

evokes a negative response. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram in his book, *Music, Devotions, and Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, quotes Horace Holley as saying in the late 1940s that "congregational worship among the Bahá'ís consists of the reading of passages from all extant Holy Books, with no ritualistic device..."(2) Some forty years later, American Bahá'ís still boast about this lack of ritual in the Bahá'í Faith. Some express alarm when they detect any attempt to promote a ritual. Even the lighting of candles at a Holy Day commemoration or a Feast can generate a letter to the American Bahá'í conveying alarm that "rituals" were sneaking into Bahá'í gatherings.

This long-standing American Bahá'í antipathy for ritual is exemplified in the reaction to the use of hymns earlier in this century. In the 1920s hymns were commonly sung in Bahá'í worship services but their use was hotly debated. By around 1940 hymns had petered out due to the opposition they faced, in spite of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's obvious approval of this musical form.

There are probably multiple reasons for the general feeling of disapproval of rituals. First, Shoghi Effendi admonished the Bahá'ís to avoid rigid rituals in Bahá'í meetings. It can be argued, however, that the Bahá'ís opted to focus on the word "ritual" rather than on the word "rigid." While rituals are repetitive, they do not necessarily have to be rigid. When they are rigid, they take on a magical quality. People become frightened that some evil will befall them if there is any variation in the programme. One might assume that this is what Shoghi Effendi was warning against.

Many of the earlier Bahá'ís did not wish to differentiate themselves from other existing religious communities. They wanted the Bahá'í Faith to be an all-encompassing religion (or movement). As rituals serve the purpose of delineating one group from another while enhancing its sense of identity and well-being, they can send the message of exclusivity, something that these Bahá'ís thought should be avoided. Another probable reason for fear of rituals (though the case of hymns can be excluded here) lies in the fact that so many Bahá'ís in America were from Protestant and often Evangelical backgrounds. Almost by definition, people from these backgrounds are hostile to anything associated with Catholicism. Since in America elaborate religious rituals were almost exclusive to Catholicism, they would be considered suspect.

Suspicion of ritual activity has had rather peculiar effects on Bahá'í community life. Two types of occasions are regularly observed by Bahá'ís: the nine Holy Days and the Nineteen Day Feast. On three Holy Days the believers are enjoined to gather together at very specific times of the night or day, suggesting the potential for rather dramatic ritual enactment of events. However, except for Naw-Rúz, during which a party of some sort has come to be expected, Holy Days are generally celebrated or commemorated in a bland fashion. Services (and even this word is usually avoided) consist almost invariably of solo recitation of prayers and selected readings from sacred scripture or from other sources relating to the occasion. Fear of ritual is combined with the fact that these Holy Days do not have deep roots in the American culture. Therefore, they tend to be lacklustre. No deep mourning

occurs for the tragic death of the Báb, nor do exuberantly joyous feasts occur in honour of the new year.

Feasts are held every nineteen days and it is specified that they should be held between sunset of the preceding day and sunset of the actual date of the feast. Feasts have a very definite format. First, there are "devotions," again involving individual reading or recitation of prayers and selections from the sacred writings. In the case of the feast, they must be the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá. Devotions are followed by the "business" portion of the feast during which letters from the National Spiritual Assembly are read and reports from the Local Spiritual Assembly to the community are given. The showing of videos from the National Bahá'í Centre has also crept into the feast programme. The state of the funds is invariably reported and consultation about teaching is encouraged. Finally, there is a social portion in which the host of the Feast is expected to serve refreshments. Oddly enough, the origin of the Feast is the social portion. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh had both ordained that the individual should give hospitality to others in his home at least once each month, an institutionalisation of the highly developed Middle Eastern tradition of hospitality: "Verily, it is enjoined upon you to offer a feast, once in every month, though only water be served; for God hath purposed to bind hearts together..."(3) Yet, in the American Feast hospitality is usually a formality and one that is devoid of its most important aspect, i.e., the unstinting giving of yourself and your possessions to outsiders.

What is of principal interest here is that the programme for Feasts is highly regular and repetitive and Bahá'ís are unlikely to argue about either its format or its content. There are debates from time to time over whether a non-Bahá'í who happens to be present should be invited to leave the room for the Feast or parts thereof, or whether "Bahá'í hospitality" should prevail and the person be allowed to remain. Otherwise, the Feast proceeds according to a pre-ordained formula. In this way, it is a ritual. Yet, those very features that give rituals power, aesthetic appeal, and a sense of transcendence are lacking. There seems to be the conception that repetitive activities outside of those strictly laid down in the Bahá'í writings constitute ritual and are, therefore, forbidden. It is my contention that the Feast is actually a ritual but one that lacks the aesthetic embellishments that would enable it to fulfil its role in sustaining a sense of community solidarity and spiritual transcendence.

American Bahá'ís can no longer be members of churches, as were Genevieve Coy and Horace Holley. And, as mentioned previously, non-Bahá'ís cannot attend Feasts. Consequently, a sense of exclusivity has become part of the Bahá'í Faith. Therefore, to argue against rituals as being "exclusionary" in nature makes little sense. For a religion to survive, it has to have boundaries and a sense of uniqueness, all of which can be achieved through rituals. Yet, Bahá'ís pride themselves on the inclusivity of the Bahá'í Faith. The dilemma is to maintain the openness of the Bahá'í Faith to others, while achieving a distinctiveness enriched by traditions and sacred activities that

nourish individual and communal spirituality.

There is a possible solution to this dilemma. A heretofore neglected occasion for communal life could be brought to life; i.e., the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, in effect, dawn prayers.⁽⁴⁾ The advantage of the dawn-prayer devotional is that it is free of any element of administration. The believers, then, can develop this spiritual meeting in the manner that they wish and as often as they wish, leaving it open to non-Bahá'ís as well. It can also reflect the regional and cultural nature of the local community. It comes with challenges as well. Scheduling any event at dawn can be problematic, though probably this can be overcome through individual initiative. The larger problem is the one that is endemic to the American Bahá'í community: finding consensus about how to express one's spiritual life. Those from Calvinist and Catholic backgrounds (to name but two extremes) will have to come to terms, through love and tolerance, with this problem.

The lack of a clergy in the Bahá'í Faith almost guarantees that any rituals created would be simple in nature. The role of "priests" (in Victor Turner's sense of the term) is to maintain and preserve religious practices. The absence of priests means that the types of rituals generally associated with major world religions would be difficult to sustain. The Spiritual Assemblies, though consisting of lay people, would have to serve as priestly substitutes in maintaining religious practices. However, they have the additional duty, as well, i.e., helping to create them.

End Notes

Quoted in R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, *Music, Devotions, and Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* (Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History; Volume 4). (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1987) 271.

Ibid. 283.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) K57; literally, "hospitality has been enjoined upon you, though it be only with water..."

The term Mashriqu'l-Adhkár can refer to either the building where prayers are said or to the actual services themselves.

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