

REVIEW

Making the Crooked Straight

A Contribution to Bahá'í Apologetics

By Udo Schaefer, Nicola Towfigh, and Ulrich Gollmer English translation
published by George Ronald, Hardback, £29.95

Apologetics is the branch of religious studies dealing with the defence of the faith against outside attacks. It is part of almost all traditions and is commended by Bahá'u'lláh in the appropriate circumstances:

"Warn, O Salman, the beloved of the one true God, not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men. Let them rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy. Those men, however, who, in this Day, have been led to assail, in their inflammatory writings, the tenets of the Cause of God, are to be treated differently. It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God." (Gleanings, Section CLIV)

This book is described modestly as "a contribution" to Bahá'í apologetics. In fact it is an extremely important text, one whose influence on the defence of the Faith will go far beyond its original German-speaking target readership. Its significance is such that the Universal House of Justice gave it special mention in its Ridván Message for this year:

"In Germany, for the first time Bahá'ís were included in an interfaith dialogue. This reversed a longstanding attitude of Christian denominations which had avoided contact with the Faith owing to a book written by a Covenant-breaker and issued by a Lutheran-publishing house in 1981. The remedy was provided in a 600-page scholarly rebuttal written by three Bahá'ís and published by a leading non-Bahá'í firm last year."

The work in German-speaking Europe had been badly affected by an "authoritative" "academic" account of the history, beliefs and activities of the Bahá'í religion, written by an embittered former Bahá'í and self-confessed enemy of the Faith. This man, Francesco Ficicchia had poured into his work an unholy mixture of distortions, half-truths, and untruths, but the book was promoted by important and influential Christian bodies that succeeded for a time in establishing it as the definitive and reliable source of information on the Bahá'í Faith. As a result of this a picture of the Faith which no Bahá'í would recognise was widely established. The word "unholy" comes to mind again, to describe the Churches' role in this, a role that reflects little credit on them.

Of course the English-speaking world has seen a similar tendency on the part of those opposed to the Bahá'í Faith to dress their enmity in scholarly guise.

The most outstanding but certainly not the only - example is that of William McE. Miller, the Presbyterian clergyman and missionary who after decades of fulminating against the Faith on grounds of religious doctrine and predicting its imminent demise finally became a disinterested academic writer and produced an "authoritative" study whose hostility was hidden behind a scholarly veneer and whose work was all the more pernicious for the way its mixture of truths, untruths, and slanted half-truths was presented to the world.

Looking at what Ficicchia has to say about the Faith it is clear that his approach and Miller's have much in common, both in style and content, thus making this book important for us in this part of the world. Clearly there are areas of Bahá'í history and teachings on which enemies will focus, and there are bound to be great similarities in content as well as approach. For that reason Schaefer and his colleagues have made a major contribution to the defence of our Faith, and produced a definitive resource for Bahá'ís wherever they are.

Making the Crooked Straight is a large (almost 800 pages in the English edition), heavy (in all senses), thorough, and somewhat forbidding book. Its size and style will certainly put off some readers, and it might not be for everyone. Its thoroughness is necessary, as is the detailed examination of early historical sources for Bahá'í history, since it is with the twisting of these sources, documents which most readers will have no chance to study for themselves that the pseudo-academic misrepresentation usually begins. Its discussion of German academics and churchmen and their writings will perhaps tire non-German readers, and one looks forward to a time when someone will produce an equally thorough refutation of their British and American counterparts whose works are in academic libraries here. But the German focus is obviously the one that was necessary for the book, and the content is apposite for us even if the names referred to are unfamiliar.

The book appears to be having the desired effect in German-speaking Europe. The Bahá'í Faith is gaining recognition as an independent religion where previously it had been marginalized as a sect or traduced as a cult, and is beginning to take its place among the other world religions in people's minds. But it has not been easy. The amount of work that had to go into Making the Crooked Straight combined with the fact that it is harder to replace a negative image than to simply present a true one made the task formidable. We might in this country be tempted to complacency in view of the degree of official and academic recognition that the Faith already enjoys. However it would be foolish to assume that we could not be faced by the same problems. This book is both a warning and a truly powerful resource for the defence of our religion. We should appreciate it.

Iain S Palin