

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Nader Saiedi. *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh*. Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2000. 404 pp. \$45.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-883053-60-4.

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Published on H-Bahai (March, 2004)

*Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh* is a thematic (“Spirit”), historical (“History”), and structural (“Order”) analysis of the thought of Bahā'u'llāh (d. 1892), prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, in its own terms of reference. *Logos and Civilization* is an original work based on original sources. Author Nader Saiedi prescinds from adopting any external theoretical framework of analysis, which he sees as inadequate and therefore reductive (pp. 11-12). Instead, the author's framework arises from the original sources themselves. This book is productive of both an original thesis and what may be construed as a learned apology in defense of a Baha'i position that strenuously and cogently maintains Bahā'u'llāh's quintessential originality, obscured as it may be by its Islamic overlay. This argument depends on a coherence theory of truth that is self-validating. *Logos and Civilization* is an engaging work, written by an engaged scholar (a professed Baha'i),

Saiedi is anti-reductive (if there is such a word) with respect to previous academic scholarship on Bahā'u'llāh. Accordingly, the author chooses not to engage with academic Baha'i studies except to refute the work of Juan R. I. Cole, author of *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). As a controversial (apologetic) work, *Logos and Civilization* is not without controversy. Accordingly, this review will address the following issues: (1) purpose; (2) approach; (3) premise; (4) polemics; (5) publication; (6) peer review; and (7) appraisal.

## Purpose

The intended audience is specialists in Baha'i studies as well as the larger Baha'i audience. Clearly, Dr. Saiedi hopes that scholars and lay readers alike, after reading

*Logos and Civilization*, will experience a new intellectual and spiritual appreciation of the originality, majesty, and complexity of Bahā'u'llāh's revelation. “A major thesis of this book,” states Saiedi in his introduction, “is the creative, revolutionary, and unprecedented character of Bahā'u'llāh's spiritual and social vision” (p. 8). This is an evaluative thesis, one that might have been better served had the author focused on Bahā'u'llāh's transformations of Islamic thought and then allowed the reader to evaluate the comparative merits of Bahā'u'llāh's new spiritual and social principles. It is really too much to expect of an academic audience to accept a claim made in superlative terms when a comparative analysis might have been more acceptable. British philosopher Stephen Toulmin, author of *The Uses of Argument* (1958) and several works on the history of science, has pointed out that relative arguments are more persuasive than absolute arguments.

## Approach

A word on methodology and method (the two are related but distinct): Assuming that this book was intended, in part, for an academic audience, one might have expected some kind of academic literature review. But, for the most part, the author does not speak to the community of discourse and research tradition in academic Baha'i studies. In other words, there is neither a comprehensive nor representative literature review, although several works of academic Baha'i studies are mentioned.

However, this is not the only legitimate form of academic scholarship. Just about any standard academic treatment is intentionally limited in its audience and rhetorical purposes, and is usually addressed to the small research community of specialists in a field. Sociolinguistic studies have shown that the frequency of use of academic conventions of discourse by academic writers

progresses in a parabola. Graduate students use such conventions most frequently, as their main purpose for writing is to produce work that will be accepted by the gatekeepers on whose approval their future career success depends. Well-established academics, who are secure in their careers, use such discourse the least, as they become free to write for the purpose of expressing what they themselves want to say about a subject—and in the way they want to say it—in order to reach the audience they want to reach. It is this latter approach that characterizes Saiedi's work, although this is Saiedi's first contribution to Baha'i studies in English outside of two or three articles in Baha'i periodicals.

Nevertheless, the absence of a literature review shows that the author, while certainly aware of the research tradition, chooses to speak "outside" of it. His attitude towards academic Baha'i studies seems to be expressed in the following statement found in Chapter 1, "Mysticism and Methodology." To wit: "The advocates of the current academic 'Middle Eastern Studies' approach consider themselves the exponents of an objective, scientific perspective on Baha'i Studies which is opposed to 'traditional' Baha'i Studies" (p. 42). "The traditional approach," Saiedi explains, "was dominated by Iranian, Islamic, and Middle Eastern cultural perspectives and perceived the Baha'i Faith through the questions and categories of Islamic discourse" (p. 42). Saiedi grants that this approach was born of "historical necessity," but with the "irony" that "the current professional academic approach of some writers to Baha'i studies is in some ways a continuation of that same limiting academic premise that looks no farther than the immediate Middle Eastern context to locate the problematics of the Baha'i texts" (p. 42). What, then, characterizes "the current academic approach" of other writers in the field? On this question, the author is silent.

Reductionist approaches, Saiedi notes, lead to distortions: "If one insists on reading off the meaning of the terms and symbols in the Baha'i writings by reference to the traditional Islamic and Middle Eastern discourses, one will distort the complexity of Baha'u'llah's discourse, miss its subtlety, and systematically overlook the new meanings it deliberately creates" (p. 43). Such scholarship is limited because it is the result of narrow documentary interpretations that view discourse as a product or epiphenomenon of larger social forces and cultural influences. In rather crude terms, there is temptation on the part of Islamicists to represent the Baha'i religion as reconstituted Shi'ism. This overcontextualization foregrounds the background, where one cannot see the forest

for the trees. Saiedi's methodological critique of current scholarship in academic Baha'i studies is perhaps well taken. But he does not appear to offer a new methodological paradigm, except insofar as his own book represents one.

The methodology of *Logos and Civilization* seems to be conflated with the subject of the book, Baha'u'llah, who is represented as offering an entirely new paradigm for scholarship in general. "[I]t is the argument of this book," Saiedi explains, "that the writings of Baha'u'llah represent a conceptual break with those traditional assumptions. Baha'u'llah's vision, in other words, initiates a new paradigm, a new model, a new logic of discourse, a new episteme, and a new problematic ... in approaching reality" (p. 43). Saiedi reintegrates the phenomenon of "revelation" as a "category of reality" that is "inspired by a higher, superhuman source," whose meaning is "irreducible to existing worldviews and human ideologies" (p. 45). The direction of influence thus points the other way, in that Baha'u'llah's revelation is to be seen "not as the reflection of intellectual movements and civilizations, but as the source that inspires them" (p. 45). This is far more than a methodological assumption. It is a major truth-claim.

Even so, the author does concede that "Sacred Text and historical context, therefore, interact with one another" (p. 44). While there does exist a dialectic between prophetic revelation and social thought, the thought-forms themselves—which are socially determined—are vehicles of an originality that flashes through the interstices of a historical and cultural framework. Here, an ontological commitment is called for: namely, that Baha'u'llah's revelation is no mere human product, but is *sui generis*, in a class of its own.

Such an assertion might not withstand scrutiny within the context of the academic study of religion, for the simple reason that this amounts to an unfalsifiable truth-claim. To assert is not to prove. True, religions advance all kinds of truth-claims. We expect this. What we don't expect is for an academic (even an "engaged scholar") to go so far, at least without clearly demonstrating the truth of his claim. We can refer to Baha'u'llah's truth-claims, as indeed we should. But to claim the truth-claim as truth blurs the distinction between scholarship that is intersubjectively available and a learned apology, that functions somewhat like a sophisticated altar call. To be fair, however, the writer does some of both, and proceeds to make his case for the distinctiveness of Baha'u'llah's life and work.

The author's purpose is clear, to establish that Baha'u'llah presents a "novel paradigm" that is "distinguished by the unity and organic synthesis of at least three fundamental principles—spiritual transcendence, historical consciousness, and global unity" (p. 43). These categories are reflected in the subtitle, "Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bah='u'll=h, and in the three major divisions of the book: part 1, "The Dynamics of the Spiritual Journey"; part 2, "The Critique of Spiritual and Historical Reason"; and part 3, "The New World Order."

#### Premise

*Logos and Civilization* may be described as a study of several of Baha'u'llah's major works: *The Seven Valleys* and *The Four Valleys* (chapter 3), the *Kitab-i Iqan* (chapters 4 and 5), the *Kitab-i Badi'* (chapter 6), and the *Kitab-i Aqdas* (chapters 7 and 8), among other texts (passim). Significantly, Saiedi offers a developmental hypothesis of a staged sequence in Baha'u'llah's revelation. The author has located an autobiographical text (cited on p. 241), in which Baha'u'llah states that his proclamation was communicated, over the course of his ministry, to "mystics, then divines, and then kings" (*Ishraqat*, p. 260). This statement provides a heuristic key that informs the stages of Baha'u'llah's revelation. Saiedi proposes this sequence: (1) Early/Middle Baghdad period (1852-1860); (2) Late Baghdad/Edirne period (1860-1867); (3) Late Edirne/'Akka period (1867-1892). While the author has not explicitly expressed it in quite this way, one may say that Baha'u'llah wrote as a mystic, as a prophet, and as a lawgiver.

According to Saiedi, Baha'u'llah has transformed Islamic mysticism from its traditional contemplative and devotional quest for union with God into a historical quest for the source of revelation. I might add that Baha'u'llah's preeminent mystical work, *The Seven Valleys*, based on 'Attar's *Haft Vadi*, represents what might be characterized as an oblique, realized eschatology. I have discussed Baha'u'llah's transformations of 'Attar in *Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Baha'i Faith*, Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions, 10 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999; Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1999).

While this is one instance in which the author does not cite previous scholarship in academic Baha'i studies, Saiedi does go beyond my formal comparison of Baha'u'llah and 'Attar to claim that the seven valleys themselves are really stages of moral development (pp. 100-102). Moreover, they are essentially a pathway leading to "recognition of the Manifestation of God," mean-

ing the acceptance of Baha'u'llah as the revelator for this day and age (pp. 103-105). In Baha'u'llah's *Gems of the Mysteries*, another mystical work, mysticism is historicized. The spiritual journey through seven "cities" recapitulates "humanity's journey through successive divine revelations" (p. 167), a teleological view of history that Baha'is refer to as "Progressive Revelation." Mysticism ("Spirit") points to revelation (salvation—"History"), leading to prophetic legislation ("Order").

This contemplation/revelation/legislation sequence is expressed in the Baha'i notion of "New World Order" (p. 240). This progression, Saiedi claims, informs the order of the *Kitab-i Aqdas*, which is structured by four "constitutive principles" that serve as "a kind of mysterious code of Baha'u'llah's revelation" (p. 242). "To talk about the order of a text is to define its logic," Saiedi writes (p. 238). The four ordering principles are: (1) the prohibition or removal of the sword; (2) the principle of covenant; (3) the universal revelation; and (4) the principle of the heart (pp. 242-257).

While there are many interesting, though excursive, textual discussions throughout the book, the author sustains his heuristic key throughout. He concludes by saying: "Throughout this book I have argued for the consistency and continuity of Baha'u'llah's underlying spiritual and social principles in all the stages of His writings, and the qualitative novelty and unprecedented character of those principles" (p. 303). This statement would, indeed, form the natural conclusion to the book. But chapters 9 and 10 are largely a polemic against Juan Cole, who is among those who "fail to comprehend the complexity, richness, and subtlety of Baha'u'llah's writings as well as the actual nature of His message" (p. 303). That this should apply to an individual who had formerly been a member of the Baha'i community over a quarter of a century (and who despite resigning from the Baha'i Faith, still considers himself to be a professed Baha'i) is a mystery.

#### Polemics

As a polemic against reductive approaches, *Logos and Civilization* is intended to correct perceived misrepresentations of the Faith, as well as an attempt to open readers to an appreciation of the beauty and breadth of Baha'u'llah's revelation, in all its panoramic grandeur. *Logos and Civilization* is part of a pitched battle between those who want to reduce Baha'u'llah to a mere philosopher—a secondary and unoriginal one—whose message, on the one hand, has somehow been subverted by 'Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi, and the Univer-

sal House of Justice, and, on the other hand, those who see doctrinal and institutional developments within the Baha'i Faith as a faithful elaboration of the "original intent" of Baha'u'llah. Whoever takes a stance on this book is engaged in this battle, according to Saiedi.

Particularly in a major section at the end of his book, Saiedi tilts his lance at colleague Juan Cole, author of the aforementioned *Modernity and the Millennium*. Saiedi's atomizing of Cole's work, to the relative exclusion of other works of scholarship (Walbridge is referred to in chapter 7), casts an apologetic shadow over an otherwise engaging discussion. It is as if Saiedi were on the horns of a dilemma, in which both horns are on Cole's head.

While this both distracts and detracts from the overall contribution the former seeks to make (at the expense of the latter), Saiedi does offer an alternative approach to understanding Baha'u'llah's messianic self-consciousness and his subsequent programs of world reform, as a counterbalance to Cole's own approach. Moreover, this distraction is an attraction to an audience that wishes to see another academic stand up to Cole and hit the target on the forehead with a methodological sling. The stone in that sling is Saiedi's critique of Cole's translations of several key passages in Baha'u'llah's writings.

One controversial issue is the evolution of Baha'u'llah's messianic consciousness. Saiedi argues that Baha'u'llah's sense of mission was fully formed, although undisclosed, throughout the entire Baghdad period, while Cole sees evidence of Baha'u'llah's messianic consciousness as a later development in response to both Islamic reformist and Western influences. Missing in all this is the wider academic discussion, in which even Cole himself once held to a messianic secrecy hypothesis, as evidenced in his foreword to *Symbol and Secret: Qur'an Commentary in Baha'u'llah's Kitab-i Iqan* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1995), now electronically republished online at: [www.bahai-library.org/books/symbol.secret/](http://www.bahai-library.org/books/symbol.secret/). In his section "Veiled Declaration in the Kitab-i-Iqan" (pp. 119-26), Saiedi completely ignores the final chapter of *Symbol and Secret*, which argues for the messianic secrecy hypothesis. While Saiedi is not obliged to cite previous scholarship in Baha'i studies, such disregard—whether intended or unintended—raises more questions than it answers.

#### Publication

*Logos and Civilization* is copublished by University Press of Maryland and the Association for Baha'i Studies, which is the sole distributor of the softcover edition.

While this is a joint publishing venture of the Association and a reputable non-Baha'i press (in order to make *Logos and Civilization* more accessible to larger audiences and to gain further academic legitimacy), the Association for Baha'i Studies appears neither on the title page nor on the copyright page. This gives pause for thought. The University Press of Maryland also publishes books for several other institutions, academic and non-academic. It should be noted that Dr. Soheil Bushrui, holder of the Chair in Baha'i Studies at the University of Maryland, published a work on *Kitab-i Aqdas* by the same press.

#### Peer Review

The issue of peer review is not something that would normally be discussed in an academic book review. I was told by the ABS editor that *Logos and Civilization* did, in fact, undergo a serious review process. This was probably a combined institutional and peer review under the auspices of the Association for Baha'i Studies itself (not the University Press of Maryland), which is authorized by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada to perform a required review for accuracy and dignity in information that pertains to the Baha'i Faith.

Review is confidential; its particulars cannot be divulged. However, it is highly unlikely that the review process was as rigorous as a standard academic peer review under non-Baha'i auspices. If it went through more reviewers than usual (which is what I understood the JBS editor to mean), that still does not mean that all of the reviewers were competent academics. And even if it did go through seasoned academics, then the review process is unlikely to have included any of the serious scholars in academic Baha'i studies. A more rigorous review process, in an academic setting, would have involved three or so top-rate specialists in the field of Middle East studies or the academic study of religion. Had this been the case, some of the issues that I have raised in this review would likely have been "flagged" by the peer reviewers themselves prior to publication.

This leads me to conclude that *Logos and Civilization* is partly a crusade against some of the distortions allegedly perpetrated by academics in Middle East studies, as noted by the Universal House of Justice in its 7 April 1999 letter, which warns National Spiritual Assemblies (nationally elected Baha'i governing councils) of "a campaign of internal opposition" promoting "a kind of interpretive authority which those behind it attribute to the views of persons technically trained in Middle East studies." Could this letter have inclined Saiedi to write the previously cited statement: "The advocates of the

current academic 'Middle Eastern Studies' approach consider themselves the exponents of an objective, scientific perspective on Baha'i Studies which is opposed to 'traditional' Baha'i Studies" (p. 42)? In this unfortunate, adversarial climate, rather than identify with other Baha'i academics who employ current—and professionally standardized (even if insufficient)—methodologies, the author (a sociologist) speaks outside that tradition and indeed in some opposition to it. The peer review situation seems to have reflected that same negative orientation.

Ultimately, *Logos and Civilization* must be judged on its own merits.

Is *Logos and Civilization* an original contribution to the field? Does it offer a fresh perspective, open up new vistas, provide fresh insights into the writings of Baha'u'llah? In the process, does the book successfully reveal the inadequacies and tendentiousness of Cole's work? As stated earlier in this review, *Logos and Civilization* is an original work of scholarship, based on original sources, that eloquently elaborates on Baha'u'llah's originality.

In addressing the question of Baha'u'llah's dialectic with history and his response to modernity, Saiedi admits: "It is undoubtable that Baha'u'llah approves of certain elements that are found in modern Western political philosophy and systems of government. But at the same time, and even more significantly, He also criticizes and transcends their limitations. A careful study of His writings discloses that they contain a new philosophical basis for political theory and a holistic vision which, without being merely syncretistic, incorporates the positive elements of Eastern and Western political philosophy and represents a novel and unprecedented structure that neither the existing categories and discourse of either East or West are capable of describing" (p. 317).

Well said, but perhaps not for the first time. In my second book, *Paradise and Paradigm*, I discuss Baha'u'llah's dialectic with modernity as a process of sacralizing (making sacred) certain secular developments in the West and desacralizing (abrogating) perceived religious excesses in Babism, Islam, and Christianity. See also the extended discussion of Baha'u'llah's responses to modernity in *Modernity and the Millennium*, where Cole presents features of Baha'u'llah's critique of modernity and, on several major issues, demonstrates how Baha'u'llah was even more "modern" than contemporary Islamic modernists or western thinkers. I have also argued for the originality of Baha'u'llah's thought. I have even provided a paradigm analysis or "symbolic profile"

of Baha'u'llah's thought and imagery, and consequently a stained-glass window of Baha'i religious consciousness. But Saiedi goes quite beyond me in his systematic treatment of Baha'u'llah's thought. While I remain somewhat skeptical of Saiedi's analysis of the *Kitab-i Aqdas*, I am impressed by his description, in chapter 6, of the *Kitab-i Badi'*, Baha'u'llah's lengthiest work.

Although not above criticism, *Logos and Civilization* has advanced interpretive Baha'i studies to a new threshold in that the book is a text-centered, paradigmatic systematizing of Baha'u'llah's thought and discourse. If it errs at all, it errs in favor of reading too much structure ("order") into Baha'u'llah's writings rather than too little. In this analysis, Saiedi may be too programmatic in his systematizing analysis of Baha'u'llah's revelation. Even so, *Logos and Civilization* stands as a counterbalance—and possibly as a corrective—to some of the rather reductive treatments of Baha'u'llah's thought that have been published to date.

My only recommendation is that a revised edition be published, in which previous works of scholarship are referenced. Otherwise, *Logos and Civilization* may unjustly imply that its author is anti-academic. While he is unabashedly anti-reductionist, Saiedi is not anti-academic. However, by writing from outside the community of discourse rather than from within it, Saiedi creates the false impression that academic Baha'i studies is dominated by such individuals in the field as Juan Cole and John Walbridge to the exclusion of others, such as Todd Lawson, Moojan Momen, Frank Lewis, and Stephen Lambden, to name a few.

This book can contribute to a wider audience if revised, and I strongly urge both author and publisher to undertake this revision. Saiedi writes pellucidly and cogently (even if incompletely and thus less than convincingly in terms of argument) and brings fresh insight to Baha'i studies discourse. In a revised edition, I would recommend toning down the superlative claims for Baha'u'llah (even if true), in order to make the work more "objective" or intersubjectively available to a non-Baha'i audience. (Perhaps the devotional and apologetic tradition of Persian Baha'i scholarship is in evidence here.) For the book to be taken more seriously in the academic world, the revised edition must take cognizance of both the research tradition and the community of discourse as a whole, and not treat that tradition as reductively as he claims it treats Baha'u'llah's revelation. However, these recommendations should not significantly detract from the merits of *Logos and Civiliza-*

tion. The book is rich with new information, provisional translations, and what one might call a conceptual crystallization of Baha'u'llah's revelation.

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**Citation:** Christopher Buck. Review of Saiedi, Nader, *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of BahÖ'u'llÖ;h*. H-Bahai, H-Net Reviews. March, 2004.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9090>

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