



## Reviews of Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies, No. 1 (May, 1997)

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Review of Juan R. I. Cole, "Behold the Man: Baha'u'llah on the Life of Jesus," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65.1 (1997): 47-71.

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Islam is not often represented in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Even less so is Baha'ism, the independent, minor world religion known as the Baha'i Faith, which emerged from its sectarian chrysalis and decisively broke from Islam in the last century. The publication of "Behold the Man: Baha'u'llah on the Life of Jesus" is thus something of an event in the emergence of Baha'i studies as a recognized sub-field in the Study of Religion.

The founder of the Baha'i faith was Mirza Husayn-`Ali Nuri (d. 1892), known as Baha' Allah (the \*Glory of God\*), or \*Baha'u'llah\* (the now lexicalized form reflecting the official Baha'i spelling established under an old transliteration convention). What is significant about Cole's topic of investigation is that, in the Islamic context, Baha'u'llah's statements about Jesus Christ are highly unusual. Cole explores this extraordinary religious phenomenon and attempts to explain why. His thesis is that \*Baha'u'llah's references to Jesus are characterized by presentism, insofar as he invokes Christ to illuminate a contemporary situation within Babi-Baha'i history\* (47). Cole suggests that

the rise of the Great Powers in nineteenth-century Europe, combined with the presence of Christian missionaries in Iran itself, precipitated a interest throughout the Middle East in Christianity (47-8).

Cole reviews the classical Islamic attitude toward Christianity, which included the dominant view (based on Qur'an 4:46) that the Christian scriptures had suffered textual corruption (tahrif) at the hands of Christian interpolators (49). \*The issue of access to the text changed radically in the nineteenth century,\* Cole observes, \*when for the first time Protestant missionaries had Bibles printed and distributed\* (49-50).

Baha'u'llah in fact championed the minority view (held by Ibn Khaldun and Tabari) which held that \*tahrif\* (interpolation) was not textual alteration, but simply bad \*tafsir\* (interpretation). Citing a relevant passage from Baha'u'llah's most important doctrinal text, the \*Book of Certitude\* (Kitab-i Iqan), Cole observes: \*To believe in both the Bible and the Qur'an was seldom attempted and that Baha'u'llah did so profoundly affected his image of Jesus\* (50).

What, one may ask, was Baha'u'llah's purpose in rehabilitating the authority of the Gospel witness in a Muslim context? Cole suggests that there was an eschatological incentive, in that Christian (and Sunni/Shi`a) expectations of the parousia (return) of Jesus at the eschaton (End-Time) resonated with popular Shi`ite expectations of the messianic figure known as the \*Mahdi\* (50) and that such expectations might find their fulfillment in the truth-claims of the Bab (d. 1850), Baha'u'llah's herald, and, by extension, in Baha'u'llah himself. Christ's passion, moreover, prefigured the tragic martyrdom of Muhammad's grandson, Husayn, the pathos of which has largely defined folk Shi`ism. \*Jesus' passion,\* writes Cole, \*opened up the possibility that the site of redemption could be a prophetic figure and so helped justify and infuse with meaning the martyrdom of the Bab and the imprisonments of Baha'u'llah\* (51).

In the main body of the article, Cole reviews Baha'u'llah's discourses on Jesus within the framework of the Gospel account. Thus, Baha'u'llah attends to such matters as the Virgin Birth and how this had scandalized Mary, and how this birth was signaled the appearance of a star in the heavens, resulting in the visit of the Magi at the Nativity, a tradition that has long had associations with Persian Zoroastrianism (51). The advent of Jesus' precursor, John the Baptist, provided an ideal typological foil for Baha'u'llah's contemporizing agenda, such that: \*The narratives of Jesus' birth and baptism inevitably contained within them implicit legitimations of the Babi break with Islam and the Baha'i evolution out of Babism\* (53).

Jesus' itinerant and ascetic life-style was not borne of mendicancy but of his prophetic calling, thus affording certain parallels with Baha'u'llah's forerunner, the Bab. As Cole notes: \*Jesus is implicitly invoked as a justification for the Bab, who, like the man from Nazareth, became penniless and was arrested once he proclaimed his mission\* (54).

Baha'u'llah spoke of the authority of Jesus, conceived as spiritual sovereignty, reinforced by access to supernatural powers (as in the power to heal) and prerogatives traditionally seen as vested in God alone (as in the authority to forgive sin). This authority was neither self-seeking aggrandizement, nor did it carry with it statist pretensions. drawing a parallel to himself, \*Baha'u'llah had to convince the state that he had no plans to promote a Babi-style theocracy but rather that he accepted the validity of the civil state\* (55). Cole perhaps missed an opportunity here to capitalize on the stark contrast Baha'u'llah's policy afforded with the historically tenuous and fickle Shi`i pledges of support for temporal authority vested in the monarchy, in exchange for state support of clerical interests, particularly in enforcement of the Shi`ite version of the Islamic law code, the shari`a.

Baha'u'llah's quietist policy went beyond enlightened self-interest, as it brooked no compromise with \*matters of principle, such as the Baha'i belief in the need for constitutional and parliamentary rule\* (55). In citing Rom. 13:1-2 (adduced as a parallel to Jesus' \*Render unto Caesar\* saying at Mk. 12:17), Baha'u'llah's appeal to St. Paul is remarkable in that it steers clear of the popular Muslim version of the so-called Jesus/Paul debate, which caricatures Paul as the corruptor of pristine Christianity, being the religion of Jesus free of later, divinizing Christological overlays that have always offended Muslim conceptions of the monarchy of God.

Illustrative of Baha'u'llah's hermeneutic of interpreting Jesus' miracles as primarily spiritual events irrespective of the historicity of the miracle narratives themselves, Cole quotes at length a passage in which Baha'u'llah eulogizes Jesus. While the in-text attribution is correct, the reader might mistakenly assume that this text was taken from the Book of Certitude (Kitab-i Iqan), which is mentioned in the sentence immediately following the quote.

Baha'u'llah depicts Jesus as \*primarily a teacher of Wisdom rather than a miracle worker\* (57). Moreover, \*Baha'u'llah's Jesus\*, according to Cole, \*...provided an alternative model for prophecy from that of the wealthy and powerful Prophet Muhammad at the end of his life\* and advances a \*politically quietist interpretation\* in the service of \*a new, non-theocratic model\* for church-state relations (57).

Cole proceeds to Jesus' arrest and trial as \*scenes to which Baha'u'llah repeatedly adverts in his writings\* (58). The trial of Jesus is presented as a type of the kind of interrogation of the Bab at the instance of the Shi`ite clergy. Throughout the events culminating in his redemptive Passion, Baha'u'llah portrays Jesus as resolute with respect to his mission and God-given authority. When the high-priest Caiaphas demands to know who Jesus thinks he is, the latter replies (in a paraphrase of Mk.

14:61): \*Beholdest thou not the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and might?\* (59). Cole observes that \*Baha'u'llah is struck by Christ's bold declaration of power at a time when he was to all appearances completely vulnerable\* (59). In fact, throughout all of his writings, Baha'u'llah draws frequent parallels between the rejectionist Jewish priesthood at the time of Christ and the nineteenth-century Muslim clergy. As Cole demonstrates, this parallelism is accomplished by the simple substitution of the Islamic term \*`ulama<sup>1</sup>\* for rabbis, with special reference to the high priest Caiaphas and to Annas as well (59).

Drawing on the work of B. Todd Lawson, Cole contrasts Baha'u'llah's view of the crucifixion with the substitutionary theory popular in Islam.

Again, Baha'u'llah opts for the minority view in accepting the basic historicity of the passion narratives (61). Baha'u'llah also affirms the redemptive effects of the Cross, although not in an exclusivist way, by drawing a parallel with the offering up of Abraham's firstborn son and with the martyrdom of Imam Husayn as well (62). This redemption, however, has nothing to do with original sin, a notion that is utterly rejected by Islam and the Baha'i faith. Another aspect of the sacrifice of Jesus is prophetic. In the \*Surat al-Sultan\*, Baha'u'llah gives a mystical account of the foreknowledge of Jesus, which Cole recounts: \*In the Surat as-Sultan written in the early Acre period for the Baha'is of Sultanabad, Baha'u'llah depicts Jesus upon the cross, confusedly noticing blood upon his tunic and being questioned and taunted. The dove of holiness then informs him of what will befall Baha'u'llah (al-ghulam) when he arises in the station of Christ's return, and it is at that point that Jesus cries out and departs from this world, ascending to the presence of God\* (62).

In a radical departure from the prevailing Islamic view, Baha'u'llah presents the crucifixion as a cosmic event, and ties this in with what one might call the Baha'i theory of civilization (a characterization made by Yale emeritus Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh in a lecture I heard some years ago).

In an epistle to a Christian cleric of Constantinople, Baha'u'llah writes of the crucifixion:

**\*Know thou that when the Son ... [al-Ibn] yielded up His breath to God [sallama ar-ruh], the whole creation wept with a great weeping. By sacrificing Himself, however, a fresh capacity was infused into all created things. Its evidences, as witnessed in all the peoples of the earth, are now manifest before thee, the deepest wisdom which the sages have uttered, the profoundest learning which any mind hath unfolded, the arts which the ablest hands have produced, the influence exerted by the most potent of rulers, are but manifestations of the quickening power released by His transcendent, His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spirit\* (63). On the significance of this passage, Cole comments: \*Jesus' passion is here identified as the motive force behind Christian civilization, the unseen source of human advance. On the one hand, this passage evokes something like the Eastern Orthodox image of Jesus as the Cosmic Christ, as Pantocrator, the Ruler of All. On the other, Baha'u'llah as a nineteenth-century thinker innovates in linking the redemption gained by the cross to ideas such as civilization, progress, and the arts and sciences. Christ not only saved individual souls but engendered by his teachings and self-sacrifice an entire civilization\* (63). In sustaining his thesis of presentism, Cole holds that \*the passion of Christ helped justify the passion of the Bab\* (63).**

**Cole has located a text in which Baha'u'llah speaks of Christ's resurrection. This text is \*a poetic passage\* in which \*Baha'u'llah depicts himself as having adorned the cross in his previous manifestation as Christ, saying that he is now risen from the dead\* (63). This leads Cole to a consideration of \*Paraclete and Parousia\*, which is the final section of the paper prior to the conclusion. The Bab had proclaimed himself to be the advent of the long-awaited Mahdi--a messianic figure of the lineage of Muhammad would appear on the Last Day to restore justice and equity to the world after it had become bereft of such virtues. The Bab himself, like John the Baptist, had foretold the advent on one greater than he, namely, \*He Whom God shall make Manifest\*. In identifying himself as this figure foretold by the Bab, Baha'u'llah \*was as a result claiming to be the spiritual return of Christ\* (65).**

**Baha'u'llah's references to Christ and the New Testament served to relativize the Islamic heritage. \*For a new religion to emerge from Islam, with its dense, millennium-old traditions and highly elaborated religious scholarship,\* Cole observes, \*was as difficult as for a moon to escape the gravity of its planet\* (66). Invoking the French linguist Saussure's metaphor of the chessboard, Cole suggests that Baha'u'llah's adducing of Christian scriptures reconfigured the revelatory position of the Qur'an as dispensational rather than final, causing it to look quite different from the traditional Muslim perspective of it. There is also the element of a potential Christian audience, although this cannot have been the primary motive, considering that Baha'u'llah had adduced the New Testament in some of his early Baghdad works, evidently for interpretive rather**

than for missiological reasons (66-7).

Cole argues that Baha'u'llah's portrayal of Jesus is governed by a personal sense of mission. *\*Baha'u'llah conceived of himself as a prophet teaching wisdom,\** writes Cole, *\*as a conduit for the irruption of divine grace and energy into the world, as a founder of a new, global civilization, and he depicted Jesus in the same terms\** (67). *\*The final image of Jesus in Baha'u'llah's writings,\** Cole concludes, *\*is as the Prisoner of Acre in western Galilee\** (68). Thus, the figure of Jesus is eschatologically assimilated to Baha'u'llah himself.

**Evaluation:** This is a nearly flawless paper, typographically marred only by the intrusion of forward slashes where macrons were intended. Cole's argument is solid and convincing. More, of course, could have been said on Baha'u'llah's use of other Christian themes, such as divine-man Christology in the context of Baha'u'llah's theophanology, on his personification of the New Jerusalem mentioned in the Revelation of St. John, on the event and substance of Baha'u'llah's epistle to Pope Pius IX, on the conversion of the first Christian Baha'i, as well as the striking parallels between Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Visitation for Imam Husayn and his treatment of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, and closer attention to Baha'u'llah's sense of mission to the Christian West as reflected in his proclamatory epistles to the great monarchs of Europe. But space constrains the author to exercise selectivity.

What Cole has achieved--and this is why this article is methodologically so significant--is to accomplish two things at once: (1) to contextualize Baha'u'llah's thought within Islam and (2) to bring into bold relief the contrasts as well as the continuities with Islam. While his effort falls short of a full-scale analysis of Baha'u'llah's *\*paradigm-shift\** with respect to the Islamic heritage, Cole has initiated the hermeneutic procedure of nuancing such a differentiation. In whatever way one might define Islamicity, Baha'u'llah has clearly gone beyond Islam in establishing a new worldview that operates from outside of the Islamic framework, while clearly having been structured by it. To use Cole's metaphor mentioned earlier, the Baha'i Faith is the only millenarian *\*moon\** to have escaped the orbit of Islam, and is now charting its own course.

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