

AFNÁN, HATCHER AND AN OLD BONE

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Like dogs with an old bone, Muhammad Afnán and William Hatcher seem unable to leave me alone. Perhaps I taste good. Since some sort of debate along these lines has raged since the last century, I don't expect that anything I can say here will do much to dampen enthusiasm in certain circles for digging after long-buried bones. But perhaps I can set down a few thoughts that may at least help preserve a sense of perspective, something I rather think is in danger of being lost.

I have no desire to wade any further into the minutiae of what is fast becoming a tedious wrangle. If Afnán and Hatcher still think there are points to be made, I am happy to let them make them. I have, I think, made my position clear enough for the reader to reach his own conclusions. It is still the broader issues that most concern me. Let me reiterate a point I made in my article on 'Bahā'ī Fundamentalism': in their critique of my work, Afnán and Hatcher invariably return to positions that just happen to correspond exactly to those of official Bahā'ī dogma. That is the sort of thing that sets alarm-bells ringing in the minds of most academics working in religious studies, and I trust it will serve to alert those who read this series of ripostes and counter-ripostes as to what is really going on beneath the surface of the debate.

The real issue is between academic and non-academic approaches to the subject. The work of Afnán and Hatcher contains many elements of the academic: it is dressed up very well and looks just the thing; but such elements are heavily outweighed in my opinion by what are essentially faith-based considerations. In their most recent reply, they say that I try to characterize them as 'hopeless amateurs and "outraged fundamentalists"'. But that (leaving out the 'hopeless') is what they are: a believing bacteriologist and mathematician who are trying to defend their religion against what seems to them an attack on its integrity. Now, I have quite a good amateur knowledge of homeopathic medicine, but I wonder if Professor Afnán would take very kindly to my criticizing in a medical journal an article by him questioning, let us say, certain assumptions in the homeopathic theory of disease.

As for their being ‘outraged fundamentalists’, perhaps it will help if I note here that several Bahā’ī academics with whom I have recently corresponded have themselves expressed concern about what they also perceive as Afnán’s and Hatcher’s fundamentalism. One correspondent described their article as ‘one of the lamest things I’ve ever read’; another said ‘it was an absolutely disgraceful piece and should have been answered in the strongest possible terms’; yet another wrote that it was ‘academically inadequate’. Similarly, some Bahā’ī academics have expressed themselves in broad agreement with my response to that article. One has recently written to say: ‘I read it with a great deal of pleasure. And, aside from a few minor points . . . I found nothing that I could disagree with . . . I hope it will achieve the effect of at least awakening some of the fundamentalist elements within the Bahā’ī community to the folly of seeking to build scholarly arguments on quotations from *God Passes By*’.

In view of the claim by Afnán and Hatcher that I have attempted ‘to stigmatize the Bahā’ī Faith and its institutions as fundamentalist, authoritarian, devious, and lacking intellectual integrity and respect for truth’, I think it important to get across the point that there are those within the Bahā’ī camp who, much as they may disagree with me on other issues, share my opinions on this matter. Nor, of course, have I tried to ‘stigmatize the Bahā’ī Faith and its institutions’ as claimed. What I did argue is that there is a strong strand of authoritarianism and anti-liberalism within the Bahā’ī movement, but that this is in a state of tension with more liberal tendencies. I happen to think the authoritarianism is at the moment stronger than the liberalism, and rather suspect that it will remain so, but it would be a very two-dimensional picture of Bahā’ism that tried to portray the movement as entirely one thing or the other.

Do Afnán and Hatcher really expect anyone familiar with the subject to take seriously their comparison between the Bahā’ī reviewing procedure and the ‘peer review’ used by academic journals? There are no academic qualifications for membership on Bahā’ī reviewing panels or other bodies empowered to veto or modify publications. As a result, Bahā’ī academics may find their work turned down by groups of individuals with no real knowledge of the subject whatsoever. To make clear exactly what is involved, let me quote from a memorandum on reviewing issued by the Universal House of Justice in 1971: ‘. . . all works by Bahā’īs which deal with the Faith, whether in the form of books, pamphlets, translations, poems, songs, radio and television scripts, films, recordings, etc. must be approved before submission for publication, whether to a Bahā’ī or non-Bahā’ī publisher . . . The purpose of review is to protect the Faith from misrepresentation and to ensure dignity and accuracy in its presentation. In general the function of a reviewing committee is to say whether the work submitted gives an acceptable presentation of the Cause or not’. This has nothing whatever to do with academic quality as such (I should

know — I was once the longest-serving member of the British Bahā'ī Reviewing Committee), and Afnán and Hatcher are on very shaky ground when they try to draw a comparison between it and academic review.

They are also being disingenuous when they suggest that the only reason some manuscripts are rejected is because the Bahā'ī community is trying to establish 'some minimal standards of quality in the materials it publishes'. Most Bahā'ī academics have painful stories to the contrary. Some years ago a manuscript of mine was turned down by the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahā'ī Faith. Among the reasons given were: 'he . . . is not concerned that what he says is fundamentally out of line with Bahā'ī guidance'; ' . . . the author's presentation shows a penchant for, one is frankly tempted to say a bias in favour of, covenant-breaker [i.e. heretical Bahā'ī] and Marxist material' (i.e. I had mentioned some works by 'covenant-breakers' and Marxists); and 'his "Bahā'ī scholarship" may be a Trojan horse whereby an "army of discontent" gains access to the minds of other Bahā'ī students and scholars'. What, may I ask, has this sort of thing in common with academic review? And may I point out that, whereas an ordinary academic suffers no penalties if he publishes a previously rejected article in another journal, a Bahā'ī scholar can stand to lose his voting rights and even be expelled from the movement if he bucks too hard against the system. It is dishonest and unacademic of Messrs. Afnán and Hatcher to pretend otherwise.

Finally, I fear the authors' amateurism reveals itself rather glaringly in the last section of their note, where they deal with the *Nuqtat al-kāf*. Of course Muhammad Qazvīnī was the real author of the Persian introduction to Browne's printed edition of the book. Everyone knows that. So what? The text (which has long been condemned in Bahā'ī circles as a forgery) stands up very well to critical examination. It may not be in its entirety the work of Mīrzā Jānī Kāshānī, as Browne supposed, but it is undeniably authentic, early, and extremely useful as a source of Bābī history, provided it is used with caution. I suspect that neither Afnán nor Hatcher has carried out first-hand research into the question of the book's authenticity. I have. I don't suppose they will want to read it, but they could take a look at my study of the subject due to be published later this year.

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