

**'THE OBJECTIVITY QUESTION' AND BAHA'I STUDIES:
A REPLY TO MacEOIN'**

Juan R.I. Cole

The independent scholar and popular novelist Denis MacEoin, a.k.a. Daniel Easterman, recently published a prolix and mostly extraneous response to a few comments of mine on an article of his.¹ He really has only two substantive complaints against the review: 1) that it criticized him for his 'uncritical' use of Azali sources and 2) that it was framed in an *ad hominem* manner. I shall reply to both of these below. I am afraid it is typical of his polemical style that he has not limited himself to these issues, but has gone on to employ against me the most scandalous sorts of innuendo. He attempts, with monstrous disproportion, to equate my criticizing his work in a short book review with the Saudi government having him fired. I decry, as a member of Amnesty International, the way he was treated by the endowers of his former post; that treatment does not, however, render his work off-limits to critical analysis. MacEoin wants to tar me with the brush of religious intolerance as a means of silencing me or making my critique of his writings about my field seem merely tendentious. Here, I submit to the arbitration of my fellow academics as to whether I make a reasoned defense of my use of the evidence.

Let me come to my primary criticism of MacEoin, that his recent work accepts an Azali version of Babi-Baha'i history uncritically. One cannot avoid using both Azali and Baha'i sources for the history of the movement, but he does not show good sense about weighting sources for their reliability in particular instances. Moreover, how many Azali sources he cites matters less than what weight he gives them in his argument. A sequel to the article on which I commented affords an example of MacEoin's approach: 'Divisions and Authority Claims in Babism (1850-1866)'.² After the messianic figure known as the Bab (1819-1850) was executed in Iran, most Babis looked to Subh-i Azal as their chief. He and his elder half-brother, Baha'u'llah, had gone into exile in Baghdad, with Azal remaining in hiding while Baha'u'llah played a more public role. Following later Azali sources, MacEoin says that Baha'u'llah considered himself under Azal's authority in the 1850s, and returned to Baghdad from his withdrawal to Kurdistan (1854-56) at Azal's command. In the 1860s Baha'u'llah founded the Baha'i Faith, a new universalist and pacifist religion, splitting with his brother, Azal, who viewed himself as the vicar of the Bab.

MacEoin uses Mihdi Dahaji's 'Risalih', a manuscript source sympathetic to Baha'u'llah, whose author lived in Baghdad from 1856 to 1863. Yet he neglects to report that Dahaji says, on the authority of Shaykh Sultan (an eyewitness),

1. Juan Cole, 'Review of *In Iran: Studies in Babi and Baha'i History*, Volume 3', *BRISMES Bulletin*, 14 (1988), 230-1; Denis MacEoin, 'The Crisis in Babi and Baha'i Studies: Part of a Wider Crisis in Academic Freedom?', *BRISMES Bulletin*, 17 (1990), 55-61.

2. D. MacEoin, 'Divisions and Authority Claims in Babism (1850-1866)', *Studia Iranica*, vol.18, fasc. 1 (1989), 93-129; see esp. pp.113-119.

that Baha'u'llah disapproved of Azal's policy of secluding himself and left Baghdad in 1854 as a way of distancing himself from Azal.³ If Baha'u'llah left dissatisfied with Azal, how likely is it that he obediently responded to Azal's 'command' to return? For MacEoin to neglect to report or discuss this information, even in a footnote, constitutes sloppy scholarship. He notes, but dismisses, both Baha'u'llah's denial that the Bab appointed any vicar, and his son 'Abdu'l-Baha's assertion that Baha'u'llah saw Azal as a figurehead designed to draw heat away from himself, the real leader. ('Abdu'l-Baha, a teenager in the late 1850s, was old enough to know what his father thought of his uncle). MacEoin sets aside the reports of eyewitnesses and principals such as the Baha'i leaders and Dahaji, sometimes in favour of accounts drawn from the Azalis Aqa Khan Kirmani and Ahmad Ruhi (born in the early 1860s), who attempted to misrepresent their late work *Hasht Bihisht* to E.G. Browne as an early Babi primary source.⁴

MacEoin complains that I pointed out in my review that he was a Baha'i for many years, then left and wrote bitterly about his former religion, calling this an *ad hominem* argument inappropriate to scholarly discourse. His objection is sheer hypocrisy. Whenever MacEoin's reviews (a trail of mayhem) have dealt with a book by a Baha'i he has made sure to point out the author's religion. Anyway, classical logic knew no fallacy called the *argumentum ad hominem*, a modern coinage of doubtful origins and rigor. If thinkers are historically conditioned, a premise I am sure MacEoin accepts, why should it be a fallacy to establish that context?⁵ I was informed by a common friend that MacEoin once wrote to him to the effect that he felt he had been duped by the Baha'i Faith and was determined to prevent others from falling into its embrace. MacEoin's alarm that the Baha'i Faith is growing, establishing academic organizations, and endowing chairs lends credence to this reported antipathy. Substitute 'Jews' for 'Baha'is' on his page 60 to see how offensive his attitude is.

At the base of MacEoin's annoyance with me lies the Orientalist problematic. He, as Orientalist, wants authoritatively to represent in his writing Oriental religions. He views academic scholarship as an elite, privileged form of knowledge, inherently secular, objective, and Western. He sees himself as operating in that realm, but Baha'is (as well as Christians and Muslims, apparently) do not; on that elite plane of discourse, they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.⁶ Academics like myself, who are believers, constitute the ultimate threat to MacEoin's sense of control. The representation is not supposed to talk back, except from the lowly corners of non-academic discourse. MacEoin must discredit scholars who are not positivists as proto-cultists who have failed to imbibe the academic ethos. His Orientalist attitude toward Islam and the Baha'i Faith can be seen in a

3. Mirza Mihdi Dahaji, 'Risala', MS. in the Cambridge University Library, Browne Or.F.26, p.48 (copy, British Microfilm Project, University of Michigan).

4. MacEoin, 'Divisions', p.108 and notes 86 and 87.

5. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.219-21.

6. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage, 1979).

Guardian article he wrote ridiculing a Saudi astronaut for having trouble praying to a rotating Mecca. See also the images he purveys of the Middle East to a popular audience in his Daniel Easterman novel, *The Last Assassin*.

MacEoin praises Karl Popper's logical positivism, a rather reductionist approach to the humanities and the life of the spirit, however well it might work in science (Kuhn has cast up doubts even there). Still, it is a respectable language-game. MacEoin invokes positivism, however, in an ominous manner to privilege one academic discourse, and to exclude from authenticity all those (such as religionists) outside the charmed Viennese Circle. Where a militant positivism might lead has already been seen, whether in U.S. McCarthyism or in the exclusion of religionists from academia in the late system in Eastern Europe. MacEoin warns that religionists believe in an 'ideology that the truth is manifest', driving them to see those who fail to recognize it as morally perverse. Ironically, his brand of 'objectivism' has more frequently become an exclusivist ideology in modern academia.⁷ For what it is worth, I myself have a firm commitment to academic freedom, and have recommended MacEoin's recent work for publication whenever I have refereed it. I follow Wittgenstein in seeing truth as grounded in intellectual forms of life and expressed through diverse language-games. MacEoin well knows that Baha'is believe religious truth is relative, not absolute, and see all religions as true. This existential truth is, of course, different from the 'truth' with a small 't', involved in getting one's footnotes right. If MacEoin wants to appeal to von Ranke's rules, I see problems with his weighting of evidence; he has ended up with *wie es eigentlich nicht gewesen*.

MacEoin paints himself as a beleaguered outsider in a field dominated by powerful Baha'i academics. This is arrant nonsense. Despite the Baha'i Faith's small size (4 million?), anti-Baha'ism has been widespread in the twentieth century. Baha'is have often been deprived of a voice and had their religion authoritatively depicted by hostile observers. Baha'is were persecuted in the Fascist and Communist worlds, and still are in many Middle Eastern countries. Western missionaries like William Miller and some Orientalists have presented a highly critical view of the religion to Western audiences. In Iran since 1979, Baha'i academics have been fired from their posts as heretics, even sometimes killed. Most modern scholarly writing about Babi-Baha'i topics, which has had a more objective tone, has not been produced by Baha'is.⁸ Many of the younger Baha'i academics helping create the field are graduate

7. For a survey and critique of 'objectivism' see Novick, *That Noble Dream*; for an alternative view, see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York, Pantheon, 1972).

8. Nikki Keddie, 'Religion and Irreligion in Early Iranian Nationalism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4 (1962), 265-95; Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969), ch.8; Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1982), chapters 4 and 5; Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989). MacEoin mistakenly says Amanat is a Baha'i; he is not.

students or lack tenured posts.⁹ MacEoin's depiction is designed to protect himself from criticism; he can always cry 'persecution' when all else fails. In the future, most academic writers on the subject may be Baha'is. So what? From the Anglo-Marxists to Anglican Church historians to Jewish medieval historians, scintillating scholarship has been produced by persons with metaphysical beliefs of the sort Popper decried. It remains unproven that believers are necessarily bad historians, or that debunkers with an axe to grind are better.

9. The showcase for this work has been the series *Studies in Babi and Baha'i History*, now 6 volumes, published in Los Angeles by Kalimat Press; some of it has been synthesized in Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987).