

A FEW WORDS IN RESPONSE TO COLE'S 'REPLY TO MacEOIN'

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I confess myself disappointed in Juan Cole. He is a fine academic, possessed of a sharp intelligence, but he just cannot see why anyone should be concerned about the influence of religious or other ideological commitments on scholarship, particularly on studies of the religion or ideology in question.

I have never suggested that believers are unable to write intelligently about their beliefs, nor would I wish to do so. What I have criticized are two things. Firstly, the problems that arise when a field is dominated by people who believe, not only that they have the truth, but that it has been revealed to them by someone sent by God. I have no objection to Baha'is or Muslims or Jews or Christians believing that. But when such beliefs set the agenda for academic debate or, more disturbingly, when religious institutions try to control scholarship by financial or other pressure, I grow disturbed.

Secondly, I do have serious objections (set out in my previous article) to the system of internal censorship operated within the Baha'i movement. Baha'i academics have to submit their writing to non-academic bodies for approval. Not doing so can lead to severe penalties. Since writing my earlier piece, a Baha'i-owned publishing company in the United States (the one responsible for publishing the excellent 'Studies in Babi and Baha'i History' series referred to by Cole) has been forced to close because so many of its titles had been blacklisted by the US Baha'i authorities. And an American Baha'i magazine which had dedicated itself to opening up debate on various academic and social issues has been shut down by those same authorities. If Juan Cole cannot see for himself why I and other academics find that profoundly worrying, I don't suppose he will ever understand any of my criticisms.

My problem with Cole and other Baha'i writers, as I said in my earlier article, is not so much that they disagree with me as the fact that no proper academic context exists in which my work or theirs can be fairly judged. Cole insists that I do not 'show good sense about weighting sources' between Azali and Baha'i accounts and gives an example from my 'Divisions and Authority Claims' piece. But unless I go my way and the Baha'is go theirs, how on earth is any kind of consensus to be reached about what is fair weighting?

Cole lays heavy emphasis on the fact that I do not mention a particular comment by the Baha'i writer Sayyid Mihdi Dahaji, 'even in a footnote'. If he had taken the trouble to read my article, he would have found the passage in question cited by me in footnote 141. And he accuses me of 'sloppy scholarship'! That I placed it there was the result of a considered decision in the context of the study as a whole. The rest of my arguments in that section are taken from Baha'i sources. My arguments about Azal's position at this period are based, *inter alia*, on statements by the Baha'i prophet Baha' Allah himself. And I go to some trouble to spell out the 'devotion and reverence' with which Baha' Allah was regarded at the time in question. The whole issue of succession to the Bab begins with two pages of exposition of the Baha'i

position. Cole, once again, is trying to rely on the fact that most of his readers will have a weak grasp of the issues and the sources involved.

Cole's tactic of blinding his readers with spurious facts is again illustrated in his remark that 'Most modern scholarly writing about Babi-Baha'i topics, which has had a more objective tone, has not been produced by Baha'is'. In evidence, he cites Nikki Keddie's 'Religion and Irreligion' article, which has a section on the Azalis; Algar's *Religion and State*, which has a chapter on Babism, Baha'ism and the ulama; and Bayat's *Mysticism and Dissent*, which has a chapter on Babism. How on earth can two chapters in books and part of a short article constitute 'most modern scholarly writing about Babi-Baha'i topics'? I am sure that Keddie, Algar, and Bayat would be amazed to learn that they were suddenly major figures in Babi-Baha'i studies, a field in which none of them has ever carried out original research. As for Amanat, who has written a full-length study of Babism, I can only say that it comes as a surprise to me that he is not a Baha'i: he certainly was when I last met him and when he wrote the original version of his study.

The simple reason why this debate can never develop in a normal way is that Cole and other Baha'is are obliged by their prior convictions to find fault with the work of outsiders that calls their faith in question. I have to ask why it is so much more important to Cole to expose my supposed failings than to draw attention to the glaring problems of past and present Baha'i historiography, which he has never bothered writing about.

It is precisely the same phenomenon that we are all familiar with in Islamic studies, where a large body of Muslim writers condemn as 'Orientalism' any writing by non-Muslims that does not conform to orthodox Islamic thinking. Orthodox Baha'is and orthodox Muslims may make uneasy bedfellows in some respects, but in others they have much in common.

In the end, the difference between Juan Cole and myself is simple. I believe that all my propositions are open to falsification: I do not possess 'the truth', I am not infallible, and I have no hotline to a source of infallible knowledge. Cole belongs to a religion which believes God has revealed the unchallengeable truth, and he has access to 'the Word of God' and to a supreme body capable of reaching infallible decisions.

To illustrate this, let me quote two passages from statements addressed to Baha'i scholars by religious authorities: 'In scientific investigation when searching after the facts of any matter a Baha'i must, of course, be entirely open-minded, but in his interpretation of the facts and his evaluation of evidence we do not see by what logic he can ignore the truth of the Baha'i Revelation which he has already accepted'; and again: 'While it may often be the part of wisdom to approach individuals or an audience from the standpoint of current knowledge, it should never be overlooked that the Revelation of the Manifestation of God is the standard for all knowledge, and scientific statements and theories, no matter how close they may come to the eternal principles proclaimed by God's Messenger, are in their very nature ephemeral and limited.'

Which of these approaches is more consistent with free and open academic debate, I leave it for our readers to judge for themselves.