

The meaning of Bahá'í history *

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When dealing with the history of religions and their founders one needs, first of all, to put aside piety and dogma. For the believer, the texts, which the historian uses, are holy writings, and as such their contents, being of a divine nature, can not be disputed. The historian must therefore insist on disregarding piety, and on using the tools of objective research, as much as humanly possible, to deal with all writings belonging to any given religion as literary texts and not as divine revelations. Texts are source material for attempting the reconstruction of the history of any religion and the biography of its founder or founders. Texts are open to critical evaluation when they are compared to each other in order to extract the information needed to build a historical picture. It is therefore clear that there are no “good texts” and “bad texts,” or “good sources” and “bad sources” even when it is clear that there are sources, which are nearer to the events than others. However, nearness to or remoteness from the happenings, though important considerations, cannot be the sole criterion for the quality of sources. Quantity rather is of crucial significance. The more source material available to the historian, the more he is able to arrive at conclusions based on comparing and confronting the texts with each other.

Believers who bring their faith into historical research are not bad historians but the outcome of their work is a pious history. Pious history becomes in itself source material for the historian who, so to speak, leaves the divine out of history. In pious history, where God is always present, and His prophets, messengers, and holy men are the main actors, the story of the birth of the religion and its development, unfolds not necessarily as it was but rather as it should have been. The earliest examples of this kind of pious history are the Gospels and the Muslim biographies of the Prophet Muhammad and the reports about the birth of Islam.

The Gospels, and other documents included in the New Testament, “were all written in the hither side of Easter;” – as Frank Peters succinctly puts it – “that is, their authors viewed their subject across the absolute conviction that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God, a conviction later rendered explicit in the Christian dogma.” (Peters 1991:291)

In the case of Muhammad, the situation seems to be totally different. Here there is no Crucifixion and no Resurrection. There is “no paschal sunrise to cast its divinizing light on the prophet of Islam.” Muhammad seems to be a perfect subject of history. “A man born of a woman (and a man), who lived in a certain place at a certain time, and shared the fate of all mortals when his time came.” Therefore, no dogma is involved in the case of Islam; instead

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there is piety. The tremendous veneration of the person of the Prophet was so great already in his life-time, growing greater by the day after his death, that it coloured the works of the early historians of Islam. So much so that they composed, not the history of early Islam, but what this history ought to have been. It is not a coincidence that when an erudite scholar of early Islamic history wanted to write a book about Muhammad he called it "*In the Eyes of the Beholder.*" This name replaced the original name of the book, which Professor Rubin called "*The Making of a Prophet.*"

The piety, which excited the medieval historians of Islam, continues to influence the Muslim writers of Islam to this very day. The veneration of the prophet has not subsided with the years, on the contrary, it seems to have grown even stronger and spread among the intellectuals as well as among the illiterate. To this very day, a critical study of the Prophet and his times can, literally speaking, jeopardize the life of any historian who attempts it. We have the history of the Ideal man Muhammad, and the ideal time of Muhammad, but we know almost nothing about the true story of the birth of Islam. The once-famous, optimistic saying of Ernest Renan that "Islam was born in the full view of history," comparing it with the difficulty in reconstructing the life and times of Jesus, needed serious revision already 25 years after it was pronounced, and now does not hold any ground at all.

Eight years ago Frank Peters of New York University, a deep thinker and great historian, wrote an article which he called "The search for the historical Muhammad". The name of the article was more than reminiscent of what Albert Schweitzer had described back in 1906, as the "quest for the historical Jesus." In this article Peters clearly defined the problem which is very well known to the historians of early Islam, namely that, in spite of the availability of a tremendous body of texts on early Islamic history we actually know nothing about Muhammad nor about his milieu. In fact Peters shows that we know more about Jesus than we know about Muhammad.

At first sight such a statement seems strange, to say the least. All that we know about Jesus comes from the New Testament, and mainly from the Gospels, the earliest of the three synoptic gospels, which could not have been written before the year 70 AD and the independent Gospel according to St. John which might even have been composed a generation later. The Gospels, as I have already mentioned, represent the dogma. They serve a religious purpose and the professional eye can easily perceive many inconsistencies even in the Synoptic Gospels not to mention the independent tradition of St. John. What we can learn from the Gospels is not about the birth of Christianity but about the worship of Jesus as the Son of God, and the story of the Passion as it crystallized two generations after the actual events. However, in the last half a century a great progress has been made in the field of the history of early Christianity as can be learnt from the 1988 new edition of Bishop Stephan Neill's book *The interpretation of the New Testament*. The progress was made not because there was new information about Jesus himself but because we are more and more familiar with his milieu. We know much better the environment in which he lived.. The time in which

he lived, the society in which he grew up, the religious atmosphere in his time, the politics of Judea under the Romans, all these are well known to us from a variety of Jewish, Greek and Roman sources. There is Josephus who provides us with the contemporary political context, the Apocrypha to supply a spiritual context, and the Dead Sea “scrolls to illuminate a Palestinian ‘sectarian milieu’ ” (Peters 292). These and other sources enable us to place Jesus certainly in his times even if his own person remains obscure.

But when we come to Muhammad we still remain with the resounding statement of Maxim Rodinson: “There is nothing of which we can say for certain that incontestably dates to back to the time of the Prophet.”

The first written document about the life of the Prophet is a papyrus fragment which dates back to the year 100 of the Hijrah namely some seventy years after the death of the Prophet and is already tinted with the Shi‘ite-Sunnî controversy. The first biography of the Prophet was written no less than a century after Muhammad’s death. Other sources about the early history of Islam were all written much later and they are all representative of the love, admiration and veneration of the infallible Messenger of God. But what is most important is the fact that we do not possess even one single source, not a glimpse of evidence, from non-Islamic sources not only about Muhammad but also about the historical context of his life and activity.

We know about him and his time only what the late Muslim sources tell us. For him we have no Josephus and no apocrypha and no contemporary sources of any kind. We do not have even the little help of archeology.

The historian of early Islam knows nothing about the social, economic, or political life in early Arabia, and most probably will never know. There is a mass of early Arab poetry the antiquity of which is very much contested, and from which very little can be learnt, out of which juts the Qur’an like a rock in a desolate ocean. The Qur’an, unlike the Bible contains no historical parts, and it has “only a few marks to suggest how and why it appeared in this watery desert.” Even if we accept every word in the Qur’an as representing Muhammad’s teachings we can learn very little from it about the man himself.

Modern research has done its best to develop scholarly tools to go through the maze of Islamic tradition, and has reached admirable achievements. But these achievements which naturally challenge the ideal picture of Islamic tradition have been termed hostile by the Muslims. The question is not a question about historical research but about enemies and friends. Enemies are the historians who question the picture extracted from the Muslim sources and apply to it the strict rules of modern scholarship, verifying facts and analyzing them, and friends are the historians who toe the line of Islamic tradition. In the last two decades or so, another element entered into the debate. The European and American historians, who have been moving Oriental studies forward since the 19th century and creating this rich field of research according to the strictest rules of linguistic and historical

scholarship, have been denounced as patronizing imperialists and colonialists. These two words in certain circles in the west mean, more or less, the advocates of the devil if not his actual allies. Edward Sa'îd the darling of the American Left launched an all out attack on Western Orientalism from this frontline and discredited the great non-Arab and the non-Muslim scholars. He asserted that only Arabs could understand and study Arab history and cultures, and, following the same logic, only Muslims were capable of studying Islam. All European research, which obviously does not always agree with the Arab view of Arab history or the Islamic view of Islamic history, was thus made politically incorrect. The reaction of Bernard Lewis, one of the greatest historians and Orientalists of our time, and one of the chief targets of Sa'îd's vehement attack, remarked that applying Sa'îd's logic to the field of marine biology we would have to conclude that only fish should be allowed to study ichthyology. The book of Sa'îd has become a bestseller, mainly because western liberals, most of whom have no idea what Oriental studies are all about, are in the process of repentance. But the truth of the matter is that if we had agreed to follow Sa'îd's logic we would have had to conclude that only the Romans (if some can still be found around) could study Roman history, only Greeks could indulge in Greek history, only the Jews would be allowed to study Jewish history, and only the Bahá'ís were capable of working in the field of Bahá'í studies. A list of this nature would be very long.

The nearest example to this attack on western Oriental scholarship in Bahá'í history was the reaction to the publication of *Nuqtatu'l-Kâf* by Browne in 1910. The great Bahá'í scholar Abû 'l-Fadl Gulpaygânî set out to write the refutation of the book but he died after writing only its beginning and his nephew Aqâ Sayyid Mahdí Gulpaygânî completed it. The massive tome was called *Kashf al-Ghiṭâ' 'an Hiyal al-a'dâ'* (Uncovering the Schemes of the Enemies). Fortunately 'Abd al-Bahâ' was then on the spot to denounce the book and stop its distribution, using his authority to the utmost. The personal attacks on Browne could not have been endorsed by the leader of the Bahá'í Faith at the time, as much as he might have had his own reservations regarding that particular publication.

The fashionable attack on Orientalism would have had broader implications if it were to be carried into the field of historical research in general. History means the involvement of the historian with his material. The historian is also the product of his time. His interpretation of the historical data that he collects must be influenced by his own cultural, political and social environment. One has to bear this fact in mind when reading any historical research. In his book, Edward Carr brings the example of the German historian Friedrich Meinecke (1862-1954) who lived to the ripe age of 92 and witnessed the dramatic vicissitudes of German history in the 19th and 20th centuries. He showed that Meinecke's interpretation of history changed at least three times as an outcome of the sharp changes in the life of the German nation. At about the same time the great orientalist and Bible scholar Wellhausen, wrote his epoch-making book on the history of the first dynasty of Islam and having lived in the period of the triumph of nationalism in Europe interpreted the events of the 8th century in

terms belonging to the German nationalism of his time. The creator creates in his own image, this is the privilege of any creator whether divine or human.

Judaism Christianity and Islam are religions with a particular sense of history and emphasis on the remembrance of the past. The Bahá'í religion belongs to the same religious tradition, and shares with the other three monotheistic religions the idea of pious history. Pious history, as I have already mentioned, represents the point of view of the believer who uses the scriptures, not only to extract details about the history of the faith itself, but also to learn universal history in general from them.

The believer cannot enter into debate with his own faith and as such, pious history must remain outside the pure scholarly, secular, historical discussion, simply because the methods of historical research are inapplicable where the authority of the scriptures is concerned. One cannot argue with the prophet nor question what is accepted as the word of God.

We are concerned here with the history of the Bahá'í faith as seen outside the realm of veneration, as a history of religion and the outline of a new culture. For the historian all the writings are texts to be examined and studied for the sole purpose of achieving the best knowledge possible of the events which brought about the creation of a new world religion. Here the questions posed by Bishop Neill in his study of the New Testament almost 40 years ago and again some 12 years ago are valid for the Bahá'í religion too. Neill believed that he had found the answers to such questions as: "Who is Jesus of Nazareth? What was his message? Why was he put to death? Why did his few followers become, in effect, the nucleus of the powerful and widespread community called Christianity? (Peters 291)"

One can pose each one of these questions when dealing with the history of the Bâb, and all except for one of them, when studying the history of Bahá'u'lláh.

But unlike Christianity and Islam, to say nothing about the ancient beginnings of Judaism, the Bahá'í faith was really born in the full view of history. We know practically everything about the background of the activity of the Bâb and Bahá'u'lláh. The sources for reconstructing the political, social, cultural and religious environments of the two Prophets are practically all open to us. They are rich and of an unusual variety. Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century have been the subject of numerous studies, and although research never ends, there is practically nothing which we do not know about these two arenas where the major events surrounding the birth of the Bahá'í faith occurred. And as we approach the Faiths themselves and the lives of their Prophets, we are also in a good situation as far as the sources are concerned.

We have the sources that come from within and those that come from without, the sources which represent the pious view, the view of the lover and the view of the foe, as well as the view of the indifferent and the view of the ignorant. The sources are a feast for the historian.

On the lovers' side there are, first of all, the scriptures themselves. True, Scriptures were not written, or revealed, depending on the point of view, in order to teach history, but they are

historical documents too. They were subjects of interpretation, and this interpretation was undertaken by ‘Abd al-Bahâ’ and Shoghi Effendi. ‘Abd al-Bahâ’ presented the official history of the faith in his *Traveler’s Narrative* and Shoghî Effendî mainly in *God Passes By*. These however are not ordinary historical books, they belong rather to the realm of scriptures, and represent the only inspired interpretations of the writings of the Prophets their lives and activities. They are not studies, but rather sources for study. But next to them we have the histories from both Bahá’í and Muslim sides and the evidence of the Europeans. We have enough material to form our opinion about the events and the personalities of the main actors.

Yet there is another factor which makes Bahá’í history such a unique affair. It is all so new. We are in the heart of the events and this makes historical research more complicated because contemporary or near-contemporary history can be very tricky. If we were a couple of hundreds years away our life as historians would have been much easier. However since we are here at this time we must deal with a situation which is rather fluid. The Bahá’í religion, the organization of the Bahá’í institutions, the development of the components of religious life and religious practice and many other issues which are born out of the needs of a newly born culture are in the process of making.

There are the schisms too; the internal breaches, the inevitability of internal oppositions; there are the diversity of cultures and the heterogeneous social environments all over the world which challenge the endurance of the fast spreading religion. In other words, things are still happening, and the history of the Bahá’í faith is a history in creation. In many ways the historian of the Bahá’í faith is inside the history not away from it. Whatever the historian writes is relevant to the actual events. The atmosphere is thick with the smoke of polemics, and there is hardly anything that has been written until now which has not been identified either as the work of a friend or the work of an enemy or at least the work of an unkindly scholar.

The battles have been fought with various degrees of intensity since 1863 and definitely since 1866. They were not always battles fought only with pen and paper. However the place occupied by the historical battle was no less important than the other battles fought in courts and prisons.

Ideally the objective historian cannot take sides. But somehow he might well find himself expected to take sides. This is not such a terrible thing. It is difficult to find a historian who did not take sides or shall we say didn’t have a soft spot for one of the sides featuring in his research. In modern history it is quite common to find historians who, when describing a conflict which involves two or more sides, favour one side. In daily journalism this is the norm. This is not a phenomenon relating only to modern or recent history. Even in the history of the wars between the Persians and the Greeks some 2500 years ago historians took sides. To this very day historians take sides when dealing with the history of the Second Temple period, the Crusades, the Napoleonic wars and, nearer to our time, the history of the American civil war. A good historian lives the events that he describes, otherwise he would

be a machine. He feels the need to make moral judgements of the historical happenings not merely to identify them.

This brings me to the one historical issue which has been troubling the Bahá'í Faith almost from its very inception. The issue is that of Mirzâ Yahyâ – Subh-i-Azal. With the years, instead of subsiding, the issue has become more and more central to the historical research, and has gathered force until it has become almost a litmus test to differentiate between the acid enemy and alkaline friend.

Already at the infancy of Bâbî research this was the main reason for Browne becoming a suspicious individual in spite of his tremendous contribution to the study of the Bâbî-Bahá'í religions. His publication of *Nuqtatu l-Kâf* and his meetings with Mirzâ Yahyâ in Cyprus as well as his clear tendency to espouse the claims of Mirzâ Yahyâ caused a negative attitude to develop towards him. This attitude was somewhat softened by the book of Balyûzî, who nevertheless could not offer complete clemency to Professor Browne.

The issue was always on the agenda of historians and at the heart of an on-going polemical battle. Nowadays, I am told, there is a whole group of scholars who are regarded to be Neo-Azalists. I am not sure whether this is an official appellation or the invention of a good friend from Newcastle. Whichever is the case, this means that we are back to the question of no more or less than the integrity of Bahá'u'lláh.

Here I wish to offer a different approach to this issue which I think is the right approach although it could be interpreted as taking sides. I shall repeat what I said two weeks ago to two members of the Universal House of Justice in Haifa. The occasion was a very happy one. I brought a gift from the Hebrew University - a large portrait of Bahá'u'lláh, one of the two existing photographs of the Prophet. I found the portrait in an archive at the University National Library consisting of very valuable material that had arrived at the Hebrew University from Cyprus almost forty years ago. I shall leave the detailed story about the circumstances of the appearance of these documents in Jerusalem for another occasion. I shall only add that full microfilm of this material has already been put at the disposal of the centre for the Study of the Texts in Haifa.

I said to Mr. Dunbar and to Dr. Khan that, historically speaking, the issue has nothing to do with the integrity of Bahá'u'lláh, nor with the succession to the Bâb. The problem arose because of the unique nature of the birth of the Bahá'í religion. The religion has two beginnings, not one. Following this assertion it should be emphasized that Bahá'u'lláh never claimed to be the successor of the Bâb. He presented his revelation as a totally new revelation with new scriptures superceding those of the Bâb. The fact that the ministry of the Bâb was only 19 years long is immaterial to the issue under discussion. There is no other religion whose history shows so clearly two distinct beginnings. This presents a tremendous challenge to the historian, but instead of really concentrating on this unique historical phenomenon,

great effort has been exerted in the futile debate, regarding an issue, which in my mind is not an issue.

Of course one cannot imagine the Bahá'í religion without the activity of the Báb. He laid the foundations on which Bahá'u'lláh could build his colossal edifice. But for Bahá'u'lláh the issue of succession did not exist. This is the point that should interest the historian, for whether Subh-i-Azal was, or was not, the successor of the Báb is a question connected with the mission of the Báb. The Mission of Bahá'u'lláh is another book not merely another chapter.

This does not mean that the story of Mîrzâ Yahyâ is not extremely interesting for the historian. The story of the Báb's movement has been left open-ended. Polemicists have made extensive use of it but not real historians.

Having said that I want to raise the question of the responsibility of the historian. There are issues that a responsible historian must avoid, at least for a while. One of these is the topic of Azal. It is not because the Bahá'í religion is not strong enough to face a serious study of the material available now but because of the possible utilization of such a study by elements that could harm other people. History is full of examples of essentially harmless research that formed the basis for atrocious actions. A straight line leading from Comte de Gobineau toying with the idea of the superiority of the "Aryans" to the implementation of his ideas in Nazi Germany.

Without being asked, I gave a pledge to the House of Justice that I shall never publish the material from Famagusta found in the archives in Jerusalem. This is not because I do not have the natural urge of the historian to publish such documents, but because I believe that, at this time, this would be utterly irresponsible.

However I wish to conclude by sharing a rare document with you. When examining the documents in the archives, I found a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh that has never been published and whose existence was known to very few people.

The tablet is most probably the swan song of the Prophet. It deals with the past and future and refers to yet another problem which was used to attack Baha'ullah. I read the Tablet and translated it. I am honoured to give publicity to it for the first time ever at this Academy.

O Creator of all Creation!

This is that which revealed from the Heavens of preexistence in which is prescribed the station in which the Beauty of God resides on a Throne of a mighty Name. For surely He is the Promised One in all the Tablets in every Name if you be of those who comprehend. In the Bayân He was named as "He who shall be made manifest," and He shall manifest Himself in the *mustaghâth* in evident sovereignty (*sultân*).

Say: By God (this is a)day the like of which the eyes of concealment have not seen, how much more so the eyes of those who are veiled from seeing. Happy is he who will be present on that day before God in utmost humility, and read this Tablet facing the Throne in order that he should bring to the Hearing of God Its melodies, which manifested themselves in the past between the heavens and earth; and in this way, this Name will be mentioned in a dwelling place which God has exalted above the glorification of mankind. Our intention in that which is mentioned in this Tablet is none other than Mine own Self, that pervades all created things..

He who anticipates a Manifestation after me is (surely) of those who have gone astray. And He who will appear after one thousand (years), He surely speaks in My Name. And in the *mustaghâth* will (surely) come He who will testify for me that I am the God the Lord of the heavens and earth. No one comprehended this Manifestation except according to his capacity; in truth God's Knowledge embraces all things.

O people! Hold fast after Me to the Branches that have stemmed from this ancient root. In them the fragrance of My raiment travels throughout the worlds, and only he who turns towards Him and is steadfast will find it. O People of the Bahâ' it is beseems to you to be steadfast in the Cause of God in all circumstances. Beware of following every ignorant sinner.

And after the Branches, an elevated place was ordained for the Servant who is present at the Throne. And it is behoves you to revere the clan among whom the Beloved of the Worlds manifested Himself; they are those who believed in God the Mighty the Glorious. This is what was revealed in the Bayân and in this illuminated Tablet. And he who repudiates them is a heretic and polytheist, nay he even is from those who are have gone astray unless he should repent, for He is the Forgiver the Compassionate.

Two major messages are in this Tablet.

One is the definition of the place of Bahá'u'lláh when he leaves this world into the spiritual existence in the Presence of the Divine Being.

The other is His vision of the future.

The second point is highly important because it contains the authoritative ruling of Bahá'u'lláh on the an issue which has been used by the opponents of to undermine his authority and his claim. This issue is connected with the word *mustaghâth* (He whose aid is sought, the greatest Name of God), the numerical equivalent of which is 2001. Bahá'u'lláh makes clear that there will be a prophet of God that will appear after 2001 years just as there will be one that will appear a thousand years earlier. Both of whom will speak in God's name in total confirmation of Bahá'u'lláh's mission.

Whether the opponents and critics accept this interpretation of the relevant passage in Bayân or not it is immaterial, the historian is bound by his sources and has the prerogative to decide if an issue is settled.

I believe that we shared together a rare moment in historical research. I thank the rector of this Academy, my colleagues and students and all of you Ladies and Gentlemen for giving me the opportunity to touch for a second the shade of eternity. God Bless you all.