

Introduction

The relationship between the Baha'i Faith and scholarship in the work of those involved in Baha'i or Baha'i oriented study is a problem area that has remained fairly unthematized. Though there were two attempts at Cambridge to explore this relationship, I feel that we have not really penetrated to the heart of some of the provisional suggestions expressed in the two ethics and methodology seminars. Speaking for myself, I certainly experience the tension between my area of 'scholarship' and the complex phenomenon known as the Baha'i Faith. Now notice the presupposition expressed in the last sentence - it is a crucial one, and one I will unpack later: is the problem a function of the objective interface between scholarship (in my case philosophy and theology) and the Baha'i Faith, or does the problem lie in my as yet untutored and undeveloped consciousness? This is one of the issues, and I am grateful to Dr. Momen for providing the opportunity to reaffirm and develop some themes proposed in the Second Cambridge Seminar on Ethics and Methodology in October 1979. Needless to say this paper will be brief and programmatic.

The Depth Grammar Of Scholarship

Our concern as Baha'is about the relationship between scholarship and the Baha'i Faith is paralleled by a similar concern in the non-Baha'i religious community, especially in the Christian tradition since the Enlightenment period. To some degree then, what can be said about the Baha'i Faith and scholarly analysis will be equally relevant to those engaged in a similar problematic outside the Baha'i Faith.

Placing the problem, as I have done, in this wider context implies that the issues are to do with the structure of reality as such and not simply with methodology. This high sounding phrase refers to the description of the very nature of our most basic activities and their extra-linguistic context in which the scholarship/Baha'i Faith dichotomy is one of the many expressions. I want to affirm that the problem of scholarship is a function not simply of scholars intention (with its subsequent consequences), which Momen has ably

listed under the heading of 'Dangers of Baha'i Scholarship', but of scholarship as such; and this firstly, insofar as scholarship involves an abstract, distanced, refined syntactic framework in which a sentential structure presents a series of concepts to be entertained both by the scholar and the prospective reader, where these concepts somehow mirror what they are about. Secondly, insofar as scholarship can, though need not, become a process of comprehensive criticality knowing no authority other than its own forward movement. When scholarship operates like this, nothing is, so to speak, sacred except the omniscience of criticism. It must be admitted, however, that this is an idealization of the scholarly process. What usually happens is that some sector of experience is comprehensively criticised by someone operating with values and beliefs, which themselves have or will become the object of comprehensive criticism by another person. However, idealisation certainly brings out the point that a method (in this case rationality) can think itself to have no bounds. Thus the problem for the prospective Baha'i scholar is not simply something that occurs in his own head, so to speak, such as pride, impatience, intolerance or resentment etc. (c.f. Momen p.2). In fact there is no logical contradiction between a Baha'i scholar having those qualities just listed and that same scholar producing a fine piece of work. The problem is, as I have said, a function of the objective interface between scholarship and the Baha'i Faith. Furthermore, there are, I suggest two features to this one objective interface which correspond to the above two aspects.

Feature 1 comprises a problem in fact, where in fact means the way things are done now, though their being done in this way is not the only way.

Feature 2 comprises a problem in principle in which the very fabric of a state of affairs constrains and maintains the problem.

Feature 1 refers to the problem of relating a comprehensive criticality to a field in which authority plays an important role. There is, however, nothing in the nature of comprehensive criticality as far as I can see, to stop this authority becoming one of its premises, providing that this obviously complex relationship be adequately mapped. Feature 2 refers to the problem of relating a conceptual framework to something which is fundamentally non-conceptual or experiential. Here I can see no way out. There is something about the non-conceptual that makes descriptive language redundant. Perhaps that is why some philosophers who wanted to maintain the objectivity of religious discourse developed an evocative theory of religious language.

What I have outlined above has been historically expressed as the Faith/Reason dichotomy, where faith, traditionally understood, involves an act of the intellect firmly assenting to a truth given on authority and assisted by an act of the will. Applying this model to the Baha'i Faith: I assent to a proposition or propositions (expressed in the Baha'i writings or from a certified Baha'i source) which I myself cannot "see" (in an intellectual sense) but which I accept because of God's veracious testimony (located in the Central figures). Now traditionally, the intellect can only assent to that whose nature is 'unconcealed', so to speak, and which is clearly expressed, inferred and grounded. In the case of religious propositions this is obviously not the case, hence the intellect is prompted by the will, since it is the will that apprehends the (in this case) existential value of accepting that which it does not "know". Ever since the Enlightenment period scholars have tended to wed the desire for clarity with the above mentioned omniscience of criticism. The rise of the natural sciences in the 19th century has certainly reinforced this quest for clarity (though interestingly enough quantum mechanics involves a critique of the neutral 'look' - a close relation of clarity - at the world which many feel science yields). Grounding these developments is the perceptual process as the paradigm of knowledge. The rise of the social sciences, specifically the Sociology of Knowledge prompted by Marxist (and Mannheim's) analysis, brings to the foreground the social and historical location of our thoughts. The concept of Ideology is introduced as a description of those beliefs which somehow justify class privilege or an elite. Problematic though this is, the important issue is that society or rather societal forces are the focus of analysis rather than participant accounts. The two prongs of Natural and Social Science attempts to reinterpret religion and religious experience in their own particular fashion - both leading to a critique of religious authority. Philosophical analysis prompted by the success and robust approach of the Natural sciences also aids in the denuding of religious authority by systematically analysing religious utterances as cognitively meaningless (though allowing them to be expressions of the utterers emotive engagement with experience). Even the Wittgensteinian rehabilitation via the Sprachspiel concept makes religion simply one form of life among others.

My very cursory account of the Faith/Reason dichotomy (I have for example, not touched on the role of psychoanalysis nor existential analysis) seeks to highlight the reductive thrust of the development of the concept of rationality. The issue is, as far as I can see, this: if faith (as understood above) is based

upon what one considers to be God's veracious testimony then it is fairly easy given the development of comprehensive criticality grounding the natural and social sciences to reduce this decision and the referent of the decision to something else.

Now the scholar embarking on an analysis of the various aspects of the Baha'i Faith will be an heir to the methods and content of this comprehensively critical rationality where often an a priori assumption operates in which participant and text-based accounts are reduced to another supposedly clearer, more descriptive conceptuality. What happens is that reasons proffered in the participant/text-based accounts are reduced to causes whose access is dependant upon piercing through to another more general (thus accurate) and lucid syntax. One way in which the non-Baha'i academic community have overcome reductionism is simply to refuse validity to the a priori of the move and to appeal to a cultural relativism (c.f. Wittgenstein again, and others), where each system of thought and practice carries along with it its own internal logic. I do not want to enter here into an attempted critique of reductionism or cultural relativism but rather to suggest that there is a problem in scholarship and that this problem is a function of its critical mode in relation to an authority structure. This latter structure resists penetration and requires a certain measure of obedience from the scholar. Under the aegis of the Natural and Social sciences rationality and obedience have never been comfortable bed-fellows, and this because, as we have seen, rationality traditionally involves the acquisition of clear and distinct ideas of unconcealed essences or natures, whereas faith involves a decision in an area in which clear, 'unconcealed' and distinct ideas are not fully operative. The aligning of faith with mere belief¹ or belief-plus² and rationality with a matrix for fully justified knowledge-claims is another example of the traditional view. Part of Baha'i scholarship will involve a critique of this dichotomy; a repudiation of a historically conditioned conceptuality. Nevertheless it is a contemporary problem for the prospective Baha'i scholar, and as I said above, it is a problem in fact for there is nothing in the internal structure of rationality as such which precludes the role of an authority (transcendent or otherwise); only a peculiarly conceived rationality finds it abhorrent. Much more needs to be said about this area. Hopefully it may be pursued elsewhere.

Concept And Experience

The second problem of scholarship in relation to the Baha'i Faith involves what I believe to be a problem in principle. That is, it is not merely a problem of a method requiring methodological revision, nor the fuller utilization of what we could call an *underachieving* operation (i.e. widening the horizon of a narrowly directed intellectual and rational activity). I want to break this second problem area into some components.

1) There is an (irreducible?) dislocation between language (as a supply of words, constructions, set expressions etc. which form the matrix out of which sentences may be formed according to particular grammatical rules. Sentences are used to perform speech acts of which scholarship is one particular type.) and experience (this is a difficult area to unpack; I would say simply that language and speech are embedded in^a logically prior relationship to the world in which the former do not exhaust the possibilities of the latter. The saying/doing or saying/showing polarities only hint at what I mean by the dislocation. I do not doubt that language interpenetrates our life to the point of making experience possible but the more reflexive we become about experience the more we may lose touch with the actual enactment of experience).

2) Language operates on the whole via the use of concepts, where a concept is considered either as a mental representation of the nature of a 'thing' or as the capacity or skill to have ideas of a certain sort which we usually exercise verbally. Concepts seen as mental representations of an essence constitutes the dominant view from Plato to the 20th century. Concepts seen as capacities or dispositions to have certain ideas which we then exercise in a behavioural-verbal manner as responses to experience is the generally accepted view of contemporary philosophers and psychologists. In the older view concepts reflect the structural divisions of reality and are expressed in the form of words which are considered the names of concepts. The contemporary view on the other hand sees reality as the 'factual' backcloth in which we exercise the responsive capacities and skills - the divisions of reality delineated by concepts in the older view are not in the contemporary understanding so clearly cut. I suggest scholarship needs to completely move away from the older view.

3) Scholarship attempts to deal with its subject matter (for us the Baha'i Faith) via the use of 'lucid' concepts, that is, concepts denuded of their symbolic or evocative (even analogical) nature. The important pre-

supposition is that these concepts allow access to the nature of its subject matter in a better way than any other type of discourse e.g. participant or textual accounts.

Given this, if the Baha'i Faith is primarily a therapy, a means for the possibilities of moral and spiritual transformation (with significant social consequences), then a representation in language (and thought) does not capture the intentional significance of the Faith. Why? Because, I suggest religion (as the deepest example of the concept/experience dichotomy) is grounded in this experiential and non-conceptual dimension; religion requires enactment rather than varying degrees of analysis. Surely the Baha'i Faith is oriented towards the development of particular kinds of people rather than enunciators of principles. I am certainly ^{not} denying the need for conceptual analysis, but we must be aware of its irreducible limits with respect to a phenomenon that is primarily experiential. Thus, scholarship as conceptual analysis exemplifies the basic problem that all language shares concerning its relation to experience-as-enactment. Prospective scholars must be aware of this dislocation and also aware of the nature of the raw-material of its methodology i.e. concepts. I must emphasize that I am in way disparaging the role of conceptual analysis - it is a necessary feature of our linguistic experience as communicators. If we lacked concepts we would be what some philosophers call 'abandoned' to sensory experience. Unable to adopt a stance with regard to the manifold of sensory data, particularity and singularity would 'exhaust' our consciousness. By forming concepts we split experience into subject and object. The question for scholars is this: is this subject-object model adequate to understanding religion?

My highlighting of the Faith/Reason and Concept/Experience polarities implies that the primary problem for the Baha'i scholar is cognitive and not simply affective or moral, though we must not underestimate the danger of the latter. Thus one way of combatting the danger of scholarship is to be aware of a) its traditional scope and method and b) its raw-materials. This goes some way to grounding what I consider the essential question for every prospective Baha'i scholar, namely: what kind of truth-claim does the Baha'i Faith make? If we keep this question as a heuristic structure conditioning our scholarship, whatever its subject matter, then I believe we will be doing justice not only to the impact the Baha'i Faith makes upon our lives but also to the non-Baha'i academic community. This latter community like the curate's egg is good in parts (and unlike the curate's egg in that it is getting better).

Moreover, one does not have to be a reductionist subscribing to a positivist philosophy to be an accredited member of this academic community.

I have only cursorily treated a number of ideas. Much needs to be said, for example, about the conceptual/experience polarity. Is there a language which cuts through or transcends this schema, or must language (specifically religious) continuously dramatize the limits of our understanding beyond which there is no progress except via a total life reorientation? We may also question the traditional view of faith presented above which tends to see the act of faith as an extrinsic relationship between a person and a proposition or set of propositions, hanging somewhere between tentative opinion or mere belief and knowledge. The whole structure needs re-working and a more experientially oriented understanding of faith developed. Many philosophers and theologians working outside of Baha'i parameters have done just this - we should certainly work with them. Another question which requires expansion - what is the Baha'i understanding of the scope and role of rationality? Abdu'l Baha presupposing the difference between the essence and existence of a 'thing' is optimistic that we can 'reach' to the existence of a Transcendent cause via a series of processes in thought. Whether this 'reach' is real or representational, that is, purely conceptual, is an interesting point for discussion concerning not only the scope of rationality but the mediating nature of concepts.

In sum: Scholarship or rather the method and raw-material of scholarship holds certain problems for those engaged in academic work on the Baha'i Faith. The problems are objectively grounded in the method and its raw-materials and are not a function of the scholar's intentions. The traditional quest for clear, distinct ideas related by equally clear and distinct inferences gave rise to a hierarchical conception of epistemological claims which grounded the rational method. In a sense, traditional accounts of faith capitulated to this, making faith a close relative of belief, and this because of the strong volitional element in the act of faith. However, there is more to life and hence rationality than logical entailment. The latter does not exhaust the content of human experience, thus prospective Baha'i scholars should disinherit these traditional coordinates in a rational fashion.

Scholarship involves the relating of sentences to a particular subject matter. Such sentences are further related to various states of affairs, which generally includes empirical and non-empirical states of affairs, meanings, events, etc. Now scholarship is not just speaking about and retrieving

these states of affairs, meanings, events, etc. It is a peculiar refined form of speaking which attempts to over-come problems inherent, not only in the states of affairs etc. themselves but also in other ways of speaking e.g. common-sense discourse and participant/textual accounts. The concept as representation supposedly improves upon the (for example) symbol, bringing about a better understanding of that which participant/textual discourse covers up. The presupposition, noted above, is that concepts allow better access to the subject matter. I am certainly not criticizing concepts per se. They are important for reasons stated earlier. However, concepts do not exhaust the experiential nature of enacting of which religion is the most important example. The map is not the territory. As I have said earlier, the Baha'i Faith is primarily a system that requires enacting, demands performance and as such contains a basic non-conceptual component. An interesting area of analysis which requires mapping is between language (concepts), that is, both scholars' and those presuppositions found in the Baha'i holy texts, and experience. Work also needs doing on exactly where in the Faith the non-conceptual element lies and how this borders on the conceptual.

We require a theoretical grounding of the nature of scholarship centering on the two structures presented above, namely rational method and the concept. The former may be revised and its limits noticed, whereas the latter is a problem in principle for the scholar.

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Footnotes

1. By mere belief I refer to what some contemporary philosophers have called mere acceptance, whether of a proposition or of a person (belief in a person, however, is a special case which I will not comment further on). Here 'X believes that -p' involves 'X' being under the impression 'that -p' with the unreasoned absence of dissent. Mere belief also emphasises the psychological component involved in the concept, where the psychological state of a person is the focus of attention rather than the referent of the state.
 2. Belief-plus refers not just to the psychological state but to what is called the doxastic component. Here X believes that -p because there is adequate evidence for p. Traditionally understood belief is an assent to something where the evidence is not adequate enough for a knowledge claim concerning the same something. Neither mere belief nor belief-plus exhaust the meaning of religious faith.
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