

The Baha'i Faith and Syncretism

Exported from Holy-Writings.com on 2026-09-16 — 1 clipping

Source: Bahá'í Library Online (bahai-library.com), curated by Jonah Winters.

Used by permission of the curator. Original citation: Robert Stockman, The Baha'i Faith and Syncretism, bahai-library.com.

[illegible]

The Baha'i Faith and Syncretism

Robert Stockman

published in Resource Guide for the Scholarly Study of the Bahá'í Faith.

Wilmette, IL: Research Office of the USBNC, 1997

One of the most common assumptions about the Bahá'í Faith stated in Religious Studies textbooks is that it is a syncretism. One introductory textbook even says the

Bahá'í Faith is "syncretistic by intention." It

is important to note, however, that the claim that the Bahá'í Faith is a syncretism is

strongly rejected by the Bahá'ís themselves and by their scriptures. Where does the idea

that the Bahá'í Faith is syncretic come from? What does the idea entail?

While the term syncretism has many meanings, a basic definition is provided by the Oxford English Dictionary: it is an "attempted union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenets or practices, especially in philosophy or religion." Historically, the word has been used to denote a religion that consists primarily, or wholly, of disparate ideas that are borrowed from other religious traditions. Such a religion is an "artificial" or "synthetic" religion, one which is not *sui generis* but is derivative.

Many scholars think that the Bahá'í Faith itself claims to be syncretic (hence

the above reference to "intention"). But this is not true. The Bahá'í religion

claims to consist of the teachings that God revealed to Bahá'u'lláh, prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'ís take such a claim very seriously;

in fact, Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be the return of Christ, the Promised One of all religions, and, in one sense, claimed to be God Godself.

The claim that the Bahá'í Faith is founded on revelation does not wholly obviate the issue of syncretism, because the Bahá'í concept of revelation does

not necessarily imply that Bahá'u'lláh's writings were totally uninfluenced

by

the world. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that virtually all of Bahá'u'lláh's literary corpus consists of letters ? some of book length ? written

in reply to questions by followers, critics, or interested bystanders. Since the revelation was in response to questions by human beings, the content of the revelation was at least partly shaped by the cultural conditions of the nineteenth-century Middle East. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh wrote in a distinct style, a style different from those of the Bab and Muhammad, two other individuals who, Bahá'ís believe, received revelation from God.

The fact that Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is in a distinctly personal style, and was in response to culturally conditioned questions, can be understood in different ways by Bahá'ís. Some Bahá'ís would be inclined to see the personal

style as a part of the process of divine revelation, and the questions as God-intended stimuli to bring out the revelation. Other Bahá'ís might understand revelation to consist of a divine assurance that Bahá'u'lláh's answers to questions, inspired in some sense by God but phrased in his own words and at least partly based on his education and experience, were guaranteed by God to be valid. In the latter perspective, revelation includes a creative process of sifting through existing ideas in Middle Eastern society, accepting some and rejecting others, and innovating frequently when the available ideas proved to be inadequate.

The influence of culture and language on revelation, however indirect, leaves the door open to the argument that the Bahá'í writings represent a syncretism.

But study of cultural and linguistic influences on the Christian revelation, or on the revelation claimed by any other religion, would lead one to draw the same conclusion about other religions as well. Christian scholars have written hundreds of books exploring the effect of Hellenistic religion and culture, first-century Judaism, "heretical" Jewish sects, and even Zoroastrian ideas on New Testament Christianity. From the point of view of these works, New Testament Christianity was syncretic; and by implication, modern Christianity is a syncretism as well. Even conservative Christians cannot deny that Christ did not invent baptism, but "borrowed" it from John the Baptist. Thus it would seem that for all religions, revelation must at least partly involve the creative process of endorsing or rejecting ideas and practices that already exist. In this sense, all religions are syncretisms.

Consequently it is not academically very useful to categorize the Bahá'í Faith

as a syncretism. If Bahá'ís claimed their religion is syncretic the description

would be useful; if syncretism were absent in the histories of other religions the description would be useful; but to state the Bahá'í Faith is a syncretism

and imply that the others are not is a hasty generalization.

Of course, it is possible that a comparative study of Bahá'u'lláh's writings would reveal them to be more syncretic than the Qur'an or the New Testament. But those who argue that the Bahá'í Faith is a syncretism never offer such comparative evidence. Usually they are unable to make such an argument because they are unfamiliar with Bahá'u'lláh's life and writings in detail. This constitutes another warning sign that the argument is hasty; any experienced scholar knows it is a difficult and painstaking task to muster a strong historical argument that X was influenced by Y, unless X, or someone who knew X well, testifies to the influence of Y.

Many Christian theologians, recognizing the importance of bringing together existing ideas in new, creative ways, have started to use the word syncretism in a positive fashion. This is in contrast to the word's usual connotation, which the Oxford English Dictionary notes is "almost always. . . derogatory." Some theologians have called on Christians to construct their theology in a deliberately "syncretistic" fashion; to reappropriate old symbols in wholly new ways, ways suited to the values and needs of postmodern culture. Such a process is not seen as a rejection of Christianity, but a development of it, a moving of Christianity forward into the twenty-first century.

It is, therefore, especially ironic to hear some liberal Protestant professors of religion call the Bahá'í Faith syncretistic. For they do not use the term in the positive, creative sense, but pejoratively. They would not refer to liberation theology, which is clearly a syncretism of Marxist ideas and the Bible, in that fashion; nor would they call feminist theology syncretic.

Where does the idea that the Bahá'í Faith is a syncretism come from? One source

is a misunderstanding of the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation, the teaching that states that all previous religions were divinely inspired and ordained. When Christianity was founded, it developed out of Judaism and recognized Judaism as a divinely founded religion. When Muhammad began his teaching he recognized Judaism and Christianity ? the religions already common in Arabia ? as divinely inspired and founded. The Bahá'í Faith is no different

in that it recognizes the religions that came before it as divinely inspired: but in the modern world, this entails not just Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism as well. By recognizing the divine origin of these and other religions, the Bahá'í Faith takes a position that is not very different from liberal Protestantism or the Catholicism of the Second Vatican conference, which recognize the existence of truth in the other religious traditions of the world.

In addition to giving praise where praise is due, the Bahá'í scriptures offer a

critique of various aspects of the religions that preceded it. For example, the Bahá'í scriptures reject such beliefs as the Christian trinity, the Hindu belief in transmigration of the soul, and the Muslim belief that the term "seal of the prophets" meant that Muhammad was not to be succeeded by another messenger. In this respect the Bahá'í Faith resembles New Testament Christianity, which criticized the Judaism of its day, and the Qur'an, which criticized Christians and Jews. But because of a lack of detailed understanding of the Bahá'í perspective on other religions, individual Bahá'ís do not always convey the balance of compliments and criticisms found in the Bahá'í scriptures. Desiring to be positive about other religions, and not wishing to offend other people, sometimes Bahá'ís will simply state that all the previous religions are "true." They will often downplay the numerous Bahá'í criticisms of central beliefs in other religions. As a result, a Bahá'í's understanding of progressive revelation can sound like an uncritical belief that the Bahá'í religion accepts everything that the previous religions teach. From this misperception, and a misunderstanding of the principle of progressive revelation, comes the belief that the Bahá'í Faith is a syncretism.

In conclusion, the question whether the Bahá'í Faith is syncretic needs to be discussed at a more sophisticated level than it has been previously. If by "syncretism" a scholar means the Bahá'ís themselves believe their religion is a blending of the best from other religious traditions, this understanding of Bahá'í self-identity is incorrect. If by "syncretism" a scholar means the Bahá'í Faith is a simplistic mixture of ideas from other religions, with no core of truths that are its own, this is a hasty generalization, and often is partly based on inadequate explanations of the Bahá'í religion by its members.

If by "syncretism" a scholar means the Bahá'í Faith is a complex product of original thought and original recombination of ideas already present in the world, then all religions are syncretisms and nothing new is being said about the Bahá'í Faith. If by "syncretism" a scholar ? consciously or unconsciously ? means the Bahá'í Faith is an epiphenomenon unworthy of study, then such a label impedes scholarship and interreligious dialogue. Hence use of the term "syncretism" highlights the need for deeper thought about the Bahá'í Faith in particular and the nature of religion in general.

METADATA

Views30898 views since posted 1997; last edit 2012;

previous at archive.org.../stockman_bahai_syncretism;

URLs changed in 2010, see archive.org.../bahai-library.org

Language

English

Permission

author

Share

Shortlink: bahai-library.com/112

Citation: ris/112

select Collection:

Archives

Articles

Articles-unpublished

Audio

Bibliographies

BIC

Biographies

Books

Chronologies

Compilations

Compilations-NSA

Compilations-personal

Documents

East-asia

Encyclopedia

Essays

Etc

Excerpts

Fiction

Glossaries

Guardian

Histories

Introductory

Letters

Maps

Music

Newspapers

NSA-documents

NSA-letters

Personal

Pilgrims

Poetry

Presentations

Resources

Reviews

Scripts

Software

Statistics

Study

Talks

[Theses](#)
[Transcripts](#)
[Translations](#)
[UHJ-documents](#)
[UHJ-letters](#)
[Video](#)
[Visual](#)
[Writings](#)

[home](#)

[sitemap](#)

[series](#)

[chronology](#)

[search:](#)
[author](#)

[title](#)

[date](#)

[tags](#)

[adv. search](#)
[languages](#)

[inventory](#)

[bibliography](#)

[abbreviations](#)

[links](#)

[about](#)

[contact](#)

[RSS](#)

[new](#)

— The Baha'i Faith and Syncretism (Used by permission of the curator)