

A Response to MacEoin's 'Problems of Scholarship...'

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I read with interest Denis MacEoin's contribution: 'Problems of scholarship in a Baha'i Context' in the last issue of this Bulletin (Vol.1.No.3, December 1982, pp.44-68). Lambden's response (ibid, pp.69-80) covered much of the ground where Baha'is can, to some extent, agree with MacEoin but I would like to point out a number of issues over which, I feel, a Baha'i would disagree. MacEoin's paper, despite his assertions to the contrary, appeared to be much more an emotional vindication of his decision to leave the Baha'i community than a useful contribution to the discussion of scholarship in a Baha'i context. In MacEoin's paper can be seen two elements that are to be found in much of his writings on this subject: the first being a curious attachment to a rather outdated idea of objectivity in scholarship which underlies the second element: a veneer of more modern sociological theory which he is determined to impose upon the Baha'i Faith whether the facts fit or not.

To deal with the second of these elements first as it is the simpler, MacEoin appears to be unaware that in his description of the attitudes of the Baha'i administrative system, there is a contradiction that spans almost the entire length of his paper. At the beginning of the paper (p.45), he attributes the anti-intellectualism and dogmatism that he sees in the Baha'i community to the fact that the Baha'i Faith is sociologically still a sect-type movement. Throughout much of the rest of the paper and in some of his other writings, he expresses the utmost pessimism with respect to the dogmatism and authoritarianism of the Baha'i administration and considers this aspect of the Baha'i Faith likely to become worse rather than better (pp.57-59, 66-69, etc.).

As a footnote I would disagree with MacEoin's classification of the Baha'i community as, sociologically, a sect. This relates to MacEoin's own very limited experience of the world Baha'i community. There are several parts of the world where there are large Baha'i communities and wholly-Baha'i villages and, in these regions, the efforts of the Baha'is towards community development, the finding of uniquely-Baha'i solutions to social problems, the emergence of Baha'i educational and health projects, etc., all demonstrate a move by the community away from a sect-like attitude and towards exhibiting the attitudes of a church. Even some of the recent decisions of the British National Spiritual Assembly have some elements of this move in them.

To return to the main line of argument, however, even if we allow MacEoin's assertion that the Baha'i community, at present, exhibits many of the attributes of a sect, it is very clearly in the process of evolving towards being a church even in areas where there are not many Baha'is. It has already shed (or never had) many sect-like features: it sets no geographical or ethnic boundaries to its membership, it is oriented towards conversion of all, it rejects asceticism or any form of separation from the world. This would therefore contradict MacEoin's pessimism regarding the future direction of Baha'i administrative authoritarianism, since in moving from sect to church, there is a corresponding liberalisation of many aspects of authoritative control and a decrease in anti-intellectualism. The very fact that a paper such as MacEoin's with its harsh criticisms should be published in a Bulletin that is subject to the Baha'i review procedure speaks a great deal for the movement that has been made in recent years towards liberalisation and more effectively negates MacEoin's criticism of the Baha'i reviewing process (pp. 61-62) than any words of mine could. Nor was the Baha'i Faith ever so rigidly authoritarian as MacEoin seems to think it was. Avari's book was not "dropped like a hot brick" (p. 60). It continued to be sold even after his apostasy and is mentioned in my book as well as appearing in its bibliography. Strangely enough, the last issue of the Bulletin which contained MacEoin's paper also carried evidence refuting MacEoin's assertions. I refer to the letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in 1934 allowing Ahmad Sohrab's book to be advertised and distributed by the Baha'i administration after he himself had been declared a Covenant-Breaker (p. 83). Shoghi Effendi also clearly describes this evolution of the Baha'i community in a more liberal direction (not that I would expect MacEoin to put any faith in that alone).

It is difficult to know where to start in criticising MacEoin's naive faith in an outdated idea that scientific objectivity is attainable in a field such as the study of religion. In brief, although in the nineteenth century, scholars used to consider that it was possible to observe and analyse all phenomena in a detached and impartial manner, this is now recognised to be illusory. As one moves from the "hard" sciences to the "soft" sciences, the inter-relationship of the observer and the observed have an increasingly large effect upon the observations made. Not only is the observer capable of inducing changes in the observed but the individual and cultural biases of the observer will distort the observations made and may even influence the choice of what observations are to be made. In studying religion which must be considered to be at the extreme "soft" end of the range of "hard" and "soft" sciences in that it is an area of human activity guided by emotion and intuition rather than rational and verifiable processes, any claim to impartial observation is untenable. The claims made by a religion, and particularly the Baha'i Faith, are so far-reaching and all-encompassing that one is forced in one's mind to adopt an

attitude of either rejection or acceptance of those aspects of these claims that impinge upon the individual's personal life. Having once reacted in this way, one cannot then be said to be an impartial or unbiased observer. And the more one researches and delves into the subject, the less detached and impartial one becomes. Impartiality is illusory in such a field of study, and the more any scholar protests that he is impartial, the more likely it is that he is either deliberately concealing a bias or deluding himself. In criticising Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani's work for not having "that pretence of rigour... and lack of obvious bias that is so essential in [modern Western] scholarship" (p. 58), MacEoin does not seem to be aware that he is admitting that many modern Western scholars put a great deal of effort into creating an appearance of impartiality and scholarship which is in fact a veneer for deep biases within their work.

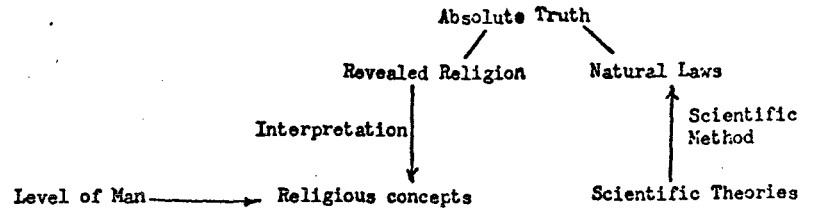
MacEoin accuses Baha'i scholars of bias although he is happy to make such sweeping assertions as: "I do not believe that a single work of scholarship of any merit whatsoever has ever been published within the confines of the Baha'i system, nor do I think any are likely to be" (p. 58). I would reverse the statement and ask whether anyone who is as hostile and unsympathetic to the Baha'i Faith as MacEoin evidently now is should continue in this field of study or whether he should divert his very considerable intellectual talents into another field where his efforts are likely to be of more lasting value (it is worth noting that historically apostates have not been noted for making good scholars of the religion from which they apostatised). MacEoin's cynical attitude towards the Baha'i Faith is reminiscent of the attitude of many 19th Century orientalist towards Islam. While the work of these scholars on such peripheral matters as an analysis of the foreign words in the Qur'an may be of some lasting value, their attempts to describe the "internal" aspects of Islam or its history are not considered to have been of any permanent value because of their basic hostility to Islam and Muhammad which affected and distorted their writings. Scholarship in the twentieth century has come to realise that such an approach is not useful in analysing the reality of a religion. The reality of a religion consists not in the observable manifestations of the religion (its institutions, doctrines and practises) but in the area of what these externals mean to those who practise the religion. And anyone who takes a cynical, unsympathetic or hostile attitude to a religion will never penetrate this area at all. Similarly, in the field of history, that part of 19th-century orientalist scholarship which was directed towards demonstrating that Muhammad was a liar and an imposter or that his teachings were unoriginal is now played down and even considered something of an embarrassment to Western scholarship. Western scholars still attempt to analyse in detail the social and economic factors in Muhammad's environment and try to discern the effects these may have had on him, but the tone of their work is much removed from the superior, cynical attitude of many 19th-century scholars. Their references to Muhammad are courteous and respectful and it is clear that their object is not to cast doubt on Muhammad's integrity or indeed upon his claims.

Thus in his approach to the study of the Baha'i Faith, I feel MacEoin is out of touch with much of modern scholarship. In my opinion Wilfred Cantwell Smith ( see Comparative Religion: wither and why, in The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology, Ed. M. Eliade and J. Kitagawa, University of Chicago, 1959) has produced the most thoughtful and penetrating account of this modern approach. Perhaps the key sentence in his essay is the following that he makes regarding Islam but which is applicable to the study of any religion: "Anything that I say about Islam as a living faith is valid only in so far as Muslims can say "Amen" to it." (He qualifies this statement by adding that the reverse is not necessarily true: that every statement about Islam that is acceptable to Muslims is not ipso facto true, p.43, and this is of course important otherwise we would be straying outside of the field of academic scholarship). I do not have the space to quote large sections of this work but I think one more quotation will give the reader an idea of Cantwell Smith's approach as well as being relevant to a topic that I intend to discuss shortly ( I recommend anyone interested in this subject to study the whole essay most carefully): " Since the scholar presumably works from a university, that is, within the academic tradition, the statement he produces must first of all be meaningful and cogent within that tradition. That is it must satisfy all the most rigorous standards of scholarship. In the particular case where the encounter is between the academic tradition of the West and a particular religion, the statement that is evolved must satisfy each of the two traditions independently and transcend them both by satisfying them both simultaneously.. This is not easy but I am persuaded that both in principle and practise it can be done" (p.53).

MacEoin is very wide of the mark when he makes such assertions as: " Hence the publication of the Kitab al-Aqdas or the writings of the Bab that are certain not to cause distress to the Baha'i masses, who would probably abandon the movement in large numbers if they knew what those writings really contained"(pp.61-2). Parallel to this is his statement: " there are also important- and more problematic- conceptual gulfs between what the majority of Baha'is (particularly in the West) believe and what the Baha'i Scriptures ( much expurgated and bowdlerised in translation) teach. In this sense, I feel that large numbers of sincere people are, unknown to themselves, working and sacrificing for aims sometimes the diametrical opposite of those that they themselves cherish"(p.66). Such assertions, which as far as I can see have little substance to them, are easy to make and difficult, especially when no concrete examples are given, to refute without going into great length. But I would like to indicate the main lines along which I would dismiss this assertion. Anyone may take Baha'u'llah's writings, interpret them in all sorts of ways and then say to Baha'is: "Look! Baha'u'llah's writings are different to what you are being taught is the Baha'i Faith." But the concept of the Covenant requires that what Baha'is believe and act upon are

Shoghi Effendi's interpretation of Baha'u'llah's Revelation. In other words, it matters not a whit for Baha'is in what way MacEoin or anyone else thinks Baha'u'llah's writings are different from what Western Baha'is believe as long as these Baha'is are satisfied that what is taught in the West accords with Shoghi Effendi's interpretations. Shoghi Effendi wrote much of his most important work in English and therefore most Western Baha'is have direct access to this material ( without any need for translation and hence any supposed bowdlerisation and expurgation). Thus they are quite able to judge for themselves, with no fear of any major hidden surprises, whether the teachings of the Baha'i Faith are something that they wish to work and sacrifice for or not. One further point that MacEoin has failed to take into account is the fact that most people become Baha'is and remain Baha'is not because of any intellectual analysis of the Baha'i teachings but because of what they experience as the reality of the religion.

Much of the discussion in MacEoin's paper revolves loosely around the much-discussed Faith/Reason dichotomy. Here again I feel that MacEoin has misunderstood the principles involved. MacEoin states that although the Baha'i teachings play lip service to the essential harmony between science and religion, in reality, if there is a disagreement between the two, the rational argument is forced to bend in favour of the revealed word: " the Baha'i version of revelation invariably reserves for revelation the final say" (p.57). But this is not at all the Baha'i viewpoint. If I may put what could be a very lengthy discussion briefly, simplistically and diagrammatically:



The Baha'i Faith believes that there is an Absolute Truth which is beyond the powers of finite man ever to attain. But in our efforts to get closer to it, we have to main paths of approach, the rational faculty associated with the scientific method and the intuitive faculty assisted by the revealed word of God. Although in their absolute form both of these approaches are "true" ( i.e. the revealed word of God is the "Truth" and the Universal Laws of nature are the "Truth" ), in practise, man has no access to these absolute values: for in respect to the word of God, man, in applying this to any given situation, is introducing the element of interpretation which means that there is no longer any certainty of being "true"; and in respect to natural laws, man can only, through the scientific method, produce theories which appear to him at the time to explain most closely natural phenomena, fully realising that the

passage of time will certainly lead to the discarding of present theories in favour of other formulations that more closely match the pattern of observable phenomena. Thus at the level of man there can be no certainty and no infallibility in either the scientific or the religious approach. The Baha'i view then is that we must, in building our conceptual frameworks, seek for solutions that satisfy both our understanding of the revealed word and our current scientific theories (thus we end up in a position not very far from that described by Cantwell Smith—see above). In the event of a clash between the two, we must attempt to transcend the apparent contradiction by either reviewing our interpretation of the revealed word or re-examining our scientific theories in the hope of breaking through the impasse. Should that be achieved, then we have brought ourselves a small step closer to the "Absolute Truth" and if we fail then we must suspend judgement and wait for the evolution of religious thought and scientific theory to resolve the problem at a future date. This is obviously a very large subject but I think the above is sufficient to show how the Baha'i idea of the essential harmony between science and religion in no way leads to an automatic rejection of all science that does not agree with religion. MacEoin may well rejoin that, in his experience, the practise does not conform to the theory as outlined above but I would maintain that that may well have been due more to the tone and manner in which he made his views known—a subject to which I will return shortly.

I would maintain moreover that the Baha'i approach outlined above is more in keeping with the spirit and trend of much modern scholarship. The sort of secular rationalism (or perhaps it should be labelled rationalist positivism) obviously favoured by MacEoin (and demonstrated in his frequent quotations of Popper) is being increasingly rejected by the intellectual world (or at least large sections of it). Having experimented with such secular philosophies and pseudo-scientific rationalism for several generations, the resulting tendency to a sterile reductionism has left many scholars and intellectuals looking for more satisfying solutions. The last decade has seen an intensification of this trend (together with a parallel movement in the world at large towards a "return towards religion" and a revival of existential philosophies). This tendency is not a "flight from reason toward irrationalism" as MacEoin has stated (p.58) but rather a recognition that there is a limit to how far such methods as reductionism and conceptual analysis can take the scholar particularly in a field of study such as religion. While these methods may have some success in analysing the minutiae of the externals of the religion, they have very limited application when it comes to assessing deeper and more fundamental questions.

By all this I do not intend to dismiss MacEoin's secular rationalist approach (in the same way he dismisses the Baha'i one) as being devoid of any possibility of producing useful results. All I say is that it must take its place alongside

other methods and approaches (such as a Christian, Buddhist or Baha'i approach) and has no a priori claim to superiority as an approach. It may have advantages in some areas but its approach imposes its own limits in other areas (as is true with every other approach) and I have indicated what some of these are. It is up to every scholar to decide which approach is most likely to yield useful result in the work he is doing.

Underlying much of MacEoin's criticism is his antagonistic attitude towards the Baha'i administration which is no doubt a direct result of his clash with the Baha'i institutions while he was a Baha'i. Again there is some confusion in MacEoin's thinking on this matter. While it may be true that the Baha'i Faith is, to a large extent, epistemologically authoritarian, it is only to a small degree totalitarian (i.e. politically authoritarian) in its administration. MacEoin has made a large and illogical jump from the one to the other. Having demonstrated epistemological authoritarianism in the Baha'i Faith, he goes on to make assertions and draw conclusions particularly about the future direction of the Baha'i Faith as though he had established its totalitarian nature. In fact in the whole of the 23 pages of the paper there is no evidence whatsoever produced to support his assertion that the Baha'i Faith is certain to slide into ever greater degrees of totalitarianism beyond the rather vacuous assertion that: "mankind cannot rely on the professed ideals of groups as a guide to how they will behave" (p.58). It is possible to postulate that any political or administrative structure could be undermined by individuals and end up in a distorted form (even Western democracy has witnessed this with Hitler) but it is hardly a useful basis for discussion if there is no other evidence to present. Again MacEoin's assertion that "critical examination, based on sociological, philosophical or other criteria, of textual or empirical data that may lead to conclusions about Baha'ism [sic] radically different to those of official propaganda" (p.66) sounds very impressive but one searches in vain for any evidence for this assertion in the paper.

One is left wondering, after reading MacEoin's paper, what sort of political system he is advocating. From his statement that he would like to live in a system where he is free to abandon any rules with which he does not agree (p.65), one wonders whether he is advocating anarchy. But if we assume, for the moment that he accepts the need for order in society and therefore for limitation on personal freedom, then I would maintain that the system envisaged in the Baha'i Faith fulfills all the requirements that he sets out while at the same time guarding against some of the less desirable aspects of Western democracy.

As Shoghi Effendi has pointed out, the Baha'i administrative system is not a democracy, not is it totalitarian, not theocracy nor a large range of other systems that mankind has tried before. Therefore the balance between the various systems of authority that the Baha'i Faith possesses will be uncomfortable to all who enter it (just as much for someone like MacEoin from a democratic Western background as for

someone from a tribal or other non-Western culture who may find the democratic aspects of the Baha'i system alien and discomforting) but that is part of the challenge of being a Baha'i.

It is worth pointing out that the Counsellors who are portrayed in MacEoin's account as authoritarian demagogues in fact possess no executive powers at all. Their role is solely advisory and exhortatory. All executive decisions are in the hands of the democratically-elected institutions. I do not deny that there may be authoritarian individuals among Baha'is as among any other group of human beings but the structure of the Baha'i community is more effective than most in minimizing the cult of personality and the impact that one authoritarian individual can have. As Stephen Lambden has pointed out in his response to MacEoin's paper, the response that one elicits from such individuals as Counsellors depends a great deal on the occasion and manner in which controversial points are put to them rather than the points themselves. Their principal responsibilities are not for maintaining the academic purity of Baha'i thought but of nurturing and developing the Baha'i community and therefore if the unwise actions of the scholar threaten to disrupt the community and cause dismay, the Counsellors may well act in a manner that will seem to the scholar to represent a cutting off of a free exchange of thoughts and ideas. But the same thoughts put forward by the same scholar on a more suitable occasion would be accepted and discussed.

MacEoin sees a certain amount of authoritarianism in the Baha'i system and predicts from this that the Baha'i Faith will grow more and more authoritarian despite what he admits<sup>6</sup> are many passages in the Baha'i Holy Writings that enjoin against such a trend. I would postulate, on the contrary, that the Baha'i community has, in its Scripture, a permanent self-correcting mechanism. For each generation of Baha'is will be concerned not so much with what the previous generation of Baha'is thought and did but rather will look to this Scripture and aim to bring the reality of their community more closely into line with the ideals set out therein. Thus whatever distortions and deviances from Baha'i teachings may be present in the present generation will not be the basis for even greater deviance in the next generation.

A great deal of the area in which Baha'is would disagree with MacEoin revolves around his underlying, unspoken assumption that the Baha'i community should, in its teachings, its literature, its organisation and its activities, comply with academic standards. Thus, for example, he states concerning Baha'i literature: "large numbers of ideologically unexceptionable materials are churned out, none of which have any scholarly value" (p. 61). I fail to see any reason why Baha'i literature, very little of which has ever been written by academics or for academics, should have any scholarly value. The primary purpose of these publications is to be spiritually edifying, to present the Baha'i Faith to the non-Baha'i

world<sup>6</sup>, or to clarify some aspect of its internal workings. If they happen to be of scholarly value, all well and good, but that is hardly a criterion for publication. Similarly, MacEoin's complaint that the books published tell us "nothing about the most crucial issues," presupposes that the Baha'i world agrees with MacEoin as to what are the "crucial issues". In fact those aspects of the Baha'i Faith that MacEoin appears to consider crucial are of no more than passing interest to the majority of Baha'is. This brings us back to the point that the Baha'i Faith is a religious community not a club for scholars.

A similar narrowness of outlook surrounds MacEoin's discussion of the term ʿulama. ʿulama means those who possess ʿilm and this word has connotations much wider than the narrow type of "book-learning" that MacEoin is implying. ʿilm also implies perception and understanding as well as being used for the mystical and esoteric types of knowledge. It is quite clear from Baha'u'llah's praise of certain ʿulama whom he regards as being the true ʿulama and his condemnation of others with their narrow book-learning (see for example the passage regarding Muhammad Karim Khan Kirmānī in Kitāb-i-Ifān, London, 1961, pp. 118-119) that he looked to this much wider view. Shoghi Effendi's appointment, as Hand of the Cause, of Musa Banani, by his own admission barely literate, must also be taken into consideration. Thus it is clear to any Baha'i that, both in theory and practice, the Baha'i Faith has taken a much wider view of the term ʿulama than the one that MacEoin wishes to impose.

I wish to put on record that I have not the slightest doubt of Denis MacEoin's very considerable intellectual abilities nor is anything that I have written in this paper intended to cast doubts on his integrity (although I consider that his negative attitude towards the Baha'i Faith has had a deleterious effect upon his output on the subject in recent years). However, over the years, he has penned many similar papers and letters, harshly critical of the Baha'i administration in particular, and, although in the past I have not been sufficiently interested in the issues raised to reply, I felt that his latest outpouring may have caused a good deal of dismay and distress to some Baha'is who may have read it and therefore I felt that a firm rebuttal of many of the points in the article that were clearly distortions of the Baha'i Faith and its teachings was necessary. I must record my surprise moreover that such an emotional and subjective paper should have been published in a Bulletin that purports to maintain scholarly standards. Perhaps its publication may be linked to the editor's complaint on p. 2 of the same Bulletin that he has failed to receive sufficient material for publication and has been forced to fall back on "space-fillers" in which case I can only heartily re-inforce his plea for a greater influx of material.

\* Despite MacEoin's stricture (p. 44), I see nothing wrong in the use of this term [non-Baha'i]. Even academics use the terms "Christian and non-Christian", "Muslim and non-Muslim", see, for example Joachim Wach's collection of essays, Types of Religious Experience: Christian and Non-Christian. I suspect that the basis of this and much else that MacEoin writes is an unwillingness to accord the Baha'i Faith recognition as being on an equal basis with the other world religions.