

DR. MACEOIN'S 'PROBLEMS OF SCHOLARSHIP..': SOME THOUGHTS.

Dr. Denis MacEoin is well known in Baha'i circles as an academic possessed of a very considerable knowledge of the Babi-Baha'i movements. Without a doubt much can be learned from his writings in this area whether or not one agrees with his conclusions. His sometimes controversial views should prompt Baha'i intellectuals, whether engaged in Baha'i studies from an academic or theological standpoint, to think deeply about methodological, historical, doctrinal and other issues. Having resigned from the Baha'i movement a few years ago his writings are naturally coloured— as he himself admits—by a rejection of Baha'i perspectives and institutions as he has understood and experienced them. At times his language is forceful and his orientation decidedly non-empathetic. Various readers of his 'Problems of scholarship..' will probably dismiss his views as extreme or coloured by a 'released from the watch-tower' bias despite his attempt to be objective. However his response to the Yerrinbool report be evaluated from a faith standpoint, the fact remains that he raises issues which Baha'is who aspire to academic integrity cannot afford to pass over in silence. It might in fact be said that Babi-Baha'i studies will not progress and mature unless honest criticisms are taken seriously and responded to. Indeed, the failure of Baha'i intellectuals to respond to or engage in dialogue with critics and to discuss problems of Baha'i scholarship has undoubtedly contributed to the withdrawal from Baha'i membership of a growing number of Baha'i intellectuals.

The time will surely come when critical academic evaluations of the Babi-Baha'i movements will be read by intellectuals and others who wish to know what the Babi-Baha'i movements are and what they teach or have to offer. If Baha'i intellectuals continue to ignore problematic issues they will prove unable to respond to academic critics. They will be seen to be out of touch and unable to engage in informed and meaningful dialogue. Baha'is, in other words, will be forced to respond to academic and critical presentations of their faith and be ill prepared to respond apologetically or in any other way unless it is realized that there are many issues in need of honest and open-minded debate. The development of an informed and honest Baha'i apologetic is essential. Apologetic it might be added here, can only be taken seriously today if it is honest, sincere and academically informed.

In one of his letters Shoghi Effendi predicted that "Baha'i scholars" would appear who would lend a "unique support" to their Faith. This "unique support" may well be in the field of apologetic. But where are the Baha'i apologists who are ready to grapple with controversial issues?

Baha'i intellectuals today face issues which did not confront religious apologists of the past who lived in an age when historico-critical methodologies were unknown. They will have to grapple with problems unknown to such learned Baha'i apologists as Mirza Abu al-Fadl Gulpaygani (1844-1914) who knew nothing of the difficulties raised by the modern scholarly analysis of religion or of the application of critical tools to the study of the Bible, Qur'an and Babi-Baha'i writings. Whether or not Baha'is admit the validity of such modern scholarly methodologies and the findings resulting from their application, the fact is that they will be compelled to respond to them. Baha'i apologetic of the near future will need to be academically informed in order to make an effective response to contemporary scholarly critics. For this reason alone the fostering of 'Baha'i scholarship' is of great importance.

Having made something of a plea for the opening of a new era of honesty in Baha'i apologetic—which need not be naive theology—I set down a few notes on some of the issues raised by Dr. MacEoin.

Baha'i anti-intellectualism.

Dr. MacEoin's critique of the strong contrast drawn in the Yerrinbool report between Baha'i and other scholars is undoubtedly justified. There are indeed countless humble and many deeply religious academics who do not belong to the Baha'i movement. He reminds us that the Baha'i writings do not encourage anti-intellectualism. It is sad that this prejudice exists within certain Baha'i communities when both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha repeatedly underlined the importance of learning and respect for the learned.

It is argued by Dr. MacEoin that Baha'i 'anti-intellectualism' is rooted in the social and cultural position of the Baha'i cause as a sect type-movement. Baha'is supposedly, as self-conscious members of a redeemed 'contra-culture', reject the intellectual values of a 'decadent society'. While there may be some truth in this hypothesis in connection with certain contemporary western Baha'i communities which have something of a sectarian 'contra-culture' consciousness, to hold that Baha'i 'anti-intellectualism' is rooted in such an exclusivist world view is to be too clear cut.

Baha'is, over the last century or so, have had various attitudes towards intellectualism and the values of the world whether secular or religious. They have seldom been averse to appropriating the intellectual discoveries of modern thinkers and have generally had a high regard for the findings of modern science. Many early western Baha'is, far from retreating into an exclusivist Baha'i 'contra-culture' saw their faith as the 'spirit of the age'. By no means all Baha'is are today anti-intellectualist in the sense of their imagining that modern 'non-Baha'i' thinkers are all hopelessly lost. Baha'i anti-intellectualism is not as rampant or as widespread as Dr. MacEoin seems to believe. Where Baha'i anti-intellectualism exists it is seldom thoroughgoing since scholarship and intellectuality are not seen as inherently evil or destructive.

It is possible to argue that a good deal of contemporary Baha'i 'anti-intellectualism' is not rooted in a sectarian contra-culture consciousness but relates to a reserved attitude towards controversial intellectuals within the Baha'i community. Many Baha'is, in other words, are fearful that Baha'i intellectuals will destroy faith and come to exhibit 'anti-intellectualist' tendencies. The desire to maintain 'unity' has led to a form of 'anti-disunity' expressed as 'anti-critical scholarship'. That this 'anti-scholarship' attitude exists is not perhaps surprising, sad though it is. One cannot expect any religion to promote the critical study of its history and teachings. Religionists, be they Christians, Muslims or Baha'is, view the findings of modern scholarship with suspicion. After all, a religion is not a God founded university existing for the purpose of championing academicism. What Dr. MacEoin sees as Baha'i 'anti-intellectualism' is not essentially different from that reserve held by many Christians and Muslims towards the critical study of religion. This at least, might be said to account for some manifestations of Baha'i 'anti-intellectualism'. Many Baha'is, it might also be argued, are less radically 'anti-intellectualist' than a good many Christians or Muslims.

As noted above academics and intellectuals within the Baha'i community at present are widely viewed with suspicion out of fear that they will create disunity or destroy faith. The aims of Baha'i intellectuals are widely misunderstood. Though one cannot perhaps expect Baha'i institutions to foster critical scholarship (as opposed to faith informed 'theology') it is sad that scholarship appears to many to be dangerous to faith--as Dr. MacEoin points out scholarship is not anti-faith. The tension which creates anti-intellectualism within the Baha'i community has to some extent been brought about by Baha'i intellectuals who see their religion as a kind of quasi-religious academic institution and expect the mass of Baha'is to have the capacity to accept critical analyses of their faith. Baha'i intellectuals who see their task as the academic initiation of the mass of 'ignorant' Baha'is are bound to be coolly received and misunderstood. The findings of the Baha'i scholar may well be of great importance but for them to be presented to

the generality of Baha'is would, at present, be comparable to a Biblical scholar giving a sermon on Bultmanian lines to a fundamentalist congregation. Most Baha'is have little or no understanding of modern scholarship and Baha'i intellectuals sometimes expect too much of them. The clash between the overzealous Baha'i intellectual and the overzealous Baha'i charismatic has created a tension which has led to anti-intellectualism within the Baha'i community. This tension needs to be resolved. Perhaps the generality of Baha'is need to be educated more adequately and Baha'i intellectuals need to be reminded that they belong to a religion and not a God-founded university.

Dr. MacEoin's remarks about the arrogance and anti-intellectualism which has crept into certain Baha'i communities highlights the need for Baha'is to review the quality of their intellectual life. Have, Baha'is might do well to ask themselves, we succumbed to that subtle secularization or introversion that draws interest away from intellectual and religious dimensions of faith into the mechanics of administrative and missionary efficiency? The role and relationships between Baha'i intellectuals and Baha'i institutions needs to be reviewed—otherwise, I fear, mutual disrespect will cause the collapse of the firmament of Baha'i intellectual life.

#### Methodology and the Baha'i-non-Baha'i dichotomy.

Dr. MacEoin notes the view that scholars who are Baha'is should undertake their researches in the light of and in conformity with the "Revelation of Baha'u'llah". He reminds us of what is meant by academic research and highlights the fact that the majority of Baha'is are unaware of the distinction between academic research and faith oriented theological studies.

Once again Dr. MacEoin seems to think that a religion such as the Baha'i movement should promote a critical academic methodology. That Baha'i institutions invite Baha'i intellectuals to embark upon essentially apologetic or theological endeavour is to be expected. As previously indicated, religion does not exist for the redemption of academic standards. Great spiritual thinkers, it seems to me, are more concerned with spiritual perspectives than scientific, historical or doctrinal facts. It is obvious for example, that 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi in their Traveller's Narrative and God Passes By were less concerned with historical accuracy than with presenting a spiritually edifying Baha'i historical perspective. Such is the prerogative of religious teachers whose concerns are not those of academics. What an academic might see as the distortion or suppression of facts the religious thinker can view as the meaningful recreation of the concrete designed to foster or encourage faith. Though I am fully conscious of the limitations of this line of argument, there is, I think some truth in it. Dr. MacEoin expects Baha'i institutions to make statements about scholarship such as might be made by a council of academics. This is to expect what is incompatible with Baha'i teaching which calls believers to engage in apologetic.

Dr. MacEoin is quite right in pointing out that there are problems raised by the proposal that Baha'is should undertake academic research in the light of the "Revelation of Baha'u'llah". Much as the believing academic might gain insights of value from his faith oriented empathy towards the 'object' of his study he cannot allow his faith to determine the nature of the 'object' of his study. Academic research in itself is neither 'faith affirming' nor 'faith negating'.

Since Baha'i institutions call Baha'i intellectuals to embark on an essentially apologetic task the question arises as to whether the academic study of the Baha'i movement is legitimate for Baha'i believers. Is it, in other words, possible for Baha'is to 'bracket faith' and utilize critical methodologies which might lead to findings incompatible with mainstream Baha'i perspectives? This question, it seems to me, has not been squarely faced by Baha'i intellectuals. I do not propose to attempt to answer it here though the bare outline of my thoughts is as follows.

Firstly, it must be realised that academic study differs from 'theology' in that 'theology' is essentially faith oriented and academic study is neither faith oriented nor anti-faith oriented. —the academic student of religion at least attempts to attain this 'objectivity'. Because academic study does not aim to destroy faith it can be argued that it is theologically legitimate. The findings or hypotheses resulting from the historico-critical study of religion may tend to either validate or challenge faith perspectives. It is for the religious apologist or theologian to evaluate academic theories in the light of faith; in this respect, the mature theologian should not ignore the negative academic hypotheses. The theological grappling with problematic issues raised by academics often leads to great insights. A faith which cannot cope with the findings of critical scholars is not likely to command much respect today.

The religious believer who engages in academic research might operate as follows:-

#### Stage 1.

Here faith is controlled or 'bracketed' such that real openmindedness and honesty prevent the fixed crystallization of Baha'i or other religious perspectives— this does not mean the abandonment of faith which may in fact play a significant quasi-methodological role in allowing that balanced empathy to emerge which leads to insight. All data, whether seemingly 'positive' or 'negative' must be taken into consideration. Critical methodologies must be utilized and honest conclusions drawn, whether or not they tend to confirm or challenge faith perspectives.

#### Stage 2.

The believing academic will undoubtedly desire to evaluate the results of his/her critical researches in the light of faith or indulge in 'theology' ( this process having been 'bracketed' at 'stage 1' ). In so doing the believer must not, if he/she wishes to be honest, ignore problematic issues and must be ready to admit, if necessary, that there are 'fundamental contradictions' between faith perspectives and honest critical theories. Faith problems may result but faith must be ready to cope with all manner of problematic issues.

It might also be noted here that the believer, at 'stage 1' ( when indulging in academic research ) must, paradoxically, control not only faith perspectives but also possibly distortive anti-faith perspectives. In other words there is a certain danger in the believer entertaining distortive anti-faith perspectives which may arise out of a desire to create a psychological predisposition towards 'objectivity'. Such paradoxical anti-faith perspectives in the believer which go beyond honest openmindedness and the balanced control of faith can have an adverse effect on both academic research and on faith. The believing academic must understand that no methodology will enable presuppositions to be completely controlled. Methodologies provide a framework which may contribute to 'objectivity' but cannot bequeath academic objectivity or scholarly insight in some magical way.

#### Contradictions and suppression.

Dr. MacEoin refers to 'fundamental contradictions' which the researcher may find within the Baha'i writings. This, as indicated above, is to be expected. Religion is not exactly a clear cut body of logical axioms or historical facts. Shoghi Effendi himself, it is of interest to note, expressed the view that there are points within the Baha'i teachings that are 'poles apart' (letter written on his behalf dated July 5th 1949 ). There are undoubted differences of emphasis, sometimes marked, within the writings of Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi which might be seen by academics as 'fundamental contradictions'. Such 'fundamental contradictions' need to be identified and discussed in detail by Baha'i apologists before Baha'is themselves can be accused of believing in a movement that harbours 'fundamental contradictions'. Faith, it must also be remembered, is not exactly grounded in doctrinal consistency or a monolithic historical perspective.

For Dr. MacEoin it appears to be illegitimate for religious thinkers to "suppress" problematic historical and other facts as might be dictated by wisdom. For the academic engaging in research such "suppression" is certainly out of place but within a religious community the application of such "wisdom" has an un doubted role to play. That Shoghi Effendi toned down the at times fanatical 'Shi'iosity' of the early Babis when presenting a Baha'i perspective of early Babism to western readers cannot be denied. But as he was writing as the Guardian of a religious community and not an academic it might be said to be mistaken to accuse him of "suppression". He was surely conscious of the fact that an undiluted presentation of Babi history might confound the faith of western Baha'is who knew just about nothing of 19th century Iran or the Shi'i milieu in which the Babi movement had its birth. Shoghi Effendi was doubtless also fully aware of the fact that Baha'i historians of the future would present many aspects of Babi-Baha'i history in a more detailed and more matter of fact manner. In a number of his letters he refers to such future endeavours of Baha'i historians, at times underlining the provisional nature of his own historical writing-- an area in which he did not (contrary to popular Baha'i opinion) claim infallibility. It might also be pointed out here that Shoghi Effendi in his historical writings does make use of sources penned by 'covenant breakers' who sometimes provide historical data of great importance. This fact should not be overlooked by Baha'i historians.

Dr. MacEoin accuses Baha'is of accepting the results of historical criticism when it suits them. Again there is undoubtedly truth in this. It is only natural for theologically oriented religionists or religious apologists to make a selective use of the findings of critical scholarship. Hopefully however, mature Baha'i apologists will attempt to grapple theologically with the problems raised by the findings of critical scholarship which do not seem to support Baha'i perspectives.

In Dr. MacEoin's opinion there is no such thing as 'Christian', 'Islamic' or 'Baha'i' science, etc., but only 'good' and 'bad' science, etc. He denies the possibility that religious values may legitimately be used to 'reinterpret' scientific or other data. In effect Dr. MacEoin rules theology out of court. For him the theological evaluation of scientific and human knowledge has no place. This, at least, is the logical outcome of his monolithic academicism. It is of course true that there is ultimately only 'good' or 'bad' science but that theology has something to say about the religious dimension of scientific discoveries must be recognized. There may not be a 'Muslim science' or a 'Baha'i science' but that Muslims and Baha'is have something to say about scientific findings in the light of their beliefs and world view is not in itself a bad thing. Science is not concerned with theology but it is not illegitimate for theologians to concern themselves with the theological interpretation of scientific discoveries. Perhaps Dr. MacEoin would agree with this; his line of argument is not entirely clear to me.

#### Supernatural knowledge and human knowledge.

Baha'is, like many Jews, Christians and Muslims, believe in divine guidance through messengers sent by God. They believe that there is a supernatural source of knowledge and that this knowledge was communicated by Baha'u'llah, and infallibly interpreted by Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. Baha'i scripture while it does not dismiss human avenues to knowledge upholds the principle that there are ultimate sources of truth; though absolute truth cannot be attained. Dr. MacEoin criticises these Baha'i beliefs or the notion that there are supernatural sources of knowledge. He quotes Popper's brilliant but rather clear-cut critique of a simplistic-ally stated religious epistemological stance as if it corresponds with the Baha'i position--which has yet to be worked out.

While Baha'is believe in ultimate sources of knowledge this does not at all invalidate human approaches and avenues to knowledge. Content criticism is not necessarily ruled out for Baha'is nor does the Baha'i movement seek to perpetuate a naive 'Yes'-'No' approach to truth. An oft repeated Baha'i principle is that religious truth is

not absolute but relative to human needs and capacities. Baha'is do not claim to be in possession of the absolute fulness of truth. The Baha'i principle of 'unity in diversity' and the 'absolute right' of the individual to express his views (refer, Principles of Baha'i Administration, pp. 24-5) should guard against that totalitarianism which results from a simplistic epistemological stance born of a rigid belief in supernatural sources of knowledge—quite rightly criticised by Popper.

A passage from Baha'u'llah's Kitāb-i Iqān is quoted by Dr. MacEoin as if it expresses Baha'i epistemology in a nutshell. Far from it. Baha'u'llah was evidently commenting on Shi'ite obscurantism in the light of his call to Muslims to identify spiritually with the Bābī movement. There is also a danger in taking one or two Baha'i texts which seem epistemologically conservative and ignoring others. The following words of Abdu'l-Baha may be said to comment on the texts noted by Dr. MacEoin and to put them in a rather different light: "If thou wishest the divine knowledge and recognition, purify thy heart from all beside God, be wholly attracted to the ideal beloved One; search for and choose Him and apply thyself to rational and authoratative arguments. For arguments are a guide to the path and by this the heart will be turned unto the Sun of Truth. And when the heart is turned unto the Sun, then the eye will be opened and will recognise the Sun through the Sun itself. Then man will be in no need of arguments (or proofs), for the Sun is altogether independent, and absolute independence is in need of nothing, and proofs are one of the things of which absolute independence has no need. Be not like Thomas; be thou like Peter.." (Baha'i World Faith, p. 383-4). Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha in the texts mentioned above are it appears, calling the spiritual seeker to a faith which recognises that there are paths to spirituality which are independent of ratiocination or which pass beyond the sphere of intellectual inquiry. Such however, does not mean that rational argument or intellectual enquiry has no place in a Baha'i epistemology. Abdu'l-Baha indeed, indicates that unfettered rational enquiry leads to spiritual identification with the messenger of God. While Babi-Baha'i writings give great importance to Sufi-type mystic avenues to knowledge and to mystic states which transcend reason, this does not mean that blind faith rules or that rational argument has no place.

#### Authoritarianism

Dr. MacEoin implies that Baha'is attempt to stultify open debate and innovative thinking in the light of their alleged 'total control of all publications'. It is to be admitted that many Baha'is at present have something of an over rigid attitude towards creative thinkers of an academic inclination. The principle of Baha'i review of publications designed to ensure doctrinal accuracy can be carried to extremes in the light of the fact that there is still much to be learned about Baha'i teachings and Baha'i history, etc. Baha'i reviewers might do well to bear in mind the following passage from Shoghi Effendi's writings: "There are many who have some superficial idea of what the Cause stands for.. There is no limit to the study of the Cause. The more we read the Writings, the more truths we can find in them, the more we will see that our previous notions were erroneous" (Principles of Baha'i Administration, p. 11).

It must also be borne in mind that academic Baha'i writing is in its infancy. It is not entirely the control of publications that stultifies creative thinking but the fact that creative thinkers who are theologically aware are few and far between. For the last ten years or so there has been something of a Baha'i intellectual crisis. Academically aware Baha'i intellectuals have begun to appear within the Baha'i community. The Baha'i community is not quite sure how to cope with them or channel their energies. Mistakes have been made out of an over-rigid sense of orthodoxy.

Excommunication, Dr. MacEoin contends, is the penalty for intellectual and moral dissent within the Baha'i community. He does not spell out what he means by dissent though intellectual non-conformity and moral failing does not lead to excommunication. Official excommunication within the Baha'i community, if I understand it correctly, is only the lot of those who 'break the Baha'i covenant' or exert a concerted effort to destroy faith while themselves denying fundamental aspects of that faith. Academics, it might be argued in this connection, should never be excommunicated as a result of their researches since academic study, as I have argued, is not intended to destroy faith. I know of no academic who has ever been excommunicated from the Baha'i community for intellectual dissent. A number of Baha'i intellectuals have however, it must be admitted, chosen to resign their Baha'i membership in the light of their inability to work within the confines of a religious system which propagates certain doctrinal and other norms. A distinction should also be made, when the question of excommunication is raised, between intellectual non-conformity and obvious "heresy".

Baha'i bodies or individuals which have to do with the 'protection of the faith' are seen by Dr. MacEoin as primarily concerned with the suppression and isolation of dissent. This is a rather harsh and clear-cut judgement. Those responsible for the 'protection of the faith' are-- or should be-- as much concerned with fostering mature spirituality as with counselling individuals who disrupt Baha'i community life.

#### Baha'i publications and review

Dr. MacEoin believes that no 'single work of scholarship of any merit whatsoever' has ever been-- or is likely to be-- published within the confines of the Baha'i system. All Baha'i literature appears to him to be so much 'mindless pap'.

While it is true that little academic Baha'i writing has as yet been published by Baha'i publishing trusts it must not be forgotten-- Dr. MacEoin plays this down-- that very, very few Baha'is have had any academic training in the field of religious or oriental studies that such writing might be published. Baha'i academic writing is only just beginning to emerge. Dr. MacEoin exalts academic writing to such a degree that all Baha'i apologetic and theologically oriented writing is seen as so much garbage. Is this judgement as potentially authoritarian or intellectually totalitarian as the supposed Baha'i radical censorship system?

Dr. MacEoin judges such classic Baha'i apologists as Gulpaygani by modern academic standards. It must be borne in mind however that Gulpaygani wrote in an Islamo-Baha'i intellectual universe which rendered him hardly if at all conscious of modern academic standards and norms. Writing off the output of such Baha'i apologists as Gulpaygani as non-academic pap is in a sense comparable to writing off the treatises of the Church Fathers because they do not conform to the high standards of modern Biblical scholarship.

It is obvious that modern Baha'i writing is not as academically or intellectually mature as the writings of modern Christian scholars. The latter have had the time, finances and maturity to educate themselves in the use of modern critical tools. Baha'i institutes of higher learning do not, as yet, exist. There are no Baha'i universities where Baha'is are trained in the use of modern critical tools and methodologies.

In the estimation of Dr. MacEoin the poor standard of Baha'i writing is attributable to Baha'i review processes and the preference of the Baha'i administrative institutions for the 'unexceptionable and bland'. Though there is truth in this judgement it is again an overstatement. There are undoubtedly 'overprotective' reviewers who have prevented the publication of works and essays of great merit though the actual Baha'i output of academically informed creative writing is, as implied above, very small. The Baha'i review process will undoubtedly mature as Baha'i intellectual life matures. Works which 'overprotective' reviewers might not deem fit for publication now may well, quite shortly, be seen in another light. Baha'i review is not a static phenomenon but, it seems to me, will mature and become more openminded as Baha'i understanding develops.

### The Search after truth

Dr. MacEoin asserts that when closely examined the Baha'i writings neither really teach nor encourage an 'unfettered search after truth'. He interprets the exhortation to search after truth as an essentially pre-conversion endeavour. While it is true that many texts underline the pre-conversion necessity of a search for truth Dr. MacEoin plays down the undoubted existence of Baha'i texts that underline the importance of post-conversion seeking, 'deepening' and intellectual progress. Becoming a Baha'i is not an automatic grasping of the fulness of truth for Baha'is believe that intellectual and spiritual progress is an eternal or unending process. Intellectual honesty and openmindedness should be as important for Baha'is after conversion as it presumably was before.

### Infallibility and reason

The Baha'i notion of revelation does not, in Dr. MacEoin's opinion, admit of a necessary balance between 'faith' and 'reason' since 'revelation' has the 'final say'. It is not, I would suggest, quite as simple as this despite the fact that 'revelation' in Baha'i theology does have the 'final say'. Revelation to have the 'final say' must be understood by human reason. This since an 'infallible' or 'revealed' statement is only infallible if reasonably grasped and understood. Then also, the statement that 'revelation' has the final say must be balanced by the Baha'i assertion that 'revelation' is not incompatible with human reason. That Baha'u'llah exhorted Baha'is to accept whatever the 'Manifestation of God' says without any 'why' or 'wherefore' cannot be said to preclude the rational investigation of the content of 'revelation' not infrequently advised in Baha'i writings. The issue of the "two Davids" mentioned by Dr. MacEoin awaits detailed analysis in the light perhaps of the fact that the Bab and Baha'u'llah sometimes wrote in accordance with an oriental chronological scheme that differs from that generally accepted by modern historians-- there is a letter of 'Abdu'l-Baha on this subject as well as (at least one) by Shoghi Effendi (cf. Dawn of a New Day. pp. 76-7). That 'Abdu'l-Baha asserted that whatever he said as 'Center of the Covenant' is correct is quite true but the seeming authoritarianism implied by this statement must not be taken out of context. Made at a time when the American Baha'i community was in grave danger of falling apart and being disturbed by the activities and assertions of such 'covenant breakers' as the partisans of Mirza Muhammad 'Ali ('Abdu'l-Baha's half-brother and rival claimant) it does not rule out individual Baha'i intellectual creativity. Shoghi Effendi did not set out to make it difficult for others to disagree with him by overstepping the limits of the sphere of his infallibility though exactly what "confined to matters which are strictly related to the [Baha'i] Cause and interpretations of the teachings" means has yet to be clarified even though it is clear that Shoghi Effendi was not infallible in subjects such as economics and science (refer, letters of Shoghi Effendi quoted in a letter of the Universal House of Justice to Mr. Richard Grieser dated July 25th 1974--see below). Dr. MacEoin exaggerates, by quoting select texts, the authoritarianism implicit in a religious movement that accepts revelation and has a philosophy of the covenant which attributes infallibility to its central figures. Theologically things are more flexible than Dr. MacEoin implies though, as he points out, in practice a greater flexibility is desirable.

### Questioning Baha'i notables

Dr. MacEoin implies that it is practically a crime to publically question a Baha'i notable; that such a 'questioner' brings on himself the 'greatest opprobium'. This he thinks illustrates the elevation of authoritarianism over the freedom to seek the truth within the Baha'i community. Much in this connection though depends on the attitude of the questioner and the kind of question asked. Baha'i notables-- or some of them-- are naturally unhappy about being publically asked embarrassing or controversial questions. They are human as are those Baha'is who zealously over react to anyone who has the courage to be controversial--which is not always a bad thing. Dr. MacEoin over states his case though more honesty and freedom in Baha'i consultation would undoubtedly be a good thing.



### Āvārīh's history.

Reference is made by Dr. MacEoin to <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Husayn Āyatī, Āvārīh's al-Kawākib al-Durriya, a two volume history of the Babi-Baha'i movements up until the passing of <sup>c</sup>Abdu'l-Bahā in 1921 which was first published in Cairo in 1923-4. This history was commissioned by <sup>c</sup>Abdu'l-Bahā and highly praised, as Dr. MacEoin notes, by Shoghi Effendi. In the early 1920's Āvārīh was called from Iran to Haifa and from there sent to Europe to strengthen the Baha'i believers (cf. Star of the West, 13/12, p. 329) but came himself to leave the movement after his return to Iran and to engage in anti-Baha'i activities. He wrote a lengthy book entitled Kashf al-Hiyāl (The Unveiling of Deception, 7th Ed., 2 Vols., Tehran 1340.A.H.) which purports to expose Baha'i corruption and in which Āvārīh himself declares his al-Kawākib al-Durriya to be of little or no value (cf. Miller, The Baha'i Faith, p. 275). Shoghi Effendi eventually excommunicated him and referred to him as a "shameless apostate" (refer, Baha'i News, No. 21, pp. 5-6, No. 162, p. 8., God Passes By, p. 327). Āvārīh's anti-Baha'i writings, like those of most oriental 'covenant breakers', are not only bitter but decidedly unbalanced. This in no way however, signifies that his al-Kawākib al-Durriya should neither be read nor republished by Baha'is. His defection has not mysteriously rendered his history of no value. Baha'is are not forbidden to read the writings of apostates written after their defection and are certainly not forbidden to republish the sometimes very valuable books written by apostates before their defection.

Dr. MacEoin assumes that the fact that Āvārīh's history has not been republished is the result of the Baha'i attitude towards Āvārīh himself. While there may be some truth in this it must not be forgotten that a great many books written by Baha'is who did not defect have not been republished. The history of Baha'i publications shows that there have been many instances in which highly important books have come to be practically forgotten. On the whole Baha'i publishing trusts—partly through financial considerations and government restrictions as well as the continual evolution of the Baha'i community—have not followed a consistent policy of republishing even Baha'i scriptural texts. Dr. MacEoin reads too much into the fact that Āvārīh's history has not been republished—which has nothing to do with the Baha'i ideal of an unfettered search after truth.

### The understanding of the Baha'i movement.

Are only Baha'is capable of understanding and presenting their faith adequately? This question is raised by Dr. MacEoin who evidently believes that Baha'is would answer 'Yes' to it. The fact that many Baha'is probably would answer 'yes' to this question is partly due to the fact that very little obviously non-polemical writing about the Babi-Baha'i movements has been done by 'non-Baha'i' scholars. Ex-Baha'is have tended to express themselves in a polemical and obviously inadequate fashion. It seems to me though, and I cannot think of any Baha'i text to explicitly contradict this, that a 'non-Baha'i' or balanced 'ex-Baha'i', could write about the Baha'i faith adequately and accurately. The writings of those who do not subscribe to the Baha'i faith are certainly not ipso-facto devoid of perception, balance or truth. It may even be that the 'non or ex-Baha'i' scholar who has a balanced empathy may contribute to Baha'i understanding in an important way. Sometimes Baha'is have endeavoured to correct 'errors' in the writings of 'non-Baha'i' academics which are not errors at all but are perspectives substantiated in little known or ignored Baha'i texts.

### Arrogance and the Baha'i view of other religions.

Dr. MacEoin thinks it a sign of arrogance that Baha'is understand pre-Baha'i religious teachings in a way that differs from the current or long established views of the adherents of such religions. This is not arrogance but simply the fact that Baha'is have their own interpretation of past religions just as Christians have their own understanding of Judaism which differs—sometimes radically—from the perspectives of Jews and Muslims understand both Judaism and Christianity from an Islamic perspective. Baha'is at least are not so arrogant

as many Jews or Christians who write off Islam as a manifestation of falsity. That Baha'is disagree in some instances with the Christian interpretation of the New Testament or mission of Jesus or the Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an need not be seen as an expression of religious arrogance. In fact a great many of the Baha'i interpretations of Christianity and Islam, the Bible and the Qur'an, have been put forth by Christians and Muslims themselves. Many Christians and Muslims would agree with a good many Baha'i interpretations of their religion. Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha it might be added here exhorted Baha'is not to consider themselves superior to other religionists or to be proud and arrogant.

#### Dr.Momen's Book and the Kitāb al-Aqdas

Dr.Momen's The Babi and Baha'i Religions is characterised by Dr.MacEoin as a compendium of 'sundry trivia' illustrative of the failure of Baha'i intellectuals to grapple with controversy. What, I wonder, does Dr.MacEoin expect to find in a volume which is not designed to grapple with controversial or crucial issues? More than this I hesitate to write in the hope that Dr.Momen might himself express his views.

Christian missionaries and other anti-Baha'i writers have long accused Baha'is of withholding the publication or translation of Baha'u'llah's Kitāb al-Aqdas (Most Holy Book, c.1873) for fear of countering the faith of occidental Baha'is. Muslim scholars are also fond of raising this point along with that of the Bab's grammar and the nature of his laws, etc. Shoghi Effendi on several occasions responded to these criticisms as have a number of Baha'i writers. It must suffice here to note that western Baha'is are not forbidden to acquaint themselves with the contents of Baha'u'llah's Kitāb al-Aqdas— most of the main points made in this book are contained in the Synopsis and Codification issued some years ago by the Universal House of Justice. Shoghi Effendi's view was that "...as most of the laws of the Aqdas cannot at present be enforced anywhere he [Shoghi Effendi] has not deemed it necessary or wise to translate and promulgate them. You can orally translate them for any of the believers anxious to know exactly what they are" (letter dated 22nd July 1949 quoted in Unfolding Destiny, p.455). He also expressed the matter as follows: "The reason it [the Aqdas] is not circulated amongst all the Baha'is is, first, because the Cause is not yet ready or sufficiently matured to put all the provisions of the Aqdas into effect and, second, because it is a book which requires to be supplemented by detailed explanations and to be translated into other languages by a competent body of experts. The provisions of the Aqdas are gradually, according to the progress of the Cause, being put into effect already, both in the East and in the West" (letter quoted in Dawn of a New Day, p.94).

Dr.MacEoin fears that masses of Baha'is would leave their faith if they knew what the writings of the Bab or Baha'u'llah's Kitāb al-Aqdas 'really say'. This is an extremely pessimistic supposition. There are admittedly certain texts in the Aqdas and the writings of the Bab that occidental Baha'is would find it difficult to accept or understand taken at face value. A number of these problematic or challenging passages have however, been interpreted by Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi in ways that render their actual application far less radical or controversial. (refer for example, Dawn of a New Day, p.77 on inheritance and pp.77-8 on the severity of the Bab's laws). The details of Baha'i law have yet to be worked out. If made fully known to the mass of Baha'is certain questions and problems would doubtless arise though to suggest a mass apostasy is to go too far. Many Baha'is do however, need to be more fully conscious of the Islamic dimension of their faith without which they may be perturbed by the 'neo-Shi'osity' of certain aspects of their faith. As the Islamic dimension of the Baha'i movement becomes more fully known in the West there will be difficulties for those raised in a liberal western culture though it is unlikely that mass apostasy will take place.

#### Baha'i 'pioneers' and ancient beliefs.

Baha'i pioneers, as Dr.MacEoin states, undoubtedly seek to offer prospective converts a new religious ideology. They do not however, attempt to demolish all cultural values, etc. in a mindless and uncompromising manner. Indeed, Shoghi

Effendi wrote: "Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Baha'u'llah. Far from aiming at the subversion of the existing foundations of society, it seeks to broaden its basis, to remold its institutions in a manner consonant with the needs of an ever-changing world. It can conflict with no legitimate allegiances, nor can it undermine essential loyalties. Its purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization are to be avoided. It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity. The call of Baha'u'llah is primarily directed against all forms of provincialism, all insularities and prejudices. If long-cherished ideals and time-honoured institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution?.." ( The World Order of Baha'u'llah, pp.41-2. )

#### The role of the scholar in the Baha'i movement.

Dr. MacEoin sketches, on the basis of a few texts, what he considers to be the 'early' Baha'i understanding of the role of the Baha'i scholar. He contrasts the openness implied in these 'early' texts with what is implied by the Universal House of Justice's ( in fact Shoghi Effendi's ) supposed institution-isation of scholarship. The fact that the 'learned' are identified with individual Baha'is who hold appointed office within the Baha'i administrative system suggests to Dr. MacEoin the subtle suppression of non-conformist Baha'i scholars. This is an unjustified inference. There is no suggestion in Baha'i scripture that the 'learned' who hold appointed administrative office are alone learned or that individuals who hold no office cannot be taken seriously or be truly learned. Scholarship and learning cannot be institutionalised within the Baha'i world as the Baha'i administrative system attempts to channel and not suppress creative energy. Certain Baha'i texts imply a role for Baha'i scholars who have no specific administrative office or duty.

Baha'is do not have, as Dr. MacEoin notes, a 'sacramental clergy' though certain individuals ( i.e. Counsellors ) do have some authority as individuals within the Baha'i administrative system. They do not however, have the same kind of duties or authority as either the Shi'i mujtahids or the Christian clergy. While it could be argued that Baha'is appointed to administrative office form a kind of 'clergy' much depends on how the term "clergy" be defined. They certainly do not have the authority to make authoritative legal or doctrinal pronouncements.

#### Utopian dreams

The vision of a new world order of the future and of a world government, etc., is regarded by Dr. MacEoin as a Baha'i utopian dream. One cannot argue either the truth or falsity of this vision which is a matter of faith-- in general terms shared by many religionists throughout the world. Baha'is do not though, necessarily expect the kind of paradisaical, totalitarian and 'perfectly-ordered' dream world of the future outlined by Dr. MacEoin to mysteriously materialise in the near future. They do not exactly look forward to a 'perfectly-controlled' and excessively centralised 'one-party' nightmare of the kind suggested. One of the 'unities' Abdu'l-Baha looked forward to in a famous tablet was the 'unity in freedom': " The third candle is unity in freedom which will surely come to pass". Baha'is are not working towards a world of unity by means of uniformity upheld by suppression of freedom.

Concluding Note

I have attempted to set down some thoughts on Dr. MacEoin's highly critical evaluation of Baha'i perspectives on scholarship, etc., being, most of the time fully conscious of the tentative nature and inadequacy of my arguments. I hope others will take up some of the points raised in more detail and apologize to any reader of this Bulletin who might be upset by Dr. MacEoin's forceful language. The controversy which the publication of Dr. MacEoin's views might spark off is neither intended to create disunity nor destroy faith. Indeed, the intellectual and theological grappling with controversy can heighten apologetic awareness and, in my view, contribute to the evolution of a more mature and open-minded Baha'i scholarship.

Stephen Lambden.

Notes, Reviews and Communications

I. Some letters of the Universal House of Justice--including various extracts from unpublished letters written by or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi.

a) Letter to Mr. Richard Grieser dated July 25th 1974 concerning the infallibility of Shoghi Effendi:

Dear Baha'i Friend,

We have received your letter stating you were disturbed by statements made in your deepening class regarding the infallibility of the beloved Guardian and we appreciate your concern.

According to your letter, this question arose in connection with Shoghi Effendi's references in God Passes By to historical events, and his descriptions of the characters of opponents of the Faith, particularly that of Hájí Mírzá Áqásí. Letters written on behalf of the Guardian by his secretary to individuals who asked similar questions clearly define the sphere of the Guardian's infallibility. We quote from two of these, one written in 1944, the second in 1956.

"The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are strictly related to the Cause and interpretations of the Teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc."

"The Guardian's infallibility covers interpretations of the revealed word, and its application. Likewise any instructions he may issue having to do with the protection of the Faith, or its well-being must be closely obeyed, as he is infallible in the protection of the Faith. He is assured the guidance of both Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, as the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly reveals."

Now, in the matter of accuracy of historical fact, Shoghi Effendi had to rely on available information. For example, on page 5 of God Passes By, he refers to Hájí Mírzá Áqásí as "...the idolized tutor of Muhammad Sháh, a vulgar, false-hearted and fickle-minded schemer..." An appropriate and pertinent quotation supporting that characterization can be found in P. M. Sykes's A History of Persia, Volume 2, pages 439-440, which appears as a footnote on page 233 of Nabíl's Narrative: