

SEENA FAZEL

A Review of Making the Crooked Straight: A Contribution to Bahá'í Apologetics

Since its inception, the Bahá'í Faith has been attacked from various quarters, the most vociferous attacks having originated in Protestant Christianity and Islam. The major Christian opponents were former American and British Protestant missionaries to Iran, who were relatively few in number—Presbyterians Samuel Graham Wilson and William McElwee Miller and Anglicans J. R. Richards and Robert P. Richardson. These missions garnered few converts in Iran. In contrast, the Bahá'ís continued to increase numerically in the early twentieth century and were, therefore, perceived as rivals. These four men were consumed with exposing to people in the West the alleged falsehood of the Bahá'í Faith. Their writings focused on the Faith's "supposed theological inferiority to Christianity in the areas of sin and salvation, alleged immoral action on the part of Bahá'í founders, accusations of Bahá'í distortion of their history and Bahá'í misuse of Christian scriptures" so that the religion would be more palatable to potential converts.¹

The impact of the early Protestant opposition is hard to estimate, although Miller's introductory book on the Bahá'í Faith—*The Bahá'í Faith: Its History and Teachings*—was the most influential publication to come out of the period and has not yet been adequately refuted.² Since the publication of Miller's book in 1974, there has been in America a trickle of anti-Bahá'í literature from Protestant evangelical churches, which has not been well-informed or particularly extensive. Such works resort to formulaic attacks on the Bahá'í Faith because it does not share beliefs

Copyright © 2004 by Seena Fazel.

1. William Collins, *Bibliography of English-Language Works on the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths 1844–1985* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1990) xviii.

2. See William McElwee Miller, *The Bahá'í Faith: Its History and Teachings* (South Pasadena, CA, USA: William Carey Library, 1974).

SEENA FAZEL

is a Senior Research Fellow in psychiatry at the University of Oxford and a consulting forensic psychiatrist with Oxfordshire Mental Healthcare NHS Trust. He has coedited *Reason and Revelation: New Directions in Bahá'í Thought* (Kalimát Press, 2002) and *Search for Values: Ethics in Bahá'í Thought* (Kalimát Press, 2004) and coauthored *The Bahá'í Faith in Words and Images* (Oneworld, forthcoming).

about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the exclusivity of the Christian path to salvation. In addition, they draw on Miller's presentation of Bahá'í history. In Europe, works attacking the Faith have been less prominent, probably reflecting the lack of strength of evangelical Christianity and the small numbers of Bahá'ís throughout the continent. There is, however, one country—Germany—where anti-Bahá'í literature has made a significant impact.

In 1981 the German Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen (hereafter EZW)—the Central Office of the Protestant Church for Questions of Ideology, which supplies information to church administration, its theologians, and church workers who have been charged as "Sektenbeauftragte" (commissionaires for sects, non-Christian religions and religious movements)—published a monograph

THERE IS ONE COUNTRY—GERMANY—
WHERE ANTI-BAHÁ'Í LITERATURE HAS MADE
A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT.

on the Bahá'í Faith by a former Bahá'í, Francesco Ficicchia.³ Ficicchia's work was marketed by EZW as a standard introduction to the Bahá'í Faith and

was reviewed positively in some German academic journals.⁴ It presented a jumble of polemical materials against the Faith, mostly derived from Miller's work. The material in Ficicchia's book ranged from attacking the personal integrity of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith⁵ to highlighting problems in succession, and to criticizing the Faith's doctrines and the policies of its current leadership. It gave the impression that the religion is a confused, fundamentalist Islamic cult that has rewritten its history, distorted its origins, and made imperialist claims on the world.

The material in Ficicchia's book found its way into German encyclopedias of comparative religion and has been used as the basis for decisions taken by certain governmental agencies. For example, the Bahá'í community of Berlin was refused a public-information stand because of the perceived danger of Bahá'í beliefs to young people. In 1995, fourteen years after Ficicchia's book appeared, a response was published—*Desinformation als Methode* (Hildesheim, Germany: Georgs Olms Verlag BmbH), of which the book reviewed here is an English translation.

The response, which bears the English title *Making the Crooked Straight*, is

3. Francesco Ficicchia, *Der Bahá'ismus—Weltreligion der Zukunft? Geschichte, Lehre und Organisation in kritischer Anfrage* [Bahá'ism?—Religion of the Future? History, Doctrine and Organization: A Critical Inquiry] (Stuttgart, Germany: Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, 1981).

4. See Joseph Henninger, *Anthropos* 78 (1983): 966–69; Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte* 36 (1984): 93–94; and Olaf Shumann, *Islam: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients* LXII (1985): 184–86.

5. The Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith are Bahá'u'lláh (1817–92), the founder of the Bahá'í Faith; the Báb (1819–50), the founder of the Bábí Faith and the forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh; and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), son of Bahá'u'lláh, designated His successor and authorized interpreter of His writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in His Will and Testament, appointed Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957) the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and designated him His successor in interpreting the Bahá'í writings.

coauthored by three individuals—Udo Schaefer, Nicola Towfigh, and Ulrich Gollmer.⁶ Udo Schaefer, a jurist, discusses methodology; questions of law, ethics, and the doctrine of infallibility of the Universal House of Justice; and Ficicchia's portrayal of the Bahá'í community. Ulrich Gollmer, a political scientist, writes on Bahá'í political thought and the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (a document that Ficicchia alleges was a fake). Nicola Towfigh, who has a doctorate in Middle East studies, deals with aspects of early Bahá'í history including the key historical sources that Ficicchia uses (*Kitáb-i-Nuqtatu'l-Káf*—The Book of the Point of the Letter "K"—and *Tárikh-i-Jadíd*—The New History), the relationship between Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'ís, the evolving claims of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and the early attempts to provoke schism in the Bahá'í community.

Overall, *Making the Crooked Straight* is a brilliant work that responds point by point to Ficicchia's attacks on the Bahá'í Faith. Schaefer in his conclusion to the book describes the impact that the German edition of *Making the Crooked Straight* had on the EZW. A somewhat favorable review of *Desinformation als Methode* appeared in its periodical, giving the impression that EZW was trying to distance itself from Ficicchia. The reviewer commends the authors for their meticulous research, "wealth of knowledge," and "erudition."⁸ Other tangible effects are the dropping of Ficicchia as an author for an updated edition of a German Catholic encyclopedia⁹ and the increasing presence of Bahá'ís in a range of inter-religious activities. It came as no surprise that the Universal House of Justice, in its 2000 annual message to the Bahá'ís of the world, highlighted *Making the Crooked Straight* as "a signal victory for the German Bahá'í community."¹⁰ I know of no other secondary publication to be highlighted in such a way.

Making the Crooked Straight is divided into three sections. The first, "Methodology," discusses the sources on which Ficicchia draws and how he uses them. The next section, "Community and Doctrine," examines Ficicchia's portrait of the Bahá'í community and his presentation of Bahá'í doctrines, law, and political thought. The final section, "Historical Issues," analyzes Ficicchia's key sources in more detail as

MAKING THE CROOKED STRAIGHT
RESPONDS POINT BY POINT
TO FICICCHIA'S ATTACKS
ON THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH.

6. Udo Schaefer, Nicola Towfigh, and Ulrich Gollmer, *Making the Crooked Straight: A Contribution to Bahá'í Apologetics*, trans. Geraldine Schuckelt (Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 2000)—hereafter *Making the Crooked Straight*. Originally published as *Desinformation als Methode* (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms Verlag BmbH, 1995).

7. Udo Schaefer, "Introduction," in *Making the Crooked Straight* 11, 10.

8. Ulrich Dehn, "Bahá'í und EZW," *Materialdienst* 17 (1996): 309ff, quoted in *Making the Crooked Straight* 780.

9. *Lexikon der Sekten* (Freiburg: Herder-Verlag). The third (1991) and fourth (1994) editions had entries by Ficicchia on the Bahá'í Faith, but the fifth edition (1999) replaced his entry.

10. Excluding statements produced at the Bahá'í World Center. The Universal House of Justice, letter to the Bahá'ís of the world, Ridván 2000 ¶23.

well as aspects of Bábí and Bahá'í history on which anti-Bahá'í works have tended to focus, in particular the schismatic attempts at the time of the deaths of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Throughout the book the authors criticize Ficicchia on a number of fronts. They demonstrate that his methodology is seriously flawed, which is not entirely surprising because he has no academic training, and show that his presentation of the Bahá'í Faith is skewed, being based almost entirely on Miller and other anti-Bahá'í sources. They also show that Ficicchia makes scant reference to Bahá'í literature; and what Bahá'í sources he does use, he often uses erroneously—such as claiming that Bahá'í authorities have intentionally concealed copies of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy

THE AUTHORS . . . PROVIDE MANY CASES

OF FICICCHIA'S MISQUOTES AND DISTORTIONS.

THEY GO ON TO SHOW HOW FICICCHIA'S LACK

OF ANY KNOWLEDGE OF PERSIAN OR ARABIC

IS PROBLEMATIC.

Book, whereas, in fact, many Bahá'ís throughout the world possessed copies in the original Arabic as early as the late nineteenth century. Using examples in Schaefer's doctoral work on

Bahá'í law, the authors of *Making the Crooked Straight* provide many cases of Ficicchia's misquotes and distortions. They go on to show how Ficicchia's lack of any knowledge of Persian or Arabic is problematic when he deals with early Bahá'í history and sources. Moreover, the authors note that Ficicchia's having left the religion disaffected after four years and subsequently writing to the Bahá'í institutions declaring that he was an “embittered enemy” does not necessarily make him well qualified to write an authoritative book on the Bahá'ís.¹¹ When he blames the Iranian Bahá'ís for their persecution, he loses any semblance of credibility. He states that Bahá'ís were “*advocates and supporters of the imperial state doctrine*” and suspects them of “*conspiracy with the throne.*”¹² This is grossly inaccurate, and independent human-rights organizations including agencies of the United Nations report that Bahá'ís were intermittently persecuted by the Pahlavi regime, even though some individual Bahá'ís were associated with the government. Gollmer makes the chilling comparison with the ways in which Nazi Germany justified the genocide of the Jews and concludes, quite rightly, that, “it is a scandal that such things should be propagated by official publications of Christian churches.”¹³

But *Making the Crooked Straight* is more than a rebuttal of Ficicchia's book. It presents new material on the Bahá'í approach to the concepts of grace, liberty, religious exclusivity, and politics that is discussed clearly and thoughtfully.¹⁴ For

11. Ficicchia, letter to the Universal House of Justice, 5 April 1978, quoted in *Making the Crooked Straight* 33.

12. Ficicchia, *Bahā'ism* 395 (Ficicchia's emphasis), quoted in Ulrich Gollmer, “Bahá'í Political Thought,” in *Making the Crooked Straight* 458.

13. Gollmer, “Bahá'í Political Thought,” in *Making the Crooked Straight* 459.

14. See, for example, Udo Schaefer, “Ficicchia's Presentation of Bahá'í Doctrine,” in *Making the Crooked Straight* 267–73, 276–89, and 301–16, and Gollmer “Bahá'í Political Thought,” in *Making the Crooked Straight* 464–77.

example, the section on religious exclusivity develops the important idea that the Bahá'í concept of the relativity of religious truth does not mean that the spiritual teachings of other religions are obsolete—rather, it is their social laws that are outdated. The truths of their scriptures and spiritual teachings remain. Moreover, it has been argued that religious teachings across ages and places fulfill each other.¹⁵

The material on liberty explains how the term *“hurriyyah”* in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, translated as “liberty” or “freedom,” more accurately refers to libertinism (or permissiveness) rather than democratic liberties and freedoms. Gollmer argues, as do other authors elsewhere, that the context of the French Revolution is important to understanding fully the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's writings on liberty. He concludes the section with an insightful discussion on the limits to liberty from a Bahá'í perspective. Gollmer suggests that these limits are not set merely at the point where the rights of others are infringed upon. The limits of liberty lie “in structures that are determined by normative premises—the image of man—and by metaphysical postulates”—that is, the limits are determined by laws that preserve human dignity. “Hence,” he argues,

many of Bahá'u'lláh's laws are determined by the goal of protecting man from establishing structures that are contrary to his divine purpose, his exalted station as ‘the noblest and most perfect of all created things’, as God's image and trustee.

...

Thus, liberty is the individual's own self-determined moral adherence to the ordinances of God. God's commandments are voluntarily fulfilled by the believer, who is responsible to God alone. True liberty is, paradoxically, the liberty that results from obedience to the will of God as manifested in the law. It is liberty in submission to God.”¹⁶

Gollmer's discussion of the background and response to the attack on Shoghi Effendi, the then head of the Bahá'í Faith, by Hermann Zimmer, a lapsed Bahá'í who had been expelled from the Bahá'í community, is the first published rebuttal.¹⁷ Zimmer wrote a monograph attacking the authority of Shoghi Effendi, which he published in 1973, distributing thirty-five thousand copies worldwide (including to many libraries). Gollmer convincingly shows that Zimmer's attack on Shoghi Effendi is based on inaccurate sources and historical errors.

SCHAEFER'S MATERIAL ON THE INFALLIBILITY
OF THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
IS AN IMPORTANT BEGINNING
FOR UNDERSTANDING THIS SUBJECT.

Schaefer's material on the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice is an important beginning for understanding this subject.¹⁸ He suggests that infallibility

15. See Seena Fazel, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations,” in *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology*, ed. J. M. McLean (Los Angeles, Kalimát Press, 1997).

16. Schaefer, “Ficicchia's Presentation,” in *Making the Crooked Straight* 310, 312.

17. Ulrich Gollmer “The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá,” in *Making the Crooked Straight* Chapter 11.

18. Udo Schaefer, “Ficicchia's Portrait of the Community and its Order,” in *Making the Crooked*

is limited to legislation alone, which he has argued elsewhere, and has only been exercised on seven occasions since the institution's establishment in 1963.¹⁹ To suggest, as some may do, that this careful and foundational work on infallibility is intended to render the concept palatable to Western audiences is not consistent with Schaefer's discussions of Bahá'í law and penal provisions that are presented elsewhere in the book. *Making the Crooked Straight* also draws extensively on research into the historical origins of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions by Abbas Amanat, H. M. Balyuzi, Christopher Buck, Juan Ricardo I. Cole, Stephen Lambden, B. Todd Lawson, Denis MacEoin, Moojan Momen, Peter Smith, and others, demonstrating the relevance of Middle East studies to apologetics.

One wonders on reading such an excellent work why it took fourteen years to publish a rebuttal, for the delay is remarkable in its tardiness. In the introduction Schaefer explains that the decision not to respond was partly due to the view of

MAKING THE CROOKED STRAIGHT
DEMONSTRATES THE NEED FOR DEVELOPING
FURTHER A CULTURE OF SCHOLARSHIP
AND THE BENEFITS THAT ACCRUE
IN STIMULATING ACADEMIC RESEARCH
ON THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH'S HISTORY AND TEACHINGS.

some Bahá'ís that Ficicchia's material was unworthy of such attention. Schaefer also speculates that another possible reason is that religious and nonreligious people are tired of hearing about religious controversies.²⁰ Yet, as

Schaefer points out by citing the following passage from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, apologetic concerns need no justification from a Bahá'í perspective:

If any man were to arise to defend, in his writings, the Cause of God against its assailants, such a man, however inconsiderable his share, shall be so honored in the world to come that the Concourse on high would envy his glory. No pen can depict the loftiness of his station, neither can any tongue describe its splendor.²¹

The delay in replying to the attacks by Ficicchia may also be attributable to the lack of a scholarly tradition in the German-speaking Bahá'í community. Had there been a stronger culture of scholarship, academic monographs on the Bahá'í Faith in German would have been available (there were none at the time that Ficicchia's book

Straight 166–94. The Universal House of Justice guides the activities of the global Bahá'í community. This body was instituted by Bahá'u'lláh as the supreme legislative organ of the Bahá'í administrative order. Its other responsibilities include guiding the growth and development of the global Bahá'í community, defending and protecting the Bahá'í community, developing the world spiritual and administrative center of the Bahá'í Faith, and preserving the Bahá'í sacred texts.

19. See Udo Schaefer, "Infallible Institutions?" in *Reason and Revelation: New Directions in Bahá'í Thought*, ed. Seena Fazel and John Danesh (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2002) 3–37.

20. See Schaefer, "Introduction," in *Making the Crooked Straight* 4–9.

21. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 1st pocket-size ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) CLIV. Cf. Udo Schaefer, "Bahá'í Apologetics?" *Bahá'í Studies Review* 10 (2001/01): 85–90.

was published) so that the effect of a single work like Ficicchia's would have been diluted. *Making the Crooked Straight* demonstrates the need for developing further a culture of scholarship and the benefits that accrue in stimulating academic research on the Bahá'í Faith's history and teachings.

Were the publishers to consider an updated edition, the following suggestions might be helpful. Criticisms of the EZW for its publication of Ficicchia's book from the perspective of interreligious dialogue appear unconvincing. Dialogue assumes that both partners are interested in an exchange of views, which is not the case here. The repetitive way in which Ficicchia is criticized comes across as awkward for English readers—the material in *Making the Crooked*

MAKING THE CROOKED STRAIGHT
STIMULATES REFLECTION ON THE POSSIBLE NATURE
OF FUTURE ATTACKS ON AND MISREPRESENTATIONS
OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH
AND ON EFFECTIVE WAYS TO RESPOND.

Straight is itself sufficient to indicate the problems with Ficicchia's book, and tighter editing would remove the need to end each section with a version of "this proves again what a terrible book Ficicchia has written." Finally, an abbreviated section on Hermann Römer, a Protestant theologian who in 1911 published an anti-Bahá'í book, which has had little influence outside Germany, would be appropriate for non-German speaking audiences. These minor quibbles aside, Bahá'ís throughout the world would benefit greatly from reading this work to deepen further their understanding of their own religion and to increase their ability to explain it intelligently to others. In addition, Bahá'ís and others will gain from reading how it systematically addresses misconceptions about the Bahá'í Faith.

In terms of the development of Bahá'í thought, *Making the Crooked Straight* stimulates reflection on the possible nature of future attacks on and misrepresentations of the Bahá'í Faith and on effective ways to respond. Yet such attacks are, ultimately, difficult to predict. For example, in the United Kingdom in 2003, the Bahá'í community had to respond to the mistaken view presented in some national newspapers that the Bahá'í Faith condones suicide, something that would have been difficult to predict from prior misrepresentations on the Faith.²² What *Making the Crooked Straight* illustrates is that the best anticipatory response to future attacks is to continue to develop grounded academic scholarship on some of the key issues in Bahá'í studies—the religion's history, theology, and philosophy.

22. This situation occurred after the suicide of a prominent government scientist, David Kelly, who happened to be a Bahá'í, and the subsequent media attention, which led to Bahá'í texts on death being misinterpreted. For the Bahá'í community's response, see the testimony of Barney Leith, the secretary-general of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom, to the Hutton Inquiry, <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/transcripts/hearing-trans27.htm>. This testimony corrected the mistaken view by some U.K. newspapers that the Faith condones suicide. The final report of the Inquiry did not discuss the Faith nor include the testimony.