SOUNDINGS

Some reflections on Juan Cole's *Modernity and the Millennium*

Amin Banani

In the strict sense of the word this is not a review of Juan Cole's *Modernity and the Millennium*[1] but rather some reflections on it with the hope that sharing these reflections may be helpful to the book's author as well as to other readers. I should say at the outset that the positive public impact of this book outweighs its shortcomings. It is the first well-documented, conceptually sophisticated, and persuasively argued treatment of a major "missing chapter" in the history of progressive ideas and movements in nineteenth century Persia. As such its value for the academically oriented readers – and particularly the non-Baha'i Iranian intellectuals – should be appreciated as it brings to the foreground subjects which have been taboo and people who have been treated as non-persons in Iranian historiography. No serious future studies in the history of modernity in western Asia, and in Persia in particular, can ignore what Cole has convincingly demonstrated in this book. Having said that I must confess that it has left a pall of sadness on my heart. While it is a work of original insights and useful conceptual constructs, it contains not a few contradictions, hasty conclusions and curious lapses. The author begins by rightly asserting that, contrary to general western perceptions, the nineteenth century Middle East was not an intellectually moribund place devoid of original and dynamic ideas. He cites the genesis of the Bahá'í Faith to prove his point. Then he tries to trace every bit of what is modern in Bahá'u'lláh's thought to direct and indirect influences from the west.

Cole, who has demonstrated in his prolific and often brilliant writings his capacity for careful and meticulous scholarship, is curiously at his most tenuous in demonstrating what he promises to do, i.e. in establishing the connection between the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the presumed sources that influenced him. Virtually all the presentation of the evidence, such as supposed casual conversations with westernised Ottoman leaders and thinkers in the coffee houses of Baghdad and Edirne, is couched in vague and subjunctive phrasing. Juxtaposition of European trends of thought on major components of modernity with the progressively emerging and ever expanding vision of Bahá'u'lláh is reminiscent of exercises in intellectual history where ideas are detached from events and very scant attention is paid to the resonance between the two.

The writings of Bahá'u'lláh from the earliest poetic visions in the Siyáh

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1 Published as *Modernity and Millennium: the genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the nineteenth century Middle-East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Chál of Tehran to his final *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* reveal a remarkable and correlative wholeness. A compression of virtually all the major themes of his prescription for humanity is present in one of his earliest works, the *Hidden Words*. Nowhere is this unity of vision more evident than in the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, the last work to issue from his pen. It is a document of *itmam-i hujjat* (completion of proof), a final delivery of the proofs of the validity of his cause, which confronts the addressee with the crucial choice to accept or to deny. In this work Bahá'u'lláh quotes trenchant passages from his writings that span of his entire life. The unity of the whole with all its manifold facets is summed up for all fair-minded and open-hearted persons to see.

The particular recipient of this book, Shaykh Muhammad Taqí, stands for all who deny his call and rise up against him and strive to harm his Cause. The light of Bahá'u'lláh's vision did not penetrate the darkness of the Shaykh's soul; but a careful and unfettered review of Bahá'u'lláh's writings over a span of half a century and the contemplation of their majestic power and beauty have led many a receptive soul to take the leap of faith and recognise their divine source. Others who by virtue of their intellectual gifts and spiritual capacity could have attained to that potential, have instead by a curious process of what is occasionally called "formal historical scholarship," allowed that faith to elude them.

I have some difficulty with the notion of "formal historical scholarship." *A priori* categorisation of varieties of scholarship can be misleading and self-serving. I have an easier time distinguishing sound scholarship from less sound. Although Cole does not say so explicitly, close examination of *Modernity and Millennium* makes it clear that viewing Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of divine will and purpose is outside the purview of "formal historical scholarship." The crucial issue of Bahá'u'lláh's own oft-repeated and explicit claim to be a Manifestation of God is finessed by Cole as: "Acclaimed by his adherents as a Manifestation of God (*mazhar-i ilahi*) and bearer of divine revelation…" (14). In "formal historical scholarship," Bahá'u'lláh is presented as merely a perspicacious reformer who had a good ear for western ideas.

Implicit in this assertion of "formal historical scholarship" is the assumption that sound scholarship is incompatible with religious faith and is the monopoly of the agnostic. Yet the world of sound scholarship has no shortage of practitioners of profound religious faith. In my own academic career I have known such giants of scholarship as Etienne Gilson, Lynn White, Harry Wolfson, Fazlur Rahman and Alessandro Bausani whose adherence to the highest standards of sound scholarship did not drain them of their faith. If such a ubiquitous human experience as the phenomenon of faith must be excluded from the purview of "formal historical scholarship," then it is the bias and limitation of that scholarship that needs to be corrected.

Cole is right, of course, in noting a pattern of evolutionary expansion in the encompassing vision of Bahá'u'lláh. But that pattern is far more credible and comprehensible as a dimension of his progressive revelation. As the context of his unfolding mission and the identity and variety of his audience

changed and expanded, he focused upon and elaborated themes that he had touched upon as early as in the *Hidden Words*. Thus it is only natural that in his early poetic responses to Kurdish Sufis about the way-stations of the mystic path he would not touch upon subjects such as the virtues of democratic consultative government, condemnation of militarism, and the need for a universal auxiliary language as he did later when he was addressing the rulers of the world. In this light, for example, Cole's statement about Bahá'u'lláh's evolution from Babi militancy to advocacy of world peace – presumably because of his improbable exposure to Saint Simonian ideas – misses the mark and does not stand the test of historical scrutiny. Bahá'u'lláh's role as a peace-maker and conciliator even in his earliest Babi days and at the height of Babi militancy is well-attested. His condemnation of the attempt on the life of Nasir al-Din Shah was unequivocal; and from the earliest Baghdad days he was, in his own words, bent upon "sheathing the swords of the Babis."

That Bahá'u'lláh was in cordial contact with progressive Ottoman individuals in Baghdad, Istanbul and Edirne is, as Cole points out, a historical fact. But for all of Cole's suggestions that these men were conduits to Bahá'u'lláh of European ideas, there is only one reasonably well documented account of direct exchange between one of these men, the Ottoman diplomat Kemal Pasha, and Bahá'u'lláh, in Istanbul in 1863. In that encounter it was the European educated polyglot cosmopolitan Kemal Pasha who was dazzled by the novelty of Bahá'u'lláh's cogent argument for the global need to adopt a universal auxiliary language. That there were areas of convergence between the ideas and objectives of some of the Ottoman reformers and the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is true. But there are three points that no objective scholar, no matter how sceptical or agnostic, can deny: (1) that none of the ideas, programmes and agendas of those progressive Ottomans came close to the multi-faceted, correlated and integrated wholeness of Bahá'u'lláh's vision for healing the spiritual, social, economic and political ills of not just the Ottoman society but the whole of humankind; (2) that on every crucial issue of social, political and economic reform Bahá'u'lláh's prescriptions were more radical and revolutionary than what the Ottoman reformers could envision; and (3) that important components of Bahá'u'lláh's pattern for his world order were years ahead of gaining currency even in the west.

In his efforts to portray Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá as recipients and reflectors of western modernist ideas, Cole occasionally makes oblique reference to events that could be misleading to uninformed readers. For example, he makes a passing reference to 'Abdu'l-Bahá attending the study classes of Muhammad Abduh in Beirut, leaving the reader with the impression of a master-pupil relationship (181). Again, Cole is entirely right that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was well aware of the intellectual currents of his environment and was well-read in the Egyptian and Turkish modernist press; and he met and corresponded with some intellectuals including Muhammad Abduh. It would be interesting to know of Abduh's recollection of meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Fortunately, we have a vignette in the memoirs of Comte de Sacy, the son of the famed French orientalist, who quotes a letter from his friend Muhammad

Abduh saying that meeting with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was more beneficial than seeing the greatest of philosophers, that he had never come across anyone with the intelligence, wisdom and vast knowledge of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that he seemed to know the secrets of hearts and could respond to inmost questions, that it was evident that the holy spirit dwelled in him, and that his knowledge was innate and his power divine.

In the conclusion of the book, Cole blames “later Bahá’í leaders” for a growing tendency to literalism, conservatism and fundamentalism. This, he suggests, has slowed if not reversed the liberal and progressive thrust of Bahá’u’lláh’s cause. He constructs a pattern of Bahá’í polity envisaged by Bahá’u’lláh in conformity with Jeffersonian enlightenment, and makes a strong plea for separation of religious and civil authority. To uphold this view, he resorts to a literalist device of insisting on the historical etymological boundaries of certain crucial terms used by Bahá’u’lláh such as *siyasat* and *millat* (historically, governmental leadership and religious group, but evolved today to politics and nation/people). To be so hidebound at a time when the semantic fields of these terms were undergoing dynamic transformation is uncharacteristic of Cole, who is usually more alert to the pace of change in history. While it is true that Bahá’u’lláh emerged from the matrix of Shi‘i Islam and as nearly all of his interlocutors were Muslims, he necessarily spoke in terms understood by them, it is equally true that he invested familiar terms, concepts and institutions with dynamic new potentialities that emerge in the course of time. To read with a backward glance is to miss the vast prospects ahead. At any rate, doctrinaire debates about the evolving relations of Bahá’í institutions and civil authorities is an exercise in premature speculation that ignores the dynamic complexities of future developments.

These “later Bahá’í leaders,” who presumably include Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, have acted with one supreme goal: to promote the welfare of the cause of Bahá’u’lláh and preserve the unity of Bahá’í communities. The individual temperamental characteristics of members of Bahá’í institutions, especially the Universal House of Justice at the apex of the Bahá’í administrative order, have little to do with the final outcome of their deliberations. No fair-minded person can review the messages and pronouncements of the Universal House of Justice in the last thirty-five years and find them injudicious, literalist, anti-intellectual or fundamentalist.

To be sure some of Cole’s criticisms about anti-intellectualism and the thought-squelching atmosphere of some Bahá’í communities, the tendency to lifetime incumbency in Bahá’í institutions, the overdue need to amend the publication review process to peer review, and the need for nurturing and making better use of scholarship in the Faith are cogent and well-taken. There is no doubt that both human and institutional behaviour are subject to retrenchment and hardening. But in the open consultative and constructive channels of Bahá’í governance, Bahá’u’lláh has provided the mechanisms to correct these tendencies. My sadness at reading Cole’s conclusion is that he may have helped set back that natural process of correction.

Historical methodology and the development of Bahá'í scholarship: toward dispelling a false dichotomy

Sholeh A. Quinn[2]

Introduction

The recently published compilation on Bahá'í scholarship states that this endeavour is for everyone. Indeed, the introductory letter from the Universal House of Justice to that compilation states:

> This scholarly endeavour should be characterised by the welcome it offers to all who wish to be involved in it, each in his or her own way, by mutual encouragement and cooperation among its participants, and by the respect accorded to distinguished accomplishment and outstanding achievement.[3]

Since this call reaches out to every Bahá'í to be involved in scholarly activity, we cannot assume that every Bahá'í will be involved in the same way. Indeed, the diversity of the Bahá'í community, and the wide range of professions, vocations and areas of expertise that are represented preclude and discourage such uniformity of thought and approach. The present paper will (1) introduce and locate one particular academic discipline, history, within the context of Bahá'í scholarship, and vice-versa; (2) present a brief introduction on historical methodologies as practised in the history profession; and (3) explain the limitations of these methodologies. It will conclude with a discussion of what sorts of contributions professional historians and other academics can make to Bahá'í scholarship.

Professional history and Bahá'í scholarship

There are countless ways one can envision engaging in the sort of "scholarly activity" mentioned in the letter cited above. For some, it might mean reading

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2 This paper was originally a talk presented at Bosch Bahá'í school in 1997 to a non-academic audience. It was written specifically for a Bahá'í audience with no background at all in history or historical methodologies. In my view, it is important that academics continue to communicate something about their various methodologies to Bahá'ís without any university background.

3 From a letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 10 February 1995, published as the introduction to the "Compilation on Scholarship," *Bahá'í Studies Review* 5.1 (1995): 105.

scholarly books and articles on Babi and Bahá'í studies.[4] Others might enrol in evening courses offered at a local community college or university. For still others, it could mean conducting classes of a scholarly nature in our local communities: deepenings on the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, for instance, or Islamic history. For yet others, it might mean delving even deeper into one's own area of expertise. Some Bahá'ís are professional scholars and members of the academy – that is, they make their living by engaging in scholarly activities – teaching courses, conducting research, and presenting that research within professional academic settings, usually colleges, universities or research institutes. Some Bahá'ís, for instance, are professional economists, others are sociologists, engineers, specialists in literature and languages, or historians. Within this group of professional scholars, a few Bahá'ís, along with other scholars who are not Bahá'ís, have chosen as their area of specialization the study of the Bahá'í religion. These individuals study the Bahá'í religion from the perspective of their specific academic disciple, whether it be history, sociology, political science, or literature. However, whether one is a professional academic, a part-time researcher, or a thinking person interested in the life of the mind, the letter quoted above indicates that everyone in the community, with all its tremendous diversity and varieties of perspectives and backgrounds, is welcome to do what he or she can to engage in "scholarly endeavour."[5]

Let us now examine the scholarly endeavours of one area of learning: history. The field of history is vast. It incorporates a wide diversity of people using a variety of approaches. Nearly everyone is familiar with history in one form or another – for some, the mere mention of the word causes grimacing and brings back unpleasant memories of an agonizing process of memorizing names, dates and places. Others love history, and although one's professional training may be in the sciences or other areas not at all related to history, people from a variety of walks of life still, for example, read historical works of various types, watch televised historical documentaries, and otherwise engage in historically-related activities. For some people, history becomes

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4 See, for example, *From Iran East & West*, eds. Juan R. Cole and Moojan Momen (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1984); H. M. Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís in the Time of Bahá'u'lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985); *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Husayn Balyuzi*, ed. Moojan Momen (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988); Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Denis MacEoin, *The Sources for Early Babi Doctrine and History: a Survey* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992); Juan R. I. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and various articles in the *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, ed. Stephen N. Lambden.

5 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains why developing one's intellect may be so compelling to some: "All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight. Man is ever partaking of these fruits. All other blessings are temporary; this is an everlasting possession" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity* [Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1945] 61).

important when they learn about the roots of their own family, whether through joining genealogical societies or recording the stories heard from grandparents or other elders. Other individuals spend much of their lives deeply studying historical eras in which they are interested. In the United States, for example, history related to the Civil War and, more generally, military history are popular fields.

In the same way that a field like astronomy encompasses both amateurs (people genuinely interested in and often engaged in the study of the stars but whose profession is something else), and professionals (those who make a living as astronomers), so too does history have an amateur and a professional side. Professional historians make their living by studying the past. They find employment in a number of places: historical societies, museums, local archives, colleges and universities. Those who make a profession of history, therefore, are only a subset of all those who consider themselves historians are interested in history, or view themselves as "historically-minded." Similarly, those professional historians who study the Bahá'í religion as their special field of research form a subset of all those individuals, professional or amateur, scientist or humanist, and many others, engaged in Bahá'í scholarship.

In today's society, history often seems to be at the centre of numerous controversies. Current debates over historical issues, such as the publicity generated by certain historical exhibitions at museums, like the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian museum, or the debates on multiculturalism, show that far from being a marginalised, obscure endeavour, history is in fact a very powerful force. People from all backgrounds and walks of life have deep concerns about that power, not only in relation for example, to whose history is taught in schools, but how it is taught as well.[6] Therefore, unlike certain other professions, where debates involving non-professionals or amateurs might be less passionate, history is seen as something to which everybody may feel the right of access.

Historical methodology

The fact that history is so accessible and so many people are involved in historical enterprises of various sorts tends sometimes to make one lose sight of the fact that the professional side of the discipline exists, and like its fellow academic disciplines in the arts and the sciences, is subject to its own methodologies, its own rules and its own approaches. For instance, the approach taken by a professional historian can in fact differ – although it does not necessarily have to – from that taken by a non-professional historian, in the same way that someone who has a general interest in cooking may

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6 For example, some of these debates took place following the publication of Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

undertake the preparation of food differently than a highly trained professional chef. The lack of understanding of how professional historians "do" history as opposed to more popular approaches has led to some of the controversies and debates mentioned above, and, perhaps, tensions within the Bahá'í community as well. Far from exhibiting unique features, the debates over history on various Bahá'í and Bahá'í-related Internet forums mirror the larger context in which they are carried out. On some of these Internet discussion groups, for instance, professional Bahá'í scientists have engaged in debates about historical methodology with both non-professional and professional Bahá'í historians, all claiming the right of access to history. Those debates, however, did not often address what it is that professional historians actually do. In order to contribute to a greater understanding of historical methodology as it is practised in the academy, a brief introduction is provided below.

Historians work primarily, though not exclusively, with written texts in order to understand the past. We may define historical methodology as the process by which historians read and interpret those written texts, sometimes called "sources" or "historical sources." This process goes by many names, some of which include "source criticism," "critical analysis," "textual analysis," or "historical criticism." It is extremely important to keep in mind two points: (1) a historian may use *any* written text for his analysis, and (2) *any* text that a historian may use for his analysis can be used by different individuals in different ways, for different purposes, which go well beyond the limits of "historical methodology."

Let us take the following well-known text as an example:

> Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
> Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
> All the king's horses and all the king's men
> Cannot put Humpty Dumpty together again.[7]

Most of us are familiar with this verse as a nursery rhyme which parents will sing or recite to their child. In this case, it is the recitation of the text which serves the function of entertaining the child. The parent is not particularly interested in historical or literary questions that the rhyme raises.

A professional literary critic will look at the nursery rhyme as a literary text. Unlike the parent, who sings or recites the text, the literary specialist will "interrogate" the text, ask it specific questions in order better to understand its literary nature. Some possible questions might include, what is the rhyme metre of the verse? What are the literary allusions being made? How is this

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7 *The Illustrated Treasury of Children's Literature*, ed. Margaret E. Martignoni (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1955) 29, and reprinted in many other places.

rhyme related to other texts, which collectively form the literary genre known as "nursery rhymes"? Here, as a result of interrogating the text in a specific way, the text reveals certain answers that would be of interest to those who study literature.

A professional historian will ask a different set of questions, which will cause the text to yield a different set of answers. In standard accepted historical methodology, the questions asked of a particular text, if one is going to use that text for historical purposes, remain constant regardless of which text is being read, whether it be a nursery rhyme, a medieval legend or a Babi chronicle. These basic questions include the following: What is the text? Who wrote it? When was it written? Where was it written? Why was it written, and under what circumstances? Whom was it written for? By answering these questions, one learns about the greater "historical context" in which the text was produced.

"Doing history," – writing about the past – therefore, requires one to ask and answer the specific questions listed above of any given text. By applying these questions to the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme, we learn the following: this text originated in fifteenth century England as a popular political protest allegory, in which Humpty Dumpty refers to King Richard III, "sat on the wall" means "attacked a Welshman," who in this case was Henry Tudor, grandson of Queen Catherine, widow of King Henry II of England. Humpty Dumpty's great fall refers to Richard III's defeat at a battle in Leicestershire, where despite his large army of 23,000 men ("all the king's men"), he still suffered defeat ("cannot put Humpty Dumpty together again").[8]

In the example of this nursery rhyme, the parent, the literary critic and the historian each use the Humpty Dumpty text for different purposes. In each separate reading, the text performed very different functions, none of which took away from the importance of the others. It helped entertain a child, it revealed something about the literary nature of nursery rhymes and it provided information about fifteenth century British history and popular political thought. None of these functions of the text need to be in conflict with each other. The historian who studies the political implications of the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme is not threatening the legitimacy or validity of the same text to the parent, who enjoys entertaining the child by reciting the rhyme.

Another important consideration for historians who seek to understand the past is deciding which text to rely on. If a number of written texts describe the same events, and no two writers are exactly the same, then no two texts will be exactly the same. But this raises the question, which version should one read, and which version should one believe? By asking the five historical

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8 See Albert Mason, *The Nursery Rhyme: Remnant of Popular Political Protest* (Kansas: Coronado Press, 1968) 67-81.

questions listed above, we can better evaluate any given text. Generally, historians favour the accounts written closer to the time of the events they describe over those written later. Likewise, accounts written by eyewitnesses are favoured over those who receive their information second hand. These criteria, however, must be weighed in light of the personal biases of the author, and since all human beings are subjective creatures, there is no such thing as a perfectly "objective" text. It is best, therefore, to read all available accounts of the same historical event.

Turning now to another example that illustrates this issue, we find the following passage in a nineteenth century historical account:

> Mirza Ahmad-i-Qazvini, the martyr, who on several occasions had heard Mulla Husayn recount to the early believers the story of his moving and historic interview with the Báb, related to me the following: "I have heard Mulla Husayn repeatedly and graphically describe the circumstances of that remarkable interview . . . 'We soon found ourselves standing at the gate of a house of modest appearance. He knocked at the door, which was soon opened by an Ethiopian servant. "Enter therein in peace, secure," [Q 15:46] were His words as He crossed the threshold and motioned me to follow Him. His invitation, uttered with power and majesty, penetrated my soul... Might not my visit to this house, I thought to myself, enable me to draw nearer to the Object of my quest?'"[9]

Here again is a text for which we may envision numerous uses. Certainly, many Bahá'ís can remember participating in celebrations of the anniversary of the Bab's announcement of his prophethood, and will recognize this as a passage from Nabil's Narrative, also known as the *Dawn-Breakers*. One of the very important functions of this text has been to encourage and inspire the Bahá'ís in the west, who – as they are taken back to Shiraz, and imagine that historic meeting between Mulla Husayn and the Bab – are partaking of the fruits of Shoghi Effendi's tremendous effort when he translated and interpreted this chronicle.[10] In this scenario, Bahá'ís would probably most

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9 Nabíl Zarandí, *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, ed. and trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) 52-54.

10 I use the word "interpret" here based on Rúhíyyih Rabbani's statement: "Although ostensibly a translation from the original Persian Shoghi Effendi may be said to have re-created it in English, his translation being comparable to Fitzgerald's rendering of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* which gave to the world a poem in a foreign language that in many ways far exceeded the merits of the original" (Rúhíyyih Rabbaní, *The Priceless Pearl* [London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969] 215). Those who care read both English and Persian might find it an interesting exercise to compare Fitzgerald's translations with Khayyam's original, and see just how much Fitzgerald changed the original Persian

often use this text for inspirational purposes, to convey the spirit of that day of declaration to their fellow believers.

The non-professional historian, or historically-minded individual, might use this text to different ends: to obtain a better understanding of Babi history, as many Bahá'ís are interested in the Babi roots of their own faith. Since not everyone is able to read Persian or Arabic, Bahá'ís are indebted to Shoghi Effendi for producing this English translation and interpretation, for it helps bring to life the historical figures of the past: Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kazim, the Letters of the Living, the Bab himself. A non-professional historian might use the *Dawn-Breakers* as a basis from which to write a popular account of Babi history, more accessible to the general public, or to lead a local community deepening.

The professional historian will use the same text in very specific ways in order to learn and analyse the past. As in the nursery rhyme example, the uses of the text differ, as do the questions posed of the text and the answers it gives. Note that the historian will ask the *exact same* questions of Nabil's text that she asked of the nursery rhyme. Again, she wants to know: When was this text written? By whom? What was the author's background? The answers to these general questions give rise to more specific questions, which might include the following: The author, Nabil, claims to have heard the story from Mirza Ahmad Qazvini, who heard it from Mulla Husayn. When did Mirza Ahmad-i Qazvini tell the story to Nabil? Did Mirza Ahmad Qazvini tell the same story to anyone else? Did Mulla Husayn tell anyone else, and do we have other versions of the same episode? If so, how do they differ from Nabil's? Furthermore, if they do differ, whose account do we "privilege," and how do we account for the differences in the various versions?

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quatrains. One of the primary reasons why Shoghi Effendi translated this work was to inspire the Bahá'ís in the west. In a cable to the United States in 1931, the Guardian urged the study of this translation for he felt it an "essential preliminary to [the] renewed intensive Teaching Campaign necessitated by [the] completion [of the] Mashriqu'l-Adhkar" (*ibid.*, 217). See also *Priceless Pearl* 214-218 for a general summary of the history of this translation.

Thus, historians analyse any number of texts in a uniform way in order to understand the past and they present their analysis in a manner that conforms to certain standard rules, sometimes known as "scholarly apparatus." For instance, one important aspect of the scholarly apparatus is that professional historians must cite their sources by means of a footnote or endnote reference, so that the reader may check the original "text" in order to evaluate the historian's analysis. By providing examples and citations from their sources, historians provide "evidence" to back up, or "prove" their conclusions. Entire undergraduate and graduate seminar courses at universities are devoted to teaching students how to ask questions, how to weigh evidence, how to read and interpret texts, and how to present one's findings or conclusions. It is very important to note that the questions and methods can become extremely detailed and complex, as students and scholars delve deeper and deeper into their topic.

Professional historians in academia specialise in various areas or "fields" of history, which are the subjects that they teach and/or research. These fields include areas such as "European history," "world history," "social history," "women's history" and "East Asian history." Within these broad areas are subfields and more specifically designated areas of specialisation. These fields of history require different sorts of special skills. Historians like to read sources in the languages in which they were written, so that less will get lost in the translation, thus some specialities require language skills. For instance, historians of China need to be able to read their sources in the original Chinese, economic historians need to have some knowledge of economics, and so forth. In the case of professional historians studying early Babi and Bahá'í history, the field requires advanced training in (1) historical methodology, (2) Islamics, and (3) the Persian and Arabic languages.[11]

History, then, as it is practised in the academy, is a sort of "craft," and like gardeners who must learn the various methods of tending a garden and know how to use specific tools and materials in order to perform their tasks, so too must historians learn to use the tools of their craft, which include the skills mentioned above. Learning to master the profession, and perfecting one's use of the "tools," requires time, training, and commitment. Since the tools of the trade are the same regardless of what period of history one studies, the approaches used in the professional study of Bahá'í history are no different from the approaches used in the professional study of any other period or area of history, for example, early Christianity, medieval India, or

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11 A sample question faced by historians could be the following: "Official Qajar historical writing is a continuation of earlier traditions of Safavid, Afsharid and Zand historical writing, where imitative historiographical methods are utilized. Did Nabil utilize the same imitative methods, and if so, which earlier texts was he imitating?" (Incidentally, the Persian original of Nabil must be consulted in order to answer this particular question.)

modern Canada.

Limitations of the discipline

Having outlined the sorts of questions historians ask and the methods they use to answer them, a few words must be said about the "limits" of the discipline. We often hear what historians do; we do not often hear what historians cannot or should not do. For professional historians, the kinds of questions that can be asked of a text are limited. Returning to the garden analogy, the number of tools in our garden shed are not infinite, and they can only fix certain kinds of problems. In the case of gardening, a gardener's tools, no matter how sophisticated, cannot prevent a winter storm from freezing the plants. Nor can these tools help the gardener explain why the storm occurred in the first place or predict when the next one is due. To require the gardener to answer such questions is making the gardener go beyond the limits of what his discipline, gardening, can tell him. Similarly, historians can only explain certain aspects of events, and answer certain questions in certain ways, due to the limitations of the discipline. It is for this reason that sometimes people read the scholarship of professional Bahá'í historians and claim that they have a problematic identity: being Bahá'ís but writing like non-Bahá'ís. Such perceptions are a result of not having sufficient knowledge of what history cannot do.

We have already established that historians ask certain types of questions of a particular text: they ask questions that the text is able to answer within the limits of the discipline. Like the gardener whose hoes, weeders and bags of fertilizer are unable to predict winter storms, there are certain questions which history cannot answer. One final example aptly illustrates this point:

> Oh Ahmad! Forget not my bounties while I am absent. Remember My days during thy days, and My distress and banishment in this remote prison. And be thou so steadfast in My love that thy heart shall not waver, even if the swords of the enemies rain blows upon thee and all the heavens and the earth arise against thee.[12]

This is from one of the best known writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the "Tablet of Ahmad." How many times have Bahá'ís recited this passage, gaining spiritual strength and comfort from its words, which Shoghi Effendi states have a "special potency and significance." For most believers, this work's primary use is for prayer and meditation.

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12 Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet of Ahmad, reprinted in *Bahá'í Prayers* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1945) and many other places.

As in the example of the nursery rhyme, however, a historian – believer or not – can also use this text, and do so for an entirely different purpose than its "spiritual" function, which does not take away or invalidate its use as a prayer or a devotion. The questions a historian would ask of this text, in order better to understand the past, should by now sound familiar: Who is the author? When did the author write? For whom? Why? Specific questions could include the following: Who is Ahmad? Why is he distressed? Where is the remote prison? How long was the author in that prison? Who, specifically, are the enemies whose swords may rain down upon Ahmad?

The first of the general questions – who is the author and what is his background – is one of the first that historians routinely ask. In this case, the text is from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. The historian writing for academic audiences would answer the first question with something like the following: "The author of this Tablet is Mirza Husayn 'Ali, who took the title Bahá'u'lláh ('glory of God'). He was a 19th century Persian who claimed to be a Manifestation of God." The professional historian, whether Bahá'í or not, *cannot* justifiably state the following: "The author of this Tablet is Bahá'-u'lláh, who is the Manifestation of God for this day." The reason has to do with the limitations of the discipline. A historian could very well believe that Bahá'u'lláh is a Manifestation of God, or not, but the fact that this is a text-based discipline means that the historian cannot use *textual* evidence to back up the second statement. The gardener may very well believe that the storm will return the next day, but his gardening tools do not, cannot, and should not be used to prove his opinion. Historians can only reach certain kinds of conclusions based on textual evidence. Bahá'ís may appear to be "writing as non-Bahá'ís" but in fact they are writing as historians, restricted by the tools of their trade, able to analyse only certain problems and say things in certain ways.

What can professional historians contribute?

Why is it so important for us to understand what professional academics do? In 1989, the Universal House of Justice wrote:

> Newly enrolled professionals and other experts provide a great resource for the development of Bahá'í scholarship. It is hoped that, as they attain a deeper grasp of the Teachings and their significance, they will be able to assist Bahá'í communities in correlating the beliefs of the Faith with the current thoughts and problems of the world.[13]

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13 From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 18 April 1989, cited in "Compilation on scholarship," no. 41, 124.

What are some of the "current thoughts" in the world, which the Universal House of Justice has asked Bahá'í scholars to correlate with the beliefs of the faith? In academia, these include newer fields of study that have attracted the attention of scholars in a number of both traditional and new disciplines, including history. The Bahá'í writings and texts all have a great deal to offer in these areas, and as these "professionals and other experts" try to correlate "the beliefs of the faith with the current thoughts and problems of the world," it is no coincidence that some of the most fervently debated issues in some segments of the Bahá'í community reflect this current thought. For example, current thought in the newer fields of gender studies, feminist studies and women's history (which includes discussions about feminist approaches to texts) cannot help but lead to discussions about women serving on the Universal House of Justice. "Current thought" on hermeneutics and how one interprets and analyses a text "correlates" with questions related to theories of the interpretation of Bahá'í texts, which incidentally have included a discussion on the relative advantages and disadvantages of "compilations," and even the relationship between science and religion. "Current thought" on the history of nationalism and religion raises issues of the relationship between church and state in Bahá'í patterns of future government. "Current thought" on post-colonialism and subaltern studies, with their emphasis on studying how some groups (such as the 19th century European colonial powers) have traditionally categorised other groups (such the colonized peoples of the Middle East) in order to maintain power over them has led to "correlated" discussions about attitudes within the Bahá'í community towards the "Other," whether that Other is a person of colour, a woman, a historian, a homosexual, a Persian, a "scholar," etc. As time passes, the issues that form "current thought" will of course change. Bahá'ís in academia should be able to engage in a meaningful discussion of whatever the current discourse of the time may be.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that there are not only many ways to read a text, but that any given text can be read, analysed and used for a number of different purposes, and that for professional history, any given text yields only certain kinds of information which can be presented in certain ways. As individuals, we have the freedom to ask any and all questions of any text. As professional historians, there are only certain questions that our discipline allows us to ask and answer. Instead of creating false dichotomies between professional historians, popular historians and Bahá'í scholars, multiple approaches to the text, like the many approaches to Bahá'í scholarship, should co-exist. Given the broad call by the Universal House of Justice to all Bahá'ís to develop

Bahá'í scholarship and to welcome all who wish to be involved in it, that welcome should include professional academic historians, who along with other academics, form just one small subgroup of all people engaged in Bahá'í scholarship.

Indigenous rights and women's rights in the Samoan Bahá'í community

Maureen Sier

The Pacific islands of Samoa are governed by an indigenous system where the key decision-makers are primarily men. Bahá'í communities in Samoa are influenced by this system and, as a result, this inhibits female participation in Bahá'í administration. This paper outlines how the Samoan chiefly system operates and then demonstrates its links to the process of Bahá'í elections at a national level. The following analysis relates to the wider question of whether Bahá'ís can respect traditional Samoan culture without undermining the fundamental Bahá'í principle of equality of men and women.

Upolu and Savaii are the main islands of Samoa, known until recently as Western Samoa, and have been independently governed since 1962. The mainstays of the Samoan way of life are agriculture and fishing, remittances from family members living abroad, tourism and light industry. Politically, Samoa has maintained stability since independence. The continuation of a system of chiefly government at the village and national level is a contributing factor in this stability.

The Samoan islands are predominantly made up of villages housing between 200 and 500 people. Samoa's urban capital, Apia, on Upolu, has around 35,000 residents. The other 125,000 live in rural villages on both Upolu and Savaii. Within each village or *nu'u* people live in extended families known as *aiga.* Extended families vary in size but are much larger than the typical western nuclear family. Each extended family appoints a person as their chief; this chief is called a *matai*,[14] and is usually the family chief for life. *Matai* titles are hierarchical in that some titles hold more prestige than others. Some titles have only local significance; others confer powers over very large districts and even over whole islands.

The *matai* is charged with general responsibility for the care of the family, allocation of resources, is custodian of the family land and represents the family on the village council of chiefs known as the *fono.* The *fono* is by tradition sole executive and judicial authority in each village. *Matai* are also the only people eligible to stand in national elections, ensuring that national government in Samoa is made up entirely of *matai.* Until 1990 only *matai* were eligible to vote and although now there is universal suffrage for all men

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14 *Matai* titles are of two kinds, *Ali'i* and *Tulafale.* Titles that are linked to aristocratic lineage and can trace their origin back to the Samoan creator God [*Tagaloa-lagi*] are known as *Ali'i.* They are viewed as sacred. *Matai* with *Tulafale* titles render service and oratory skills on behalf of their *Ali'i* and are often referred to, by westerners, as "talking chiefs".

and women aged twenty-one and over it is still the case that only *matai* may stand for election.

The *matai* system is fairly democratic as a *matai* is the elected representative of his family and will in theory have their best interests at heart when consulting at a village *fono* meeting or when standing for national election. However, when one realizes that around 94% of all *matai* are male, the system does not appear to be democratic in relation to women's involvement in local or national government. Samoan Bahá'ís are part of their cultural milieu and, as such, Samoan Bahá'í families will appoint a *matai* as their family head and as their family representative on the village *fono:* not to do so would isolate Bahá'í families from village affairs. In fact without a *matai* they would have no one to represent their land claims or to protect their interests at a local or national level. In the history of Bahá'í persecution in villages, for example, it is often the Bahá'í *matai* who have successfully interceded and protected their fellow village Bahá'ís.

The decision making and governing body of a Bahá'í community at a national level is the national spiritual assembly. This institution is elected yearly by delegates who are themselves elected representatives of local Bahá'í communities. Annual local conventions are held, where the Bahá'ís of three or four villages or urban districts (the number varies depending on the size of Bahá'í community) come together with the primary purpose of voting for their delegate or delegates. These go forward and vote for the national spiritual assembly at a national convention. In 1999, there were 28 local conventions held for 49 communities in Samoa and 38 delegates were elected.

This process is theoretically democratic in nature as Bahá'ís the world over vote for national delegates from amongst the "most capable" men and women in their communities. In Samoa traditionally the 'most capable' people are perceived to be *matai* and therefore it is quite natural for the assembled Bahá'í communities to vote for the *matai* in their locality. As very few women are *matai* in the Samoan cultural context this spills over to the Bahá'í context and so in 1999 the majority of delegates were male *matai*. Only seven of the 38 delegates were women, four of these were actually *matai* and two were non-Samoan prominent women. The Samoan island of Savaii sent twenty-three delegates to the national convention, again the majority being *matai* and all were male. The vast majority of Samoan delegates therefore were, without doubt, *matai* and following the Samoan custom they were predominantly male. Subsequently the national spiritual assembly of Samoa for 1999 was an all male, predominantly *matai* assembly. Four members of the national assembly in fact hold prestigious *matai* titles.

Although this paper is primarily concerned with female involvement in national Bahá'í elections and institutions in Samoa, it is important to note that the electing of *matai* for both the position of delegate and national representative also precludes young talented non-*matai* men from being fully involved in national Bahá'í administration.

Women in Samoa are reasonably well represented on the local Bahá'í

institution, the local spiritual assembly. There are 49 local spiritual assemblies in Samoa and between 30 and 40% of the people serving on the assemblies are women. On the surface the 40% female involvement is very encouraging and is certainly a much higher ratio than the average 6% female representation on the Samoan village *fono*. However, this situation may only be temporary. At present, in most Samoan villages where Bahá'ís reside there will be an average of two to three extended Bahá'í families. When it comes to voting for a nine-member local spiritual assembly there will only be the potential for two to three *matai* to be voted for, leaving the other six members to be a mix of women and untitled men. In the future, should Bahá'í communities grow to say fifteen extended families at a village level, the potential is there for fifteen *matai* to be present and the further potential for nine of these to be voted for to serve on the local spiritual assembly. If this should transpire then at both a local and national level the decision making, governing bodies of the Samoan Bahá'í community may be predominantly *matai* and male at both the national and local level.

The situation is in some ways exacerbated by the very nature of Bahá'í elections where any form of electioneering is forbidden. Bahá'ís simply cannot make suggestions that certain women would make good delegates, local assembly members or national assembly members as this would violate the spiritual principle of allowing people to vote unhampered by any overt or covert pressure to vote for certain individuals. However, if the predominant Samoan paradigm of voting for *matai* is uncritically accepted then the situation in the Samoan Bahá'í communities will not reflect the Bahá'í principal of equality of men and women and this would be a tragedy for future generations of Samoan Bahá'ís. A male bias (even if it reflects current cultural practices) clearly is in contradiction to the fundamental principle of equality of men and women.

A Bahá'í paper presented in 1995 to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Equality, Development and Peace states that:

> The principle of equality has profound implications for the definition of the roles of women and men. It impinges on all aspects of human relations and is an integral element in domestic, economic, and community life. The application of this principle must necessarily entail a change in many traditional habits and practices. It rejects rigid role delineation, patterns of domination and arbitrary decision-making; calls for women to be welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour and allows for the evolution of the roles of men and women.
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> The development of women is considered vital to the full development of men and is seen as a prerequisite to peace. Hence, the members of the Bahá'í community, male and female alike, and its democratically elected administrative councils share a strong commitment to the practice of the principle of

> equality in their personal lives, in their families, and in all aspects of social and civic life.[15]

Within Bahá'í communities in Samoa women have influence in most aspects of Bahá'í community life, from services at the Samoan Bahá'í temple, to consultation in the regular community gatherings. Women are also represented on all committees within the Bahá'í community, such as the national media committee, the national children's committee, the national institute board and the national teaching committee. However final decisions on national Bahá'í matters are made by the national spiritual assembly and women are under-represented on this institution.

Effort is being made by Bahá'í counsellors and auxiliary board members operating in Samoa to encourage women in Bahá'í administrative elections.[16] The Bahá'í counsellors for the Pacific region show an awareness of the need for gender balance in Bahá'í administration in Samoa. This institution within Bahá'í communities may prove to be the main catalyst of change. Visiting counsellors suggested that their influence through "advice and encouragement" have the potential to alter the gender balance. They stated that they are making a conscious effort to appoint more female auxiliary board members and to encourage them in turn to appoint more female "assistants." This may have the effect of awakening an awareness within Bahá'í communities of the potential and capacity of the non-*matai* in their midst. They also hold workshops, seminars and discussion groups on the Bahá'í principle of equality of men and women and they are in constant liaison with the national spiritual assembly of Samoa.

During my fieldwork in Samoa a focus group was organized to critique an earlier version of this paper. Although the focus group had only nine participants, these participants were from diverse backgrounds, and all were either Samoan or had long term academic interests in Samoan culture. During the discussion that followed presentation of the paper some of the Samoan women spoke in defence of the role of women in Samoan society claiming that, although men make the decisions, women often influence the decisions of men. One of the participants stated that Samoans often describe men and women's roles in Samoa in terms of a fish. The men are the head of the fish and make the final decisions but the women are the tail of the fish and often influence the direction the fish should take. A Samoan national spiritual

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15 Janet Khan cited in *The greatness that might by theirs* (New York: Bahá'í International Community, 1995) 3.

16 These counsellors and auxiliary board members include both men and women and are appointed to encourage development within Bahá'í communities. There are eleven counsellors appointed for Australasia, six men and five women. These counsellors appoint auxiliary board members within their jurisdiction, who work at a national level, and they in turn appoint assistants to work at a local level. In Samoa auxiliary board members and their assistants are an even ratio of male and female. They are outside of the *matai* structure as they are appointed rather than elected.

assembly member captured the Bahá'í response to the fish analogy when he stated that men and women should be present in both the head and the tail of the fish. They should not operate within separate spheres of influence but should learn to swim together.

It is apparent from statistics gathered by the international Bahá'í community that progress is being made in other communities around the world in relation to female participation in Bahá'í administration. The most recent survey (1993-1994) of the status of women in the Bahá'í community internationally found that women make up 30% of the membership of national spiritual assemblies, and 40% of the membership of local spiritual assemblies. Moreover 47% per cent of those appointed to inspire and advise the community (auxiliary boards) at the sub-national and regional level are women.[17]

In the Samoan context, although women are well represented on local assemblies and on the appointed institutions of the Bahá'í community, in the process of election for the national spiritual assembly, because of the *matai* bias, they are not.

In Samoa it is not only local and national government structures that favour male decision making but also religious structures, including, as has been shown, the Bahá'í Faith. One of the interesting features of the Samoan Bahá'í paradigm is the ability of the *matai* social structure to influence a new structure. In theory there is the possibility for full female involvement in Bahá'í administration at both a local and national level but because of the power of the *faa matai* (Samoan chiefly system), to date this has not occurred. This demonstrates that the Bahá'í Faith in Samoa is integrated with the local culture – however, this integration with the local culture may in fact be detrimental to the full participation of women in the Bahá'í election process.

It is quite likely that the Samoan Bahá'í community is not unique in operating within a traditional structure of government and that other cultures also operate within highly gendered structures. It is therefore critical that a start is made to explore how Bahá'ís can support traditional culture while simultaneously promoting full equality of men and women.

The Bahá'í Faith upholds the right of indigenous[18] peoples to "develop and take pride in their own identity, culture and language." However, the Universal House of Justice only supports the view that the "cultural traditions of the people should be observed within Bahá'í communities as long as they are not contrary to the teachings."[19]

The Bahá'í and the UN definition of indigenous communities is "peoples

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17 Janet Khan cited in *The greatness that might by theirs* (New York: Bahá'í International Community, 1995) 81.

18 The Bahá'í definition of indigenous peoples is in line with the UN Economic and Social Councils.

19 Universal House of Justice, letters dated July 1995 and August 1977 to individual believers.

and nations which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems." This definition of indigenous people, however, inadequately describes the situation in Samoa, where the indigenous population is in the majority, and has maintained its own "cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems," despite being colonised prior to independence in 1962. From a Bahá'í perspective, no culture is static and the Bahá'í Faith promotes the ideal of culture evolving towards ever more appropriate forms of governance. The writings of the Bahá'í Faith are clear on the encouragement of indigenous minorities within Bahá'í communities. However, guidance is not so clear when the indigenous population is in the majority and still practice their traditional way of life. This paper has shown that the traditional *matai* system of government in Samoa works against women participating equally in national Bahá'í elections.