quality and depth. I cannot stress this too strongly because in debates that have gone on in the past, it has been claimed that insider scholars are somehow inimical to the academic methodology and this simply is not true.

The problem that insider scholars have is not with the academic methodology *per se*, but with the claim that this is the only pathway to true and certain knowledge -- the arrogation to this pathway of a claim of superiority and indeed of exclusivity. Insider scholars accept the methodology of rationalism and historically-based argumentation as a way of deriving knowledge, but they set alongside that other pathways to (and sources of) knowledge: intuitive knowledge (which 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes as being the result of meditation, the mind conversing with the soul), a rootedness in the spiritual heritage of humanity and a belief that this world has a spiritual aspect alongside its physical aspect, the introduction of values and ethics into methodology, and lastly a belief in Divine Revelation. Ultimately these other methodologies yield criteria for truth that are unacceptable to the strict application of the academic methodology. They cannot be contained within either the academic universe of discourse or in the academic methodology.

Insider scholars, especially those who are academically trained, stand in a difficult place. They are on the interface between two different and in many ways incompatible universes of discourse. They have the responsibility of mediating the ideas of the academy to the world of the believer and also of correctly representing the world of the believer to the academy. Given the radical and foundational differences between the two universes, they are in the position of ultimately never fully satisfying either world -- the position of being criticised from both directions.

I want now to bring my presentation from generalities to a focus on the area of Bahá'í scholarship. Here I think it would be useful to distinguish between two areas: a core area which deals with the history and writings of the central figures and institution of the Bahá'í Faith where I think there will always be a clash between insider and outsider scholars, and a more peripheral area concerned with the rest of Bahá'í history and the application of Bahá'í teachings, where I think there is every prospect of a relatively conflict-free co-existence.

With regard to the core area, this is as I stated, an area where it seems to me that there will always be a conflict between

insider and outsider scholars because the conflict is not over facts that can be resolved by an appeal to the sources -- nor can the opinions and position of one side be overturned by the discovery of a new source of information. The differences are foundational and relate to the fact that statements are being made from within different universes of discourse. They are thus in essence not resolvable. There is a great deal we could talk about, but I want to focus on two key concepts that cause perhaps the greatest amount of conflict and where this matter of the existence of two separate universes of discourse stands in greatest contrast. The first of these is Divine Revelation, a concept that we have already mentioned above and which is one that I think outsider scholars understand even if they do not accept it. The second is the Bahá'í concept of the Covenant and here I think that many outsider scholars do not even understand the concept, especially its ramifications, let alone accept it.

Divine Revelation is the idea that a single individual has access to a source of knowledge that is outside this phenomenal and contingent world. This idea of the authority of the words and ideas of a particular individual, Bahá'u'lláh, and the assertion that he is outside the contingencies of history and of the relativism of knowledge to which all human beings are subject is alien to the academic mind. Academic outsider scholars will insist on treating Bahá'u'lláh as a product of his times, whose ideas and teachings were derived from his education, his milieu and life experiences and his interactions with others. Insider scholars will understand such presentations of Bahá'u'lláh but will think them both inadequate and distorted. They will insist that, although the time, context and culture within the setting of which Bahá'u'lláh's words were written can provide useful information about how these words should be understood, these words can also be legitimately understood in ways that are outside this setting.

The second area that I want to speak about is that of the Bahá'í concept of the Covenant. This is an especially revealing example because it sets up axioms that verge on being unintelligible to the academic; for example, the idea that when Shoghi Effendi is engaged in interpreting one of the passages of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, he is not deriving interpretations that are based on his own understanding and experience (the historical contingency of being Shoghi Effendi), but rather they are the result of some supra-natural guidance being imparted by Bahá'u'lláh. Shoghi Effendi's words, in these circumstances, impart the import that Bahá'u'lláh himself wishes to give these

word. Similarly, the concept of the Covenant implies that, when the Universal House of Justice is engaged in its work of legislation or in leading the Bahá'í community, then its decisions are not the result of a balance among the various human personalities that sit upon the House of Justice but are again supra-mundanelly guided by Bahá'u'lláh. Such concepts lead inevitably to accusations by outsiders that insider scholars privilege the statements of the central authorities in the Bahá'í Faith over the statements of others. They lead to accusations of anachronism, where the authority of Shoghi Effendi is used to define what Bahá'u'lláh meant. And of course, they lead to frustration among outsider academics that Bahá'ís refuse to limit their analyses of Bahá'u'lláh's words to the prevailing academic methodologies.

Thus I would maintain that scholarship in this core area from an outsider perspective is fated to always be in conflict with the Bahá'í community and insider scholars are fated to stand in an uncomfortable intermediary role between two universes in discord. Disagreements between insider and outsider academics over points in this core area are fated to remain unresolved and unresolvable, with neither side fully comprehending the other.

In the area of the periphery, however, there is much less likelihood of conflict occurring. Historical or sociological studies of Bahá'í communities or the broad area that could be described as applied Bahá'í studies do not inherently have the same problems as the core area. At the periphery, one is dealing with ordinary Bahá'ís, their lives and their attempts to put into practice the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. In this area, scholars, whether insiders or outsiders, are free to postulate that individuals act in accordance with contingent influences upon them -- their culture, education and life experiences; the statements of particular individuals are not privileged over those of others and, while popular Bahá'í literature may often have recourse to the supra-natural, Bahá'í scholars will usually not.

Is it an implication of what I have written that it is not possible for a Bahá'í scholar to do good academic scholarship in the core area? I think not. While the theory may be that good academic scholarship is based on a cold, neutral, detached, agnostic, objective methodology, in practice the best scholarship emerges from those who are enthusiastic, passionate and involved. In the area of Bahá'í studies, we need look no further than the early years of E G Browne, the founder of the

field. His enthusiasm, passion and involvement cannot be doubted. The same characteristics led him later to a similar passionate involvement in the Persian Constitutional Revolution on the side of the Constitutionalists. Indeed, I would argue that it is Browne's very passion and involvement with his subject that makes his scholarship so compelling. Thus I see no reason to suggest that just because a person is involved in their subject they are therefore necessarily incapable of good scholarship. Insider academic scholarship is however a difficult endeavour -- being placed in between two universes that are in conflict and having to reflect and explain each to the other.

Lastly, do I think that it is impossible for an outsider to do good scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith? No, I think an outsider has every chance of seeing things from a new perspective, and therefore seeing aspects of the Bahá'í Faith that insider scholars may miss because of their insider perspective. Therefore I welcome and look forward to increasing amounts of outsider scholarship. The only proviso that I would make in this regard however is that the outsider scholar must be sincerely seeking knowledge and truth -- not using a veneer of academic methodology to camouflage a prejudice against the Bahá'í Faith nor an agenda against the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith. For just as I think an enthusiasm and a genuine sense of warmth and empathy for one's subject is an important ingredient of good scholarship -- so I think a prejudice or concealed hatred of one's subject matter results in distortion and poor scholarship.

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