

# NOTE ON MACEOIN'S 'BAHÁ'Í FUNDAMENTALISM'

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## *CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THIS NOTE HAS BEEN WRITTEN*

For the purposes of preparing this note, we have been given access to the galleys of MacEoin's article 'Bahá'í Fundamentalism and the Academic Study of the Bábí Movement' (but, as it turns out, only shortly before its publication in *Religion* 16, 1986, 57–84) and limited by the editor of *Religion* to a maximum of 1800 words. Hence the telegraphic style of this note. Also, we have written a detailed reply, entitled 'The Bahá'í Faith and Its Critics', to MacEoin's 'From Babism to Baha'ism . . .' (*Religion* 13, 1983, 219–255) and submitted it to *Religion* in April, 1985. Its publication was refused on the grounds that our 'right of reply' had been satisfied by the publication of our 'Western Islámic Scholarship and Bahá'í Origins' (henceforth referred to as *Origins*).

## *THE STYLE OF MACEOIN'S REPLY TO OUR PUBLISHED ARTICLE*

MacEoin's present article, henceforth referred to as *Fundamentalism*, is essentially a reply to comments made in *Origins* about MacEoin's 'The Bábí Concept of Holy War', henceforth referred to as *Concept*. (In the following, all unattributed page numbers refer to *Fundamentalism*). A considerable portion of *Fundamentalism* is given over to the following: (1) An attempt to characterize the authors as hopeless amateurs and 'outraged fundamentalists' (p. 57), incapable of assessing intelligently or judging fairly MacEoin's work. (2) Speculations about and a prosecution of the motives that have, in MacEoin's view, led the authors to write their article. (3) Attempts to stigmatize the Bahá'í Faith and its institutions as fundamentalist, authoritarian, devious, and lacking intellectual integrity and respect for truth. (4) Attempts to picture MacEoin himself as an objective scholar with an unimpeachable desire for truth who has been unjustly maligned by our criticisms of various aspects of

his work, and who finds himself the latest in a long line of such scholar-martyrs similarly persecuted by Bahá'ís.

Space limitations do not permit us to engage in any detailed discussion of these points. (Indeed, we consider many of them unworthy of comment.) In any case, such tactics serve primarily to divert attention from substantive issues. If, for example, our approach is so amateurish, emotionally-based, and unsound, then an accomplished, professional scholar should be able easily to refute it. Let us see, then, how MacEoin has dealt with the substance of our criticisms of his work.

### CONTRADICTIONS IN MACEOIN'S TREATMENT OF THE JIHÁD THEME IN 'CONCEPT'

In *Origins* we have pointed out a fundamental contradiction in MacEoin's *Concept*. The contradiction is between affirmations he makes at the beginning of his paper, when he states what he intends to do, and other affirmations he makes in the conclusion of the paper where he sums up what he feels he has done (see *Origins*, 31–34). MacEoin's response in *Fundamentalism* is to say that all he has done is 'to investigate . . . links' between statements about *jihád* in some of the Báb's writings on the one hand, and what actually took place in the three main Bábí-Muslim confrontations (Shaykh Ṭabarsí, Nayríz and Zanján) on the other (p. 69). Surely, he says, such research 'does not involve any obvious contradictions,' even when, as it turns out upon investigation, the links are rather weak (p. 69). He then proceeds to restate a summary description of the cardinal events of early Bábí history as he sees them (p. 70), a description with which, except for a few quibbles (mainly, though not wholly, about what has been left out), we are basically in agreement.

The point is that MacEoin's *Concept* paper sets out explicitly to defend a thesis, and not just neutrally to investigate possible links between certain statements of the Báb and certain historical events. This thesis, as clearly stated by MacEoin in *Concept*, 94, and quoted by us in *Origins*, 32, is that the view of Bahá'í historians that the Bábís were defending themselves against an essentially religious persecution was inadequate and that 'the nature, status, and function of *jihád* within the Bábí movement' was the 'more fundamental issue' in assessing the true nature of these events. In particular, MacEoin specifically claims that *jihád* will 'enable us to carry out a reappraisal of the political and ethical issues involved in the struggles of Shaykh Ṭabarsí, Nayríz and Zanján' (*Concept*, 94).

However, as we have pointed out in *Origins* (31–34), MacEoin's own analysis in *Concept* led him to conclude that in fact the Bábís never declared *jihád* against their attackers (*Concept*, p. 121), but he nevertheless characterized the Bábís' self-defensive actions as 'defensive *jihád*'. In his discussion of this point in *Fundamentalism*, he protests that 'there is a difference between simple

defensive action and defensive *jihád*' (p. 69). But the difference lies in the various religious motifs associated with the defensive action, and all of these motifs are discussed in detail in Bahá'í accounts of these events. Thus, MacEoin's stated conclusions in *Concept* contradict his stated thesis of the fundamental inadequacy of Bahá'í accounts of these events.

Moreover, pages 95–107 of *Concept* are given over to a detailed examination of a concept of *jihád* that is essentially offensive, and is clearly presented as such by MacEoin, and it is in the light of *this* doctrine of *jihád* that MacEoin undertakes his 'reappraisal of the political and ethical issues' involved in the various Bábí-Muslim confrontations. Of course, there is nothing *a priori* unreasonable or contradictory in speculating that there might be a link between this *jihád* notion and the conflicts that eventually erupted between Bábís and Muslims. However, when once the study was completed and the conclusion drawn that there was in fact no link at all, it would have been most logical to reject this *jihád* doctrine as a 'fundamental issue' related to the Bábí-Muslim confrontations and as a 'vital factor in the study of the Bábí-Bahá'í movement' (*Concept*, 94). However, *Concept* maintains both the initial statements affirming the importance of (offensive) *jihád* to an understanding of the Bábí-Muslim conflicts and the stated conclusion that there are, essentially, no links, and it is this contradiction in *Concept* that we have pointed out in *Origins*. Had MacEoin presented the matter as a purely empirical, hypothesis-free investigation with only *a posteriori*, empirical conclusions (as he has essentially done in this section of *Fundamentalism*) then we would have had only minor criticisms of his work.

#### THE STATUS OF THE BÁB'S CLAIMS TO DIVINE AUTHORITY

In *Concept* MacEoin states that it was only in 1848, four years after the beginning of his religion in 1844, that the Báb claimed for himself the title of Imám Mahdí, and still later that he claimed to be 'an independent prophet . . . directly empowered by God to open up a new religious dispensation after Islám, to reveal new scriptures and to ordain a new legal system' (*Concept*, 93). In *Origins*, 34–40, we have refuted this, basing our refutation on a significant historical document, namely, the *fatwá* or edict issued by a (combined Sunní-Shí'ih) religious court in Baghdád in January, 1845. The Báb's personal identity was unknown to the court, and the *fatwá* document is based strictly on the text of the Báb's *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá'*, written in the Spring and Summer of 1844. The *fatwá* specifically charges the Báb with claiming divine revelation and the station or rank of an independent prophet of God. Fully two pages of our article (*Origins*, 36–37) as well as footnotes 30–37 are devoted exclusively to quotations from and a discussion of the *fatwá* document.

However, in his four-page (72–75) discussion in *Fundamentalism* of our treatment of this theme in *Origins*, MacEoin not only fails to mention our

having cited this document, he does not even acknowledge its existence and states (incorrectly) that our ‘account of the inception of Babism, while correct in its broad outlines, is . . . drawn exclusively from late Bahá’í sources’ (p. 75). He also asserts that ‘we are involved here in the defence of dogma rather than in any attempt to carry out fresh research into the texts or the historical evidence . . .’ (p. 72). In support of this assertion, he mentions our quotations from Shoghi Effendi, stigmatizing them as ‘dogmatic statements’ (p. 72), and then asks ‘But what are the facts of the case?’ (p. 73), clearly implying that we have based our analysis only on anti- or a-historical, theological statements. Furthermore, we have quoted, in *Origins*, 37, a statement of the Báb himself in which he comments on these questions and explains the reasons why, in the early years of his ministry, he temporarily enjoined on his followers the observance of Islámic religious law, even though he claimed, as an independent prophet, the right to abrogate it (which he subsequently did in his Persian *Bayán*). MacEoin likewise makes no mention of this in his exposition of the ‘facts of the case’.

#### *THE THEME OF JIHÁD IN THE WRITINGS OF THE BÁB*

MacEoin’s treatment in *Fundamentalism* (75–77) of our discussion in *Origins* of *jihád* in the Báb writings is permeated with distortions both gross and subtle, as even a superficial reading of *Origins* clearly shows. In particular, MacEoin sets up several strawman arguments which he then proceeds to demolish and ridicule. Rather than attempting to deal with these various issues one at a time, let us restate our basic points as succinctly as possible.

On the basis of quotations from the Báb himself, and with reference to various other contemporary documents and texts, we have established in *Origins* the following facts. The Bábí Faith began in 1844 with the Báb’s oral and personal declaration of his mission to a number of leading Shaykhís and, simultaneously, with his writing of the *Qayyúmu’l-Asmá’* wherein the same claims and declarations are to be found. From the beginning the Báb laid claim to be an independent prophet or Manifestation of God, indeed to be the Mahdí. As such, he clearly claimed the right to promulgate new laws and to abrogate those of Islám. However, during the first four years of his ministry (until 1848), he deliberately refrained from establishing any new laws, and specifically enjoined his followers to continue the observance of Islámic law. Thus, all of the laws contained in the *Qayyúmu’l-Asmá’*, including those relating to *jihád*, were regarded by the Báb himself as restatements (in virtually identical terms) of the corresponding Qur’anic laws. In a passage from his *Seven Proofs*, the Báb stated explicitly this principle of his ministry, explaining that his intention in this regard was to avoid giving an unnecessary initial shock to the Islámic recipients of his teachings (see *Origins*, 37–39). However, in 1848, he wrote the Persian *Bayán* which institutes a radically new

set of rather severe laws designed to break the hold on his followers and disciples (and indeed in Shí'ih Írán) of what the Báb clearly regarded as an outmoded legal system. At the same time, and in the same book (the Persian *Bayán*), the Báb speaks of the imminent appearance of a new prophetic figure (called 'he whom God shall make manifest') on whose approval and authority the application of the laws of the *Bayán* ultimately depends. The *Bayán* contains no doctrine or law of *jihád*, and in fact contains only two explicit references to *jihád* (both incidental) in its entire corpus.

### SEVERAL PARTICULAR POINTS

MacEoin makes much (pp. 60–63) of the fact that the various Bahá'í publications each have established the policy of reviewing materials before publishing them. MacEoin suggests that this practice is oppressive and fundamentally inimical to the intellectual integrity and freedom of authors. But every serious academic journal in any field of study has a similar policy of peer review, and the scholarly community hardly considers this oppressive. The fact that some manuscripts submitted to Bahá'í organs are indeed rejected for publication means only that the Bahá'í community, even at this relatively early stage in its development, has attempted to establish some minimal standards of quality in the materials it publishes.

In order to document cases of 'Bábí brutality' (p. 79), MacEoin cites successively four different passages (see p. 79 and p. 84, notes 48–51) from a book called the *Nuq̄ṭat'l-Káf*. This monograph, of disputed authorship, purports to be a history of the Bábí Faith edited by E. G. Browne of Cambridge University and with the introduction written by Browne. However, it has been known for some years by scholars in the field of Islámic studies that the published version of this work is a forgery, and that both the editing and the introduction of the Browne edition were done for Browne by one Muḥammad Qazvíní, a well-known enemy of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths (see, for example, the paper 'Islám and the Bahá'í Faith' by Professor Heshmat Moyyad of the University of Chicago, forthcoming in the Proceedings of the first international conference on Islám and the Bahá'í Faith held at McGill University, 23–25 March 1984). In fact, after Browne's death, Qazvíní admitted in writing that the Browne edition of the *Nuq̄ṭat'l-Káf* was not Browne's work (see M. Qazvíní, *Bist Maqála-yi-Qazvíní*, 1953 reprinting, vol. 2, Tehran, p. 313). Muḥammad Mihíṭ-i-Ṭabátábá'í, himself a Shí'ih and inimical to the Bahá'í Faith, has confirmed that 'The writing of the introduction of the printed *Nuq̄ṭat'l-Káf* was the work of Shaykh Muḥammad Qazvíní, as he himself told me, but the collecting of documents and proofs was done by Browne; it was a joint effort.' (See Ṭabátábá'í, *Gowhar*, vol. 2, no. 11–12 (1975), p. 961.)

In-depth comments on a number of issues raised in *Fundamentalism* can be found in our (unpublished) manuscript 'The Bahá'í Faith and its Critics'.

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