

Is the Baha'i Faith a World Religion?

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Is the Baha'i Faith a World Religion?

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The Bahá'í Faith has, during its 140-year history, succeeded in spreading itself over most of the globe. Indeed, so successful has it been in this regard that it is now considered by one authoritative source to be the second most widespread religion in the world after Roman Catholicism.[1]

This geographical diffusion has not been a steady process throughout the whole of Bahá'í history. Rather the picture has been one of gradual spread and consolidation within one cultural world followed by a breakthrough into another. Some early examples of this process are the break out of its Shi'i Iranian confines into the Arab and Turkish Sunni world (largely as a result of the successive exiles of Bahá'u'lláh into Iraq, Turkey, and Syria), or when it first began to convert significant numbers of Jews and Zoroastrians in Iran and Christians in Syria and Egypt. However, most of the geographical spread of the religion has been as a result of two major breakthroughs.[2]

The first occurred at about the turn of the present century when the religion managed to break out of its erstwhile mainly Muslim Middle-Eastern constituency and spread to Christian North America and Europe. The foundations of this achievement had been laid from the earliest days of the new religion when Bahá'u'lláh in two of his writings from the Baghdad period[3] addressed Christian issues. Then towards the end of the nineteenth century, the famous Bahá'í scholar, Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygání, extended these foundations by writing extensively on Bahá'í approaches to the New and Old Testaments. This was followed by the conversion of numerous Jews, in Iran, and Christians, in Syria and Egypt, to the Bahá'í Faith. It was Syrian Christian converts in particular who were largely responsible for taking the Bahá'í Faith to Christian North America, from where there was further spread to Europe and Australia.

The second major breakthrough occurred from about 1955 to 1965 when the Bahá'í Faith began to spread rapidly in the villages of the Third World. Again the foundations of this breakthrough can be traced back to earlier periods, perhaps to the spread into the villages of Iran in the earliest days. Although small numbers of Bahá'ís had gone to Latin America from the 1930s and to Africa in the early 1950s, there had been few conversions of indigenous peoples. Then suddenly from the late 1950s onwards, there was a rapid increase in the number of Bahá'ís in many of the countries of the non-Muslim Third World. This breakthrough occurred principally, it would seem, as a result of the decision of the Bahá'ís to change the focus of their missionary activities from the urban, Western-influenced elites in these countries to the rural, illiterate masses. As in the first major break-through, some adjustment of the basic Bahá'í message was necessary in order to reach this new target group. In India, for example, where the Bahá'í message had for decades been primarily addressed to Indian Muslims and Parsees (Zoroastrians), a re-interpretation of the Bahá'í message in accordance with Hindu ideas was necessary. The influx of large numbers of rural peoples from various Third World cultural backgrounds has certainly made a great change in the make-up of the world Bahá'í community. Some idea of the extent of this comparatively sudden change can be gleaned from the fact that prior to 1954, approximately 94% of the world Bahá'í population consisted of Iranians. Today, a little more than thirty years later, that figure is about 7% while Bahá'ís from the non-Muslim Third World represent some 90% of the Bahá'í world.[4] Bahá'ís now live in most of the countries and major dependent territories of the world.

The Bahá'í Faith has therefore certainly gone around the world. But is it yet a world religion? Of course, this depends on one's definition of "world religion". If one were speaking merely in terms of geographical spread, then the Bahá'í Faith would certainly merit the appellation. However, I propose to look question from the viewpoint of a wider definition of the term "world religion".

In one of his writings, `Abdu'l-Bahá states that although human beings are, alone among the physical creation, capable of manifesting all of the Names and Attributes of God, yet each specific individual person manifests these Names and Attributes to different degrees, and one of the Names and Attributes predominates over the others in any individual.[5] Given the large number of Names and attributes of God and the range of permutations and gradations available, this results in the wide variety of human types that can be observed. In this passage, `Abdu'l-Bahá is explaining the different ways in which God is conceptualised by different human beings and he goes on to give some examples of what he means. He states that in those individuals in whom the Divine names "Sanctity" and "Transcendence" predominate, there is a tendency to conceptualise God as being completely free from any connection with the world of creation, which is

indeed considered to be utter nothingness compared with God. In other individuals in whom the Names "All-Knowing", "Divinity" and "Lordship" predominate, God is only conceptualised in relation to the creation, since it is only with the existence of a creation that these attributes can come into being.[6] Thus each individual has a unique manner in which he or she manifest the Names of God, the individual's soul-psyche complex, and this in turn results in a unique viewpoint on such matters as God and world. Since both of the viewpoints which `Abdu'l-Bahá discusses are valid it is not surprising that statements can be found in the Baha'í scriptures supporting both. For example the first viewpoint is supported by the following quotation:

No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness.[7]

And for the second position:

Turn thy sight unto thyself that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.[8]

Therefore, no person has any right to claim that their understanding of either God or the world is the true one in any absolute sense - it is only a description relative to their viewpoint.

This people, all of them, have pictured a god in the realm of the mind, and worship that image for themselves . . . But that Essence of Essences, that Invisible of Invisibles, is sanctified above all human speculation, and never to be overtaken by the mind of man. [9]

`Abdu'l-Bahá is in effect saying that the different ways of conceptualising the Absolute Reality (which in Western culture is called God) are each "true" relative to the individual who sincerely holds such a view.[10] This conclusion brings us back to our consideration of the definition of a world religion. We may now define a world religion as one which satisfies the need and fulfills the expectations of all types of humanity, i.e. it must be true to the various viewpoints of the different types of human soul-psyche complex.

Before going on to consider the Bahá'í Faith, let us briefly consider the manner in which other religions fulfill this definition and become entitled to the appellation of "world religions". The two types of human soul-psyche complex that `Abdu'l-Bahá refers to in the above-mentioned passage can be thought of as representing two extremes of human type which can be used as examples. The first type, which considers God as being completely separate from the world, is the predominant type in the Western world. This viewpoint emphasises the otherness of God and His distance from humanity. Its concomitant attitude is one of worship of the Deity and devotion. This represents the attitude of the mainline orthodoxies of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic religions. The second type mentioned above, which only conceptualises the Absolute in relation to the world, is the major religious form in the Eastern religions. Its aim is to realise the ultimate identity of the Absolute and man and

this is achieved usually through meditation or other techniques that involve an altered state of consciousness. In all the major orthodox religions of the West, Judaism, Islam (whether Sunni or Shi'i) and Christianity (whether Roman Catholicism or the major Protestant movements), the first type of approach is the main-stream of orthodox thought, but the second type is catered for in various mystical movements, such as Jewish mysticism, Christian mysticism and Sufism. Taking Buddhism as an example of religions of the East, we see that the main stream of the religion as expounded by Buddhist monks is clearly of the second type, but if we look to the religion which the ordinary people follow, we see that it is largely a religion of worship and devotion suiting the first type of soul-psyche complex. Thus each major world religion caters for both extremes of human soul-psyche type as well as all gradations in between. They each fulfill the needs and aspirations of all types of humanity. However the achievement of this breadth has not been a smooth and harmonious process. In the West, Christian gnostics and mystics have been declared heretics and persecuted by orthodox Christianity, while Sufis have experienced the same fate from their co-religionists. In the East, those whose religious outlook is of the first type are regarded as practising an inferior form of religion.

The Bahá'í Faith began in a Muslim country and its initial spread was to other Muslim countries and to the countries of the Christian West. It is not surprising therefore that the formulations of the Bahá'í Faith that were evolved during its early history were closely patterned on the models of the Western Judaeo-Christian-Islamic religious and cultural world. When Bahá'í pioneers from the Western cultural world first began to take the Bahá'í teachings to the Third World, they naturally took these formulations with them and taught this to the indigenous peoples of the Third World as being the Bahá'í

Faith. Let us briefly examine the main features of the Western cultural mode as compared with other modes, such as the African or South American tribal cultures or the more sophisticated Indian and East Asian cultures. The main features of the Western approach to any subject are the tendency to look at what is being examined as being separate from the person who is doing the examining (i.e. Cartesian Dualism); to reduce what is being examined to its component elements (reductionism); to rely heavily on rational processes of analysis and reasoning; and to consider that an aggressive, uncompromising pursuit of the truth (regardless of the means) is laudable. These features of Western culture have, to a large extent, stood it in good stead. They have been a major factor in the development of science and technology in the West and have contributed to the present situation where Western culture dominates the world and threatens to overwhelm all other cultures. These other cultures are frequently characterised by attitudes that run counter to those prevailing in the West: a tendency to emphasise relationships rather than things; to look at the whole rather than the parts; to attribute great importance to intuitive sources of knowledge; and to consider the means to an end to be just as important as the end

itself.[11]

We have a situation where Bahá'ís have brought with them to the non-Muslim Third World formulations of the Bahá'í Faith that have been evolved in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic world and are therefore to some extent foreign to these other cultural worlds. Let us examine some examples of this.

One notable example is the fact that the Bahá'í book most frequently translated into other languages has been Esslemont's Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era. This book was a major advance in the clear formulation of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith when it was first published in 1923. But its British author undoubtedly speaks mainly to a Western audience. Its appeal to other cultures is likely to be limited to the Western-educated

élites of those nations. And yet, despite the fact that a Bahá'í community has existed in a country like India since the time of Bahá'u'lláh, very little has yet been produced which can be said to be a genuinely indigenous

formulation of the Bahá'í Faith. The catalogue of the Indian Bahá'í Publishing Trust contains mostly translations in the native Indian languages of scripture or of introductory books such as Bahá'u'lláh

and the New Era by non-Indians.

Another example is the manner in which Bahá'ís have tended to deal with the problems of presenting the Bahá'í Faith to Buddhists. Buddhism does not have a concept of God in the same way as the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic religions have and therefore there is also no concept of a prophet from God. Instead of trying to formulate the Bahá'í Faith in such a way as to take account of Buddhist attitudes and the Buddhist way of seeing things, Bahá'ís have insisted on reformulating Buddhism in a manner conformable to the Bahá'í Faith (or rather to the Western formulation of the Bahá'í Faith that is accepted as the norm).

Hence the attempt to find a God in Buddhism and thereby to recast Buddhism with all the trappings of the Western religions: a prophet, a Holy Book, prophecies, etc. When Bahá'ís are challenged with the fact that there is not much evidence for all of this in the Buddhist writings, the usual response is that the original teachings of the Buddha have been lost. Not surprisingly, Buddhists are not very convinced by the exercise. However politely they may listen to such an exposition, most are not likely to be sympathetic to a viewpoint that says, in effect, that the whole basis of their religious belief is false and the civilisation which they have erected over the past 2,500 years and the writings of all of their most respected saints and scholars have been founded on error. It would seem rather impudent of Bahá'ís even to advance such a hypothesis and it is almost certainly only the fact that tolerance is one of the strongest Buddhist virtues that has prevented a vigorous Buddhist response. A more

constructive approach to Buddhism can begin with those statements of Bahá'u'lláh that are most akin to Buddhist viewpoints. Such statements as:

Pleasant is the realm of being wert thou to attain thereto;
glorious is the domain of eternity shouldst thou pass beyond the world
of mortality; sweet is the holy ecstasy if thou drinkest of the mystic
chalice from the hands of the celestial Youth. Shouldst thou attain this
station, thou wouldst be freed from destruction and death, from toil and
sin.[12]

Nor indeed is this more constructive view in any way contrary to the Bahá'í teachings. Whilst it is true that the Bahá'í writings do contain the idea that the true teachings of a religion can become obscured by the passage of time and the attempts of men to interpret them, the principle is also laid down in the Kitáb-i-Íqán that once the physical presence of the Manifestation of God is withdrawn from the earth, God would not cause the teachings of the Manifestation to be completely lost also for this would be contrary to His Mercy and Grace.[13] From this it would appear that the saving aspects of the message of the Buddha must still be present in the Buddhist teachings as handed down in the Buddhist tradition.

In summary then, taking Buddhism as an example, the point is that Buddhism and Buddhist culture enshrines a certain worldview which predetermines how Buddhists see the world. If the Bahá'í Faith is presented to Buddhists in a manner that is incongruous with that worldview, then it is unlikely to receive a sympathetic hearing. If Bahá'ís try to change the Buddhist worldview in order to make it conform to a Western vision of the Bahá'í Faith, they are equally unlikely to be successful. Only a presentation of the Bahá'í Faith that is fully congruent with the Buddhist worldview is likely to succeed in any major way.

This is similarly true for all other cultures and societies.

What must be realised is that at the heart of all religion is the human relationship with the Ultimate Reality (I have avoided using the term God so as to include Buddhism). Since this relationship has no similarity with any other relationship that we experience in our lives, it is beyond the ability of words to describe it. Therefore every culture has evolved a set of metaphors and symbols to express it. But in the process of bringing that relationship down from the level of experience to the level of words, the innate biases of particular cultural viewpoints come to the fore. As a result, the relationship may be expressed in quite different, even seemingly contradictory, ways. For example, the Ultimate Reality may appear positive, personal and active according to one viewpoint (God in Western Judaeo-Christian-Islamic culture) but an empty void according to another viewpoint (the concept of Shunyata in Buddhism). But these contradictions only arise when two terms from two different cultures are placed side by side and then interpreted

as though they occurred within the same culture, i.e. from only one viewpoint. If an empty void is seen from a Western viewpoint as a description of God, it immediately appears faulty and wrong - a pointless, fruitless dead-end. (If God is an empty void, what can that possibly lead to in terms of religious expression?) But seen within the context of Buddhism, Ultimate Reality viewed as an empty void is a rich and fruitful concept leading to a wide diversity of religious expression.

Since each set of metaphors and symbols is specific to that culture, an outsider cannot appreciate the full significance of a given term or expression. The real problem is that each individual person is only capable of adopting one cultural viewpoint at a time. This is true even with those who have expended a great deal of effort in getting inside a culture that is different to their own so that they can see things from a different viewpoint. Even with such persons, all that they can say is that what appears right from one cultural viewpoint appears wrong from another. There is no absolute standard by which to judge the relationship with Ultimate Reality. Where Bahá'ís have carried out the process of re-interpreting the Bahá'í teachings using local cultural symbols and metaphors, the results have been extremely good. One example of this is in India. Here Bahá'í teachers have transferred Bahá'í

concepts into corresponding Hindu concepts. Thus for example, Bahá'u'lláh has become an Avatar or more particularly the Kalkin Avatar, the Avatar who will appear at the end of the Kali-Yuga, the close of the cosmic aeon. And in addition, traditional Hindu vehicles of expression such as bhajans (songs with a religious theme) are being used. Of particular importance in India is the avoidance by Baha'ís of cultural symbols that are closely associated with Islam, in view of the age long history of antipathy between Islam and Hinduism.[14]

But this lesson does not appear to have been learned in other parts of the world. The Bahá'í Faith has up to the present time largely spread through the process of Bahá'ís from the "West" (i.e. from the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim world) moving to other parts of the world and attempting to interest the peoples there in the Faith. But in most places, these Bahá'í "pioneers" from the West continue to teach the Bahá'í Faith using the symbols and metaphors of the West, an alien culture for the indigenous peoples.

How then can the Bahá'í teachings be reinterpreted so as to appear congruent to those with cultural viewpoints other than the Western Judaeo-Christian-Islamic viewpoint within which the Bahá'í

teachings are currently expressed? Certainly one of the keys to this process is the powerful tool of consultation. If true consultation is carried out between the Western pioneers, with their advantages of literacy and knowledge of the Bahá'í Writings, and the indigenous Bahá'ís with their knowledge and intuitive understanding of what aspects of the Bahá'í teachings and what approaches are most congruent with local culture, then it is very likely that a significant start to the process

can be made. However, the proviso for this is that "true" consultation occurs. Great care must be taken over this since it is all too easy for the Western Bahá'ís (given the characteristic qualities of Western culture described above) unconsciously to dominate any consultation and intimidate indigenous Bahá'ís into agreeing with positions put forward by the Western Bahá'ís. This is particularly likely to occur where Western Bahá'ís fail to differentiate what the Bahá'í

Writings say from their own culture-bound understanding of these writings. This will be likely to lead to the Western Bahá'ís authoritatively stating that a particular approach to the Bahá'í teachings which is congruent with local culture is contrary to the Bahá'í teachings, where in fact it is only contrary to the culture-bound understanding of the Bahá'í teachings current in their home communities in the West. One of the key areas where Western Bahá'ís are most likely to fall into the trap of imposing their cultural models on indigenous peoples is that of the terminology for key concepts such as "God", "prophet", etc. In most parts of the world, Christian missionaries have arrived many years before the Bahá'ís. The traditional Christian missionary attitude to indigenous religious forms has been to treat these as pagan ideas and practices which must be obliterated if Christianity is to be established. Therefore, in most places, the missionaries have created their own words to express the concepts of "God", "prophet" etc. But Bahá'ís look upon all sincere expressions of religious feeling as being aspects of a wider truth (in accordance with different types of peoples as described above), therefore they do not accept the Christian missionary attitude. But when the Bahá'ís are trying to translate the Bahá'í teachings into local languages, the easiest thing to do is to borrow the terms that have been created by the Christian missionaries. The Western Bahá'ís can immediately relate to these terms and they feel comfortable with them. In some areas it may be appropriate to do this -- where, for example, local religious terms have fallen into disuse because of the predominance of Christianity. But the unspoken (but perhaps keenly felt) implication of borrowing these terms is that the Bahá'ís agree with the Christian missionary assessment of the local forms of religion, and this becomes yet another instance of Western Bahá'ís imposing their understanding of the Bahá'í Faith. It may be much more difficult for the Bahá'ís to achieve sufficient understanding of the local religious forms to enable them to translate correctly Bahá'í ideas into local indigenous forms, but the effort is likely to be well rewarded in the greater appreciation and understanding of indigenous Bahá'ís, who may have no clear understanding of the teachings if they are expressed in alien form.

Another important psychological trap is for Western Bahá'ís to imagine that the aspects of the Bahá'í Faith which most appealed to them will be the aspects that appeal to those from a completely

different culture. This may appear, when put down in black and white, so obvious that it hardly needs stating, but in fact these cultural differences are extremely subtle and even the most wary person cannot avoid occasional mistakes. In the West, for example, the fact that Bahá'u'lláh has made several strong statements about the importance of agriculture is rarely given any prominence in presentations of the Faith. And yet in the predominantly-rural third World nations, it perhaps should be given much more emphasis.

In the same way that certain teachings should be brought to the fore in some areas so as to appeal more to local culture, so some teachings may need to be placed in the background. The Baha'í teaching in some areas such as alcohol, drugs, the position of women, etc. may clash markedly with local culture. In such cases, the Bahá'í teachings should be presented in as attractive a way as possible so that the positive aspects are seen first and appreciated. Once the enthusiasm for the Baha'í Faith is present, then the other teachings can be introduced in a gradual manner. It is important to realise that traditional societies change at a very slow rate and therefore patience is needed as it may be years, perhaps even generations, before much change is seen on points where the Baha'í

teachings and the local culture conflict.[15]

Having adapted the Bahá'í teachings themselves to indigenous modes, the next task is to adapt the method of delivering the Bahá'í teachings

so as to accord more closely to indigenous modes. Again the clue must come from a study of the local religious traditions themselves. In one area, stories may be the most important mode for conveying religious truths, in another it may be songs, or art, or drama, or dance. This is an area in which the Bahá'ís of the West have failed even in relation to their own culture: one of the key modes for the propagation of religious truths in Christian culture has been through hymns, but Bahá'ís have signally failed to appeal to that cultural taste in recent years.

For several different groups of Bahá'ís there are clear roles in this process of developing local adaptations of the Bahá'í teachings. For the Bahá'í "pioneers" from the West, the need to suppress their natural tendency to dominate the community and impose their own viewpoint of the Faith has been discussed above. For the Bahá'í national and local institutions, there is a need to set up appropriate committees and working parties, which can develop these new approaches to the Bahá'í teachings, and then the provision of the resources necessary to put them into effect. The Continental Board of Counsellors also have a valuable role in that, being able to compare different national communities, they may have a better overview of what is happening in a particular country and they are therefore in a good position to provide guidance. From Bahá'í scholars there is a clear need for research in two main areas. Firstly, there is a wealth of anthropological research into local forms of religious expression in many parts of the

world. This material is most easily found not in the localities to which it applies but in the libraries of the universities of the West. Such material if located by Bahá'í scholars and provided for the use of Bahá'í pioneers (or potential pioneers in pioneer institutes) could be of assistance in greatly shortening the time it takes for Bahá'í pioneers to acclimatise culturally to their new surroundings, and would give them many clues as to ways in which the Bahá'í teachings could be presented so as to conform to the cultural norms of the area. Secondly, Bahá'í scholars may have the right training to be in a position to look dispassionately at the Bahá'í writings in order to separate what is the essential core from what is cultural accretions.

In summary then, the question asked in the title of this paper: "Is the Bahá'í Faith a World Religion?", can be answered thus: it has the potential to become a world religion but as yet that potential has only been manifested to a limited degree.

Notes

1. See D. Barrett (ed.). *World Christian Encyclopaedia*. Oxford. 1982, p 6
- 2 On this concept of cultural breakthroughs see P. Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, Cambridge, 1987, pp 162-171.
- 3 *The Kitáb-i-Íqán and the Jawáhiru'l-Asrár*.
4. For the derivation of these figures, see P. Smith and M. Momen "The Bahá'í Faith 1957-86; a survey of Contemporary Developments", *Religion*, forthcoming.
5. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Sharh-i Kuntu Kanzan Makhfiyan*, (Commentary on the Islamic tradition "I was a Hidden Treasure...") in *Makatib-i `Abdu'l-Bahá*, Cairo, Matba`a Kurdistan al-`Ilmiyya, 1330/1912, vol 2, pp 41-44.
6. *ibid*.
7. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, London, 1961, p 63.
8. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic, no. 13.
9. Selections from the writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p 54-5.
10. This subject is dealt with in more detail in M. Momen, "Relativism as a Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics", forthcoming in a volume of papers in memory of the late Hand of the Cause, Mr Hasan Balyuzi to be published by Kalimat Press.
11. It is not without interest that these two sets of attitudes correspond to a large degree to the differing attitudes between men and women.
12. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Persian. No.70.
13. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, London, 1961, p 57-8.
- 14 For a further consideration of the manner in which the Bahá'í Faith has been adapted to Indian cultural norms. see William Garlington, "Bahá'í bhajans", *World Order*, vol 16, no 2 (Winter 1982). pp 43-49.
- 15 On the subject of the gradual assimilation of Bahá'í teachings by traditional societies. see M. Momen, *The Bahá'í Faith and*

Traditional Societies. Dialogue magazine. Vol 1. No 4, Winter/Spring
1987, pp 9-13.

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