Dissidents and the Baha'i Faith

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Jack McLean

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On the Internet today one may find webpages and websites that contain disgruntled views and/or bitter attacks, usually against the Bahá’í Administrative Order, from inactive or ex-Bahá’ís. A dissident is not, of course, an ex-Bahá’í, but someone who still claims to be a follower but who has serious grievances against the faith to which he or she belongs. Surprisingly, some of these attacks even come from so-called “Bahá’ís is in good standing.”

In the early 1990’s, I gained first-hand experience of this phenomenon when I was a temporary member of the original Talisman list, hosted by ex- Bahá’í, Dr. Juan Ricardo Cole. I subsequently resigned from Talisman I when Dr. Cole, in his grand design to be the “gadfly” — his self-description to me in a personal email — and reform the Bahá’í Faith, made direct, frontal attacks on the Universal House of Justice. What was perhaps not so well known was that by that time Dr. Cole had been remonstrating with the Universal House of Justice more or less steadily for about 20 years. He has spilled a not inconsiderable amount of ink in a conscious effort to blacken the reputation of the Bahá’í Faith, particularly the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States and the Universal House of Justice.

It is not the purpose of this message to reopen the specifics of Cole’s case with which those who once belonged to Talisman I are quite familiar. He has since found new enemies in his professed role of critic-commentator. However, I would like to make some general comments about dissidents and ex-Bahá’ís, whether it be Juan Cole, Francesco Ficicchia in German-speaking Europe in the 1980’s and ‘90’s, and/or the like-minded club of present or past hostile critics.

The behaviour of these dissidents, when observed closely, reveals in fact a negative dynamic or pattern of behaviour that continues to be dismally instructive. I seriously doubt that the Bahá’í community has seen the end of the complaints of the constantly disgruntled, the doctrinally innovative and the permanently embittered. While space is lacking here to fully set out the entire dynamic of this pattern, I would like to comment briefly on the climate of sympathy that seems to be created, at least for a time, for the grievances made by these individuals.

One of the keys to the ready ear temporarily received has something to do with the way that institutionalized religion is generally perceived in contemporary society. In modernity, religion and spirituality have gone their separate ways. Individuals may willingly affirm their theism or spirituality but many disavow being official members of an "institutionalized religion." Except for official members, the religious "institution" in a secular age has become definitely suspect.

And for good reason. This climate of suspicion has been created by a long history of the violent repression of doctrinal minorities, and other past or present grave moral errors by institutionalized religions. Observers, consequently, tend to be predisposed to accept the viewpoint of the dissident without further reflection or investigation. If she has dissented from a religious institution, ergo, she must be a victim: at least, that is the hasty conclusion. This predisposition was clearly at work for a time in Juan Cole's case, just as it was for another ex-Bahá'í, Francesco Ficicchia.

What these dissidents fail to realize, and do not accept, is that the Bahá'í Faith, while it does allow for a fair and reasonable largesse of individual interpretation, has nonetheless its own doctrinal boundaries and ethical protocol. But in the final analysis, these doctrinal boundaries and ethical protocol are simply not accepted by these individuals who, driven by frustration at the perceived rightness of their cause, ego-mania, hyper-individualism and the so-called principles of "liberal democracy," engage in corrosive attacks which by definition are beyond the norms of Bahá'í ethics, morality, spirituality and the principles of consultation which Bahá'u'lláh has seen fit to substitute for acrimonious and divisive debate.

The founders of the Bahá'í Faith have repeatedly warned their followers — some dissidents even balk at the presumption of warning — of the grave moral, spiritual and intellectual consequences that accompany such hostile, confrontational approaches. But these individuals, unless they disaffiliate themselves from the religion to which they belong, and although they have knowingly accepted these doctrinal boundaries and ethical protocol, imagine that these norms should not be imposed on them. They clearly view themselves as being in a different category from other Bahá'ís. Dissidents persist in believing that somehow they are fully within their rights to violate these norms with impunity.

Yet, like all perpetrators who claim to be victims, they continue to act surprised, and claim betrayal and harassment, when the religion to which they belong finally asks them to withdraw or takes measures to remove them permanently from the membership list. This removal, I should add, usually takes place only — in some cases, years — after a patient hearing and exchange of views, counselling and warnings from Bahá’í institutions, despite the charges of fascism and religious fundamentalism which are inevitably levelled against the Administrative Order. It must be said that neither Bahá’í doctrine nor covenants gives any Bahá’í a licence to radically alter Bahá’í belief or ethical practice to the point of making it unrecognizable to Bahá’ís and to the institutions that govern the Bahá’í Faith.

As sequitur to this last sentence: the point of this message is not, as some might suppose, simple justification — the basic preoccupation of theology — of administrative sanctions taken against these individuals. Methodologically, their heavy-handed approaches are also quite unsound. For example, phenomenologist of religion, William Brede Kristensen, the Norwegian-Dutch scholar (1867-1953), in his instructive essay "What is Phenomenology?" was perhaps the first to make the point that serious students and scholars of religion must identify with the faith of others to the extent that they "must therefore be able to forget themselves, to be able to surrender themselves to others" (p. 49). The respected comparative religionists, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Huston Smith have since made the same point both in their writings and in their lives.

Kristensen is promoting here, not some objective and detached study of a particular religion — let alone an inflammatory one — but rather a process of initiation into the sympathetic understanding of "the faith of other men," as the title of Cantwell Smith’s 1962 comparative study of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Chinese philosophy, Christians and Jews put it. Smith’s innovative little book aimed to elucidate, not only the beliefs of these world religions, but also and especially, how these religions formed the personal values of the men and women who practiced them, and how their personal beliefs motivated their lives. In other words, Cantwell Smith recommended that the student be willing to be taught by the participants of the tradition he or she was investigating, and to assume their point of view, without necessarily adopting their faith. In the academic study of religion, then, the testimony of believers is consequently the starting point and the meeting place of authentic understanding and must necessarily carry great weight.

My point is that with Cole, Ficicchia and others like them, the testimony, sacred writings, history and moral and ethical norms of believers were either ignored or distorted to the extent that members of the Bahá'í Faith themselves were no longer able to recognize the very faith that these critics claimed to represent in their hostile or distorted depictions. This is a clear violation of the methodology recommended by Brede Kristensen, Cantwell Smith and Huston Smith and other scholars of religion. All this is even more astonishing because these individuals claimed, for a time, and some of them still claim, to be Bahá'ís. No wonder that the official representatives of the Bahá'í Faith ultimately came to the intellectually defensible conclusion that they were not. No wonder, also, that the Universal House of Justice has said that character, that is, active spirituality, ethics, values and norms, and methodology cannot, and should not, be separated. In this, as in all things

Bahá'í, character and methodology are one.

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