

VOLUME 8

THE BAHÁ'Í STUDIES REVIEW

A PUBLICATION OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

English-speaking Europe

1998

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BOOK REVIEWS

Desinformation als Methode. Die Baha'ismus-Monographie des F. Ficicchia

Authors: U. Schaefer, N. Towfigh, and U. Gollmer

Publisher: Georg Olms, Hildesheim, Zürich & New York, 1995, 685 pages

Reviewer: Christian Cannuyer

Translated from the original French by Greg Massiah¹

When, in 1987, I put my name to a work in the "Sons of Abraham" collection, an overview of "The Bahá'ís, People of the Triple Unity," I expressed in the bibliography² certain reservations about a work which had appeared six years earlier, and which I found excessively polemical, namely Francesco Ficicchia's *Der Baha'ismus – Religion der Zukunft? Geschichte, Lehre und Organisation in kritischer Anfrage* (Baha'ism – religion of the future? A critical inquiry into its history, teachings and organisation), published by the *Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen* (Protestant centre for philosophical questions, Stuttgart). In answer to this work, which has at times been put forward as the "standard work" on the subject in the German language, three Bahá'ís have undertaken to produce a rebuttal. This work has necessitated research of an impressive breadth and quality. The authors are all academics, among the finest representatives of current Bahá'í scholarship, which possesses remarkable dynamism, both in the Germanic and in the Anglo-Saxon world: the musicologist and jurist Udo Schaefer, the orientalist and Islamicist Nicola Towfigh, and the sociologist Ulrich Gollmer. In principle, the Bahá'í Faith enjoins its followers to avoid polemic and aggressive apologetics. Yet, taking Ficicchia's book to be an exercise in systematic disinformation, the authors have chosen to put aside this reticence. U. Schaefer reminds us of the Latin legal saying which warns that *Qui tacet, consentire videtur*.

This extensive rebuttal is divided into three major parts. The first attacks Ficicchia's method, not without recourse to an *ad hominem* argument which is not to be taken lightly: in the seventies, Ficicchia was a member of the Bahá'í community of Switzerland and even worked for a time at the world centre of the faith in Haifa. From 1974, however, he entered into open conflict with the Bahá'í community and its supreme authorities. The clear acrimony which shows through on every page of his argument – and whose bitterness I had identified from the outset as excessive – can probably be explained in large part by his inability to conceal his resentment. There is a more serious charge: the authors claim that Ficicchia lacks the necessary knowledge of the oriental languages (chiefly Arabic and

¹ This review was originally published in *Mélange de Science Religieuse* 54.1 (1997): 116-18.

² *Les Bahá'ís: Peuple de la Triple Unité* (Brepols, 1987) 165.

Persian) in which the principal sources of the history and doctrine of the early Bahá'í Faith were written. Moreover, they point out indisputable faults in his use of secondary literature in German and English. Supported by numerous precise and verifiable examples (a few soundings of my own sufficed to assess their relevance), their attacks are remarkably effective. Though they are relentless, intellectual integrity compels me to acknowledge that their target is deserving. One senses too the apologists' concern with denying Ficicchia the right to treat the Bahá'í Faith as a marginal and questionable sect. The Bahá'í Faith today is a universal religion in its own right, with some five million followers, whose status is recognised by the United Nations, who have invited its participation in several of its commissions as a Non-Governmental Organisation. For the Bahá'ís this recognition is vital: on the pretext that their faith is merely a dissident sectarian movement within Islam, they are persecuted by the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as by the governments of a number of other Muslim countries. In Iran, the faith's country of origin, the Bahá'ís, numbering around 300,000, are considered *mahdur ad-damm*, "people whose blood may be shed with impunity," and not as "People of the Book" deserving respect and tolerance. Hundreds of their number have been executed or murdered since the fall of the Shah, while hundreds more languish in jail in Tehran and elsewhere.

The second part aims to point out and to rectify those erroneous representations of Bahá'í theology,³ law, and ethics of which Ficicchia is guilty. Two points of particular importance are the legitimacy of the present Universal House of Justice, the supreme organ of the Faith since 1963, and the authenticity of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ("Most Holy Book"), one of the pillars of the new revelation whose status as "Holy Writings" entails, from the Bahá'í viewpoint, specific differences which prevent it from being considered the equivalent of a Bible or a Qur'an; under these circumstances, the text is inseparable from the entire teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and of his heirs, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. We are nevertheless pleased to note that the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has finally been published in its entirety, an official English translation in 1992 and a French one in 1996. One of Ficicchia's misinterpretations of Bahá'í practice which the authors latch on to is his assertion that Bahá'ís are required to recite a ritual prayer (*salát*) three times a day, a

³ I would like to take this opportunity to mention Udo Schaefer's most fascinating essays in Bahá'í theology, which have recently been translated into French by Héléne Momtaz and Susanne Hof: *L'histoire du Salut et Changement de Paradigme. Deux Contributions à la foi Bahá'ie* (Genève: Association d'Études Bahá'ies d'Europe Francophone, 1993, 160pp. [and into English as *Beyond the Clash of Religions*]). The first essay presents the Bahá'í revelation as the fulfilment of messianic expectation or parousia, which while in some aspects analogous to the hopes of the New Age, clearly sets itself apart by aligning itself with the succession of great revealed religions; the second essay deals with the history of religions, with their diversity, but also with their complementarity and their unity, according to the Bahá'í Faith, within a single plan. It constitutes a theology of religions which goes to the very heart of the Bahá'í Faith.

custom inspired by the Muslim's fivefold daily prayer. True, the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* (K6) ordains three individual ritual prayers a day. However, Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the faith, subsequently modified this prescription leaving Bahá'ís a choice of three versions of the ritual prayer: the shortest and the longest should only be recited once a day, and only the "medium" prayer requires three recitations (morning, noon and evening).

The final part of the rebuttal concerns "darker" passages of Bahá'í history, notably the schisms which have shaken the community since its inception. It is regarding these issues that my own work generated a "response" – a most courteous one – in 1990, from an eminent member of the Belgian Bahá'í community, my friend Louis Hénuzet.⁴ Though I cannot here go into the finer detail of these complicated incidents and their manifold reverberations, I remain convinced that Bahá'ís have a tendency to play down the seriousness of the dissensions which have split their community since its foundation. In these matters – quite understandably – their faith leads them to remove any blame from their three successive supreme guides, the prophet and manifestation of God Bahá'u'lláh (1817-92), his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921) and the latter's grandson, the Guardian Shoghi Effendi (1896-1957), who, during his "reign" succeeded in falling out with almost his entire family. I must admit that I cannot help observing that these individuals – otherwise engaging characters and essentially unselfish – led the community with an ever-increasing authoritarianism, which accounts for many of the tensions which arose at its heart. Ficicchia may well have blackened Bahá'u'lláh out of all proportion in favour of his brother; he may also be wrong – following the American Bahá'í Ruth White – in his outright denial of the authenticity of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament which appoints Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause and lays the foundations for the future Bahá'í institutions: this takes nothing away from the fact that the authors' (and Monsieur Hénuzet's) counter-argument appears to paint an idealised portrait of the founders of Baha'ism which does not stand up to scrutiny.⁵ Yet here we are touching upon the sensitive boundaries between faith and historical analysis: it is hard for a believer to turn his/her critical gaze upon the person of the prophet, the instrument of revelation, and, in the Bahá'ís' view, the manifestation for our age of the one Divine Light. Bahá'ís may perhaps come to realise that, like any revelation, the message of their faith, which is so pure, so modern, and so inspiring – the oneness of God, the oneness of revelation, and the oneness of mankind – has been transmitted through human beings and cannot bypass their weaknesses. For my own part, I tried to show in my work that these – usually quite excusable – failings do not blemish the greatness and

⁴ L. Hénuzet, *Les Bahá'ís par Christian Cannuyer. Le point de vue d'un Bahá'í*. (Brussels: Maison d'Éditions Bahá'íes, 1990, 91pp).

⁵ Another significant recent example of Bahá'í "hagiography" is the booklet published on the occasion of the centenary of the prophet's death entitled *Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)* (Paris: Bahá'í International Community Office of Public Information, 1992).

the profound spirituality of the new Abrahamic religion heralded by Bahá'u'lláh.

Overall, this book impressed me by the rigour of its argument and the relevance of its findings. As it reviews the majority of those aspects of the Bahá'í faith attacked by Ficicchia, it also constitutes a masterly survey of the doctrinal and vital principles of this religion. By consulting this book, especially with the aid of its copious "Sachindex" (index by subject) (667-685), one may obtain a mine of information on Bahá'í theology, practice, and ethics, and the Bahá'í vision of the socio-political organisation of the human family. Ficicchia's book was an attempt to reduce the Bahá'í community to a "sect" with doubtful motives, engaged in unwholesome activities. This is a serious accusation in this age, when the phenomenon of sects is a cause of genuine disquiet. For my part, I would not change one word of what I wrote in 1987: "Emerging from Shi'ih Islam, considered by the ayatollahs in present-day Iran as a harmful heresy, relegated by others to the rank of a sect, Baha'ism today is in reality a religion of universal import which has left the orbit of Islam. It is a separate 'Abrahamic monotheism' in its own right: for its original teachings it merits attention. For its message of love, its tolerance and humanitarian activity, it inspires sympathy. For its many martyrs, in Iran and elsewhere, it is due respect." It is this respect which is claimed by Schaefer, Towfigh, and Gollmer's book. The claim is honourable and the pleading hits the mark.