

teachers of the Faith everywhere, must also be added as factors in this growing public recognition.

Despite

these advances, however, the general recognition of the Bahá'í Faith as an independent world religion is far from being a foregone conclusion. Large numbers of people still ignore the existence, general aims, and purposes of this youngest of the world's great religions. Even in academic circles, despite the increased public exposure, the Bahá'í religion continues to be classified in some courses of study as just another in the plethora of contemporary religious movements, although an increasing number of qualified scholars have at the same time vouched for the independent status of the Bahá'í Faith and have made fair and accurate appraisals of its history and teachings.

That

this general recognition of the independent character of the Bahá'í Faith has been a slow process is due, in part, to the erroneous perception early observers of the Faith held. Early treatments and mentions of the Faith, viewing it mainly in terms of its religious and cultural antecedents, often referred to the Bahá'í religion as a sect or reform movement within Islam. Other accounts, less charitable in their aims and purposes, and originating mainly in ecclesiastical and missionary circles, attempted to discredit the founders of the Faith and their teachings, either through deliberately distorted or poorly informed misrepresentations.

The

1980s have also witnessed the birth and renewal of hundreds of sects, denominations, cults, metaphysical belief systems, spiritual disciplines, and mental and occult practices of all kinds. So numerous are these movements that some have dubbed them as "The New Age" movements. Whether the label is apt or not, it now takes a discerning eye to recognize how the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh may be distinguished from this welter of religious and parareligious groups on the scene. These movements display an astonishing variety in outlook, belief, and practice, aiming as they do for points of special interest along the whole psychospiritual spectrum. Some of them can challenge the limits of human credulity, and a few of them have their dark side.

Udo

Schaefer's study comes at a timely moment, then. For his purpose here is to assist the reader in more accurately defining the distinguishing features of the Bahá'í Faith as seen against the backdrop of the spiritual movements of the day. His main purpose, alluded to above, is to demonstrate the independent status of the Bahá'í Faith as a revealed world religion. He does not attempt to compare it to all of the movements already mentioned, for this could scarcely be done within the scope of this paper. Instead, he examines and rejects the point of view which

would still classify the Bahá'í Faith as a sect, however noteworthy.

Dr. Schaefer's study offers convincing argument that the Bahá'í Faith deserves the noble rank and title, not of sect, but of world religion. He validates his thesis through a thorough examination of data taken mainly from the sociology of religion. He argues that according to the criteria established by scholars, the Bahá'í Faith does not meet the norms set down to identify a sect. Instead, it meets those criteria that would identify the Faith as a world religion. The author's thesis is well documented, and his method is orderly and systematic throughout.

Udo

Schaefer belongs to a great tradition of German scholars, dating back to the late nineteenth century, who have distinguished themselves in the field of religious studies. It was German-speaking scholars who, in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, laid much of the foundation work for "Religionswissenschaft" (literally, the science of religion) to form the basis for what have now become the diverse branches falling under the umbrella phrase Religious Studies. In Comparative Religion, Islamic studies, Hebrew and Christian biblical studies, Far Eastern studies, and theology, names like Max Müller (the father of comparative religion), Theodor Nöldeke, Ignaz Goldziher, Julius Wellhausen, Hermann Oldenberg, Heinrich Zimmer, and Adolf von Harnack are all recognized as founding fathers in the field.

Very

early in its development, the merit of Comparative Religion, as it is known in Anglo-Saxon countries, was recognized by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

During a public address given in Washington, D.C. in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá pointed out the potential that exists for interfaith understanding through the study of comparative religion — a potential that has not yet been fully understood and exploited:

Praise

be to God! You are living in a land of freedom. You are blessed with men of learning, men who are well versed in the comparative study of religions. You realise the need of unity and know the great harm which comes from prejudice and superstition.[1]

To

be valid, any attempt at interfaith understanding must begin with, or at least take into account, the characteristic self-understanding of the religion(s) under study. In other words, one of the first questions to be raised is how this Faith defines and views itself. Even though any individual is free to make evaluations of the faith of others, the observer will not do justice to the evaluation until he or she has taken into account the perceptions of the participant — the one who looks at that faith from "the

inside out." Udo Schaefer's paper helps to ensure that the self-understanding of the participant-faith is taken into account-As the public awareness of the Bahá'í Faith continues to grow, studies like the present one will continue to be of value for all who seek to better understand the Bahá'í Faith as a full-fledged member of the community of world faiths.

Jack McLean

Gatineau, Quebec

1.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2nd ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 410.

The reaction of modern society to the question of religion is curiously divided. On the one hand, our society is infused with the spirit of the Enlightenment; we have become secular and indifferent to religion. Traditional religion has lost its impetus, and the outstanding characteristic of modern history is, as Nietzsche[1] so clearly predicted, the desertion of the masses from religion.[2] On the other hand, the Enlightenment, together with science and technology, has led to a sense of anomie, alienation, and purposelessness; to a yearning for spiritual values and for religious forms and symbolism. The question of religion has long enjoyed the attention of those who seek the alternative society. Many young people view the established and institutionalized forms of religion as unsatisfactory and weighed down by the burdens of history. Their attention is directed toward new promises of salvation — of which there is currently a bewildering variety. It is often the strange and bizarre forms of religion which most quickly attract a following, and then just as quickly fall out of fashion.[3] The fact that the name of religion is often used to conceal essentially material goals and is perverted to evil purposes has become widely recognized since the Jonestown affair in Guyana,[4] and the phenomenon has been subjected to scientific scrutiny.[5]

To a casual observer, the Bahá'í religion might appear to be just another of these new paths to salvation. It is true that the Bahá'í Faith is an alternative to the inherited forms of religion, but it is demonstrably not one of those fads which quickly appear in response to ephemeral spiritual needs. The history of the Bahá'í religion stretches back into the middle of the nineteenth century. From its genesis in Iran, it has spread and taken root in nearly every country in the world. In Iran, Bahá'ís represent by far the largest religious minority. Although their number is still relatively small in the West, Bahá'ís have recently been mentioned frequently in Western newspaper

1. Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* 125, 343; Thus Spake Zarathustra, Part I, "Backworldsmen"; *The Will to Power* 1.2; for further details see Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion* 4-7.

2. There has, however, been a recent resurgence of Protestant fundamentalism in the United States.

3. Already in 1936 Shoghi Effendi described this development: "So marked a decline in the strength and cohesion of the elements constituting Christian society has led, in its turn, as we might well anticipate, to the emergence of an increasing number of obscure cults, of strange and new worships, of ineffective philosophies, whose sophisticated doctrines have intensified the confusion of a troubled age. In their tenets and pursuits they may be said to reflect and bear witness to the revolt, the discontent, and the confused aspirations of the disillusioned masses that have deserted the cause of the Christian churches and seceded from their membership" (*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 184).

4. Jim Jones, the leader of a cult, caused his community of nearly one thousand people to commit collective suicide in 1978. A film in the United States made several years ago suggested that Jones's followers were murdered. That is, they were forced at gunpoint to drink the poison.

5. Cf. Müller-Küppers and Specht, *Neue Jugend-"religionen"*; Parents' Initiative Working Group, *Dokumentation über die Auswirkungen der Jugendreligionen auf Jugendliche in Einzelfällen*; Haack, *Die neuen Jugendreligionen*; Haack, *Jugendreligionen — Ursache, Trends, Reaktionen*; Zaretsky and Leone, *Religious Movements in Contemporary America*.

headlines
as a result of the brutal persecutions carried out against this minority by the current Islamic Republic.[6] In these reports, the Bahá'í religion is generally referred to as a religion, but occasionally also as a sect.

The Bahá'ís make the claim that their belief is based on revelation and that the religion was founded by God through his messenger, Bah'a'u'll'ah.[7] That the Bahá'í Faith is an independent religion, rather than a sect, is a claim whose justification in religious-scientific terms (religionswissenschaftliche Begründung) cannot be expounded in a few words. The answer reaches into the very center of the conceptual realm of theology and religious studies.

The Concept of 'Sect'

There

exist few words whose common usage differs so radically from their scientific denotation as does the word sect. The layman in religious studies quickly ascribes a meaning to the word: religious communities outside the large churches and world religions are labelled 'sects' most readily when their membership is relatively small. These sects in turn — whether the appellation is accurate or not — invariably deny the charge vehemently. If usage were to depend solely on the sociological self-interpretation of the individual religious communities themselves, there would be no sects at all. The reason for this emotionally negative reaction is that the word sect, far from being neutral, conveys a wealth of historical undertones and is considered to be pejorative. That this is the case is even clearer from the word's derivative, sectarian, a term which invokes unambiguously negative associations and which in common usage is only used polemically and pejoratively.[8]

The

word sect,[9] originally a neutral term to describe individual political, philosophical, and religious groups, was already employed polemically in the early Christian era. At first, the Christian community was itself labeled a 'sect' by the Jews. The history of the Apostles[10] reports how the high priest Ananias denounced the Apostle Paul before the Roman representative, calling him a "pestilent fellow," a

6.

In its resolutions of 19 September 1980 and 10 April 1981, the European Parliament pilloried and condemned the executions, abductions, and manifold acts of suppression of the Bahá'ís in Iran. In its session of 25 June 1981 (printed item no. 9/614, minutes to the meeting, p. 2697), the German Bundestag also condemned the injuries to human rights with respect to the Bahá'í community and petitioned the Iranian government to extend to the Bahá'ís its protection and the official recognition vouchsafed them by the UNO Convention on Human Rights; it furthermore petitioned the foreign ministers of the European Community to lodge a complaint with the Iranian authorities. For fuller background information, see also Martin, "The Persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran, 1844-1984," Bahá'í Studies, application of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, vol. 12/13, Ottawa, Canada: 1984.

7.

For information about the history of the Bahá'í religion see:
Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, Balyuzi, Bahá'u'lláh:
The King of Glory; Balyuzi, `Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the
Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh; Balyuzi, The Báb: The

Herald of the Days. Concerning the teachings, see: Esslemont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era; Huddleston, The Earth is but One Country; Ferraby, All Things Made New: A Comprehensive Outline of the Bahá'í Faith; Sabet, The Heavens are Cleft Asunder; Vahman. "Bahä'ismus," in TRE Theologische Realenzyklopädie; Schaefer, The Imperishable Dominion: The Bahá'í Faith and the Future of Mankind; Hatcher and Martin, The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion.

8.

In German, Sektierer, sektiererisch, and in French, sectaire, are synonymous with narrow-minded, hidebound, fanatical, borné.

9. From Latin, secta

(guiding principle, party, school of thought).

10. Acts 24:1ff.,

14.

"mover

of sedition" and "ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes."

Thus, the Christian community was considered to be an heretical splinter-group of Judaism. In the letters of Paul,[11] the word sect[12] is used in the purely negative sense. Here, we already find that meaning which the Latin word secta has assumed in the course of its history: false teaching, splitting from the (mother) community. The word found its way into the German language through Martin Luther, from whose writings it has been carried over into the linguistic usage of religious studies. Kurt Hütten stressed the fact that the concept is so loaded with negative connotations that one might be well advised to find another translation, one which "does not bring with it such heavy historical baggage." [13] The dilemma, however, lies in the fact that the word is indispensable because it has become an accepted term in the sociology of religion, indicating specific criteria as established in the study of modern sociology of religion. Moreover, the unscientific use of the word sect has led to a confusion of concepts: religious and pseudoreligious communities that flock around a living guru, for example, Jim Jones's Jonestown community in Guyana, or that of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, or the so-called new religious movements, are often referred to as 'sects', even though in religious-scientific terms they are phenomenologically and sociologically distinguished structurally from sects and should more properly be called cults.[14] It is clear that the proliferation of such phenomena into general usage has further overloaded the meaning of the word sect.

From

the above observations, it is clear that, in ordinary linguistic usage, only one distinguishing characteristic is implied: the number of adherents. Numerical strength, however, is not a decisive criterion for a classification: "There are large and small ecclesiastical

bodies, large and small denominations and large and small sects." [15]
]The following consideration demonstrates how useless the criterion of numerical strength really is.

Christianity

was in the beginning a little flock [16] and was initially belittled as a Jewish splinter-group. Was therefore Christianity at first a sect, only gradually becoming a "religion"? Can a sect become a religion at all? This question must be answered in the negative if, as we will shortly see, the essential characteristic of sects is that they are particularistic (whereas revealed religions are generally universalistic) in nature. The general cannot be derived from the particular, though indeed the particular can be derived from the general." That which Christianity became — a universal religion — was established by virtue of its entelechy. [18] Finally, there remains the question of whether such widely differing phenomena as the Jonestown community,

11. 1 Corinthians 11:19; see also 2 Peter 1ff.

12. In Greek, *hairesis*.

13. Hütten, Seher, Grübler, Enthusiasten 5.

14. For more on this point, see pp. 6, 8-9, and footnote 3.

15. Wach, Church, Denomination and Sect 19.

16. Luke 12:32.

17. Which point Smith fails to recognize (see footnote 35 below).

18.

From the Greek word, *entelecheia*, in Aristotelian philosophy the immanent force, the potentiality which contains the goal and end result within itself, for instance, the force that causes a walnut to become a walnut tree.

Transcendental

Meditation, and the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia should be thrown together into the same terminological pot.

The Concepts of

'Sect' and 'Church' in the Sociology of Religion

The

sociology of religion [19] has developed criteria by which it is possible to distinguish a sect from other forms of religious community, that is, from church and from cult. [20] It must be borne in mind, however, that this terminological apparatus is tailored to the context of the

specific sociology of occidental Christianity.[21] That the term sect is defined sociologically in terms of a contrast between idealized forms of the notions of 'sect' and 'church' shows just how dependent this definition is on the Western Christian perspective.[22]

The cross-cultural transfer of this latter concept presents problems. It is terminologically inaccurate to apply the term church to organized non-Christian communities,[23] since with respect to both the teachings and the legal foundations of the church, its central figure is the person of Jesus Christ:[24] *Ubi Christus ibi ecclesia*.[25] Elimination of the modifier, "Christian," is thus impossible because it is the defining characteristic of the concept of an ecclesiastical body.[26] On these grounds, it is terminologically contradictory to describe the legally organized Bahá'í world community as, say, the "Bahá'í Church," or to speak of its "churchification" [Verkirchlichung],[27] quite independently from the fact that the community of Bahá'u'lláh, while being a community governed by faith and legal institutions,[28] is fundamentally different in nature and structure from an ecclesiastical body of the church type.

19.

The basic fundamentals are to be found in Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*; Weber, "Sect, Church and Democracy"; Mensching, *Soziologie der Religion*.

20.

Another notion, "denomination" as the American churchform, may be left out of consideration as it is beyond the scope of this treatise. (See De Jong, "The Denomination as the American Churchform.")

21.

Most notably in Weber, "Sect, Church and Democracy"; Wilson, "Eine Analyse der Sektenentwicklung."

22.

Rudolph also emphasized the "typically European Christian bias" of the concept of sect, "specifically the basing of the notions of 'sect' and 'sectarian' on the legal concept of the institution of the Church" ("Wesen und Struktur der Sekte" 243). That is evident in Wach's, *Church, Denomination and Sect*.

23.

If by "churches" they mean the legally organized congregation of these religions, religious scholars do an injustice when they speak of Jewish, Taoistic, Confucian, Tibetan, Buddhist, Lamaistic, or for that matter Islamic "churches" (Mensching, *Soziologie der Religion* 251ff.; for references to a Lamaistic "church," see Schulemann, *Die Geschichte der Dalai Lamas* 78; for references to Zoroastrian "churches," see Wach, *Sociology*

of Religion 145; for references to an Egyptian "church," see Otto, *Priester und Tempel im hellenistischen ägypten* II:281ff.; for references to an Islamic "church" see Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam* 215).

24.

Sohm (*Kirchenrecht* 2:12) offers the following definition: "A church is a religious community based on the declared belief in Christ."

25. "Wherever Christ is, there is the Church."

26.

For further information, see Schaefer, "Die Grundlagen der Verwaltungsordnung der Bahá'í" 82-85, which also quotes further sources in the literature.

27. As Hütten (Seher, *Grübler, Enthusiasten* 319) and Rosenkranz (*Die Bahá'í* 56) do.

28.

The believers are not only united by the bond of faith and love but also by the bond of law. For further elucidations, see Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion* 243.

A

constituent element in the nature of a church is its function as administrator of sacraments [Anstaltscharakter]: the church according to its self-evaluation is custodian of sacramental grace [sakramentale Gnadenanstalt]. Sacraments belong to its organization as essential instruments in the dispensation of grace. The church sees itself in possession of an objective treasury of grace, which the church officials — the priests — administer.[29] The priesthood is therefore an immanent institution of the church. Administration of the Word and the Sacrament pervades the whole nature of "churchness": "Where there is the Word and the Sacrament, there is the Church." [30] The Bahá'í community administers the Word but no sacraments and, since there are no objective dispensations of grace, possesses no priesthood. The Bahá'í community is not a transcendental administrator of grace.[31]

Thus,

the criteria established by the sociology of religion for the application of the term sect must, in light of historical associations, be employed with caution. Worth mentioning in this connection is a suggestion by Joachim Matthes that "all specifically religious-sociological terminology should be avoided," because "a sociology of religion is only possible as a sociology of Christianity." [32] Furthermore, Joachim Wach emphasizes that in reality the three types of Christian fellowship:

ecclesiastical body, denomination, and sect, "are not always found in unadulterated purity." [33] Nonetheless, there is no alternative available for the concept of 'sect', and therefore its use in the religious-scientific classification [religionswissenschaftliche Begründung] of religious groupings cannot be avoided.

One

additional point must be borne in mind: the unbiased and sensitive appraisal of the status of a religious community is not possible without taking its theological content and its theological self-interpretation into account. [34] By that is meant not sociological self-interpretation, but rather religious consciousness, the inner understanding [Verstehen] of the community's own teachings. The mere claim of a religious group for membership to one or the other category (church, sect, religion) is irrelevant — not so, however, statements concerning the genesis and the goals of the respective community. Of decisive relevance is whether a religious community considers itself to lie within the fold of the religion from which it came into being; whether it claims to have arisen in the spirit of reform, returning to the true, unfalsified teachings of the religious institution within which it has arisen; or indeed, whether it appeals to a new revelation from God, renewing the ancient covenant and thereby cutting the umbilical cord that bound it to the "mother religion." Understandably, the claim to ultimate truth must remain outside consideration here. This question lies beyond the reach of scientific investigation.

29. Ex opere operato.

30. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* 478.

31. See Schaefer, "Die Grundlagen der Verwaltungsordnung der Bahá'í" 114-120.

32. Matthes, *Religion und Gesellschaft* 117.

33. Wach, *Church, Denomination and Sect* 18.

34. Flasche, *Die Religion der Einheit und Selbstverwirklichung der Menschheit* 188; Wach, *Sociology of Religion* 19ff., 197; Rudolph, "Wesen und Struktur der Sekte" 249.

It

is clear from this last point that a mere description of the sociological structure and appearance of a religious community is of little help. Such an approach fails to recognize that a religious community is more than the sum of its empirically observable characteristics. This point is all the more true

for a young religion, whose essential nature is often at best only barely observable from its structure.[33] The fact that "cognitive minorities"[36] — in other words, diminutive communities — often appear "sect-like" to the uninitiated, implies little about the true nature of these religious communities.[37]

Criteria for Sects

Particularistic Tendency

The most obvious criterion for the recognition of sects is their particularistic tendency, the "characteristic of being a part of the religious community and of its dogmatic foundations." [38] Sects are possible only as elements of a closed system. There are Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist sects, but there are no sects in their own right [Sekte a« sich]. For that reason alone, it is not possible to apply the concept of sect to religious communities that view themselves as complete and independent systems, and not as variants of already existing major religions. Buddhism is not a sect of Hinduism, from within which religion it developed. Neither is Christianity a sect of Judaism. Both Buddhism and Christianity have their own core. However, a particularistic tendency is not in itself sufficient justification for the application of the term sect. In particular, the concept of 'sect' cannot correctly be applied to phenomena that are more aptly described as cults,[39] to which belong a large proportion of the pseudoreligious communities mentioned earlier.

Basic Motivation to Reform

The basic motivation of a sect is to reform. Its attention is directed backwards, into the past, back to the origins of the whole of which it is apart, back to the pure teachings of the early period, back to the source of revelation. All Christian sects share the claim that they represent the true, unsullied, living spirit of Christianity.[40] Each Islamic sect

35.

Failure to recognize this point can lead to extraordinary conclusions, such as those of Peter Smith, who describes the Bahá'í communities in Iran as "church-like" and those in the West "sect-like" (Smith, "Motif Research, Peter Berger and the Bahá'í Faith" 210-34): a consequence of scientific positivist thinking that sees only the surface features and fundamentally excludes any search for the essence of the matter, which in essence surely cannot vary from one to another example of the same phenomenon.

36. See Berger, A
Rumor of Angels 1ff.

37.

The image of the early Bahá'í communities in the West at the turn of the century was without doubt in many ways reminiscent of sects. In the natural course of the process of growth of the community and development of its teachings, however, these characteristics were, or are being, progressively eliminated.

38. Mensching, Soziologie
der Religion 238.

39. See pp. 3, 8-9,
and footnote 3.

40.

This applies also for the Mormons. Although they claim (a post-Christian) divine revelation for their Book of Mormon, they are nevertheless a Christian group. According to their self-interpretation, the Church of Mormon is the "re-establishment of the original Church of Jesus Christ" (Hütten, Seher, Grübler, Enthusiasten 626). Joseph Smith did not claim to found a new dispensation that would disassociate itself from the Christian one (unlike the early Church, which clearly disassociated from Judaism and unlike the Bahá'í Dispensation in Iran, which clearly disassociated itself from Islam). After all, Joseph Smith is not the central figure of the Mormon Faith, Christ is.

claims

to point the way to the pure faith of earlier times, to early Islam, unfalsified by human embellishments. The Christian Adventists, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baptists — all appeal to the New Testament, just as the

Qur'án is the source of belief and law for the Isma'ilis, the Wahhabis, and all the other Islamic sects.

Emphasis on
Elements of Faith

It

is a common feature of all sects that they raise certain elements of faith to a position of central thematic importance, elements which are present in the religion but which had been neglected in the wider community, for example, healing, awakening, and eschatology.

The

Christian sects thus share the characteristic that they emphasize particular passages of the Gospel and of the articles of faith of the church, which have perhaps been neglected by the church in favour of others, and raise these for the most part to the one-sided central principle of their teaching and their community.[41]

A

degree of one-sidedness and narrowness of thinking is often the observable result of this shift of emphasis: "A certain monomania is thereby a peculiarity of the sect in contrast to the universalism of the main community." [42]

Ethical Rigor

A

further characteristic of the sect is its ethical rigor, which manifests itself chiefly in seclusion from the world and rejection of secular civilization: [43]

"The sect turns its back ascetically to the world." [44]

It tends "radically to reject the social order and to give vent to this rejection either through seclusion or through active protest," [45]

while mass organization is "always worldly." [46] The

condemnation of outsiders may be based "on intellectual or moral criteria (incapacity or unwillingness to see or acknowledge the truth, 'worldliness', and so forth). It expresses itself in more or less definite rules, avoidances and taboos." [47] Thus, the community of the sect

functions as a "selection apparatus for separating the qualified from the unqualified." [48] These groups are characterized by a

"rigid exclusiveness." [49] Max Weber [50]

cites the elitist exclusivity of the *examen rigorosum* [51] as characteristic, with its scrutiny of the previous lifestyle

41. Mensching, *Soziologie der Religion* 239.

42. Mensching 239.

43.

Troeltsch treats the rejection of secular civilization as the essential characteristic of sects (*The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* 381;432 n. 163).

44. Mensching, *Soziologie der Religion* 241.

45.

Fürstenberg and Mörth, *Religionssoziologie* 25. "It is the sect which will be most radical in the criticism of civil authority due to its rigid or even extravagant standards" (Wach, *Sociology of Religion* 23).

46. Mensching, *Soziologie der Religion* 241.

47. Wach, *Sociology of Religion* 18.

48. Weber, *Sect, Church and Democracy* 1204.

49. Wach, Sociology
of Religion 17.

50. Weber, Sect,
Church and Democracy 1205-6.

51. A rigorous,
methodical scrutiny of one's conscience.

of
an initiate, and with corresponding monitoring and exhortation of its members.
Worldly activities such as theater, cinema, and dancing are often denounced.
This behavioral rigor encourages the sense of belonging to an elite
minority which is, because it is in possession of the Truth, protected from the
threatening Last Judgment.[52]

Free Choice

The
principle of free choice, compared to the coercive nature of the church, is
often seen as a further characteristic of sects. This principle is included
among the criteria of most exercises in typology. Thus, for example, the
Baptists require adult baptism because membership requires the personal consent
of the individual. One is not born into the organization.[53]

The free choice community stands in contrast to the church of birth and
compulsion.

Exclusivity

The
elitist exclusivity and cultural estrangement of the sect implies its lack of
universality. "The sect is a group whose very nature and purpose
precludes universality." [54]

Charisma of
Office

Another
structural principle of the sect is its rejection of the charisma of
office. Authority is assumed much more on the basis of individual
pneumatic gifts [53] and recognition, in other words, on the power of
personal charisma, on "pneumatic spontaneity ('prophecy')," [56]
than is the case with legally constituted institutions. Leadership of
the community is determined in some sects through specific pseudoprophetic
inspiration on the part of individuals apparently infused with the Holy Spirit.
In place of a rule of order, the community is governed by "pneumatic
anarchy," it is considered as a "pneumacracy": [57]

"The services of the Quakers are a silent waiting in order to see whether
the Divine Spirit will overcome a member on this day. Only he will speak up to
preach or pray." [58]

Doctrinal

Orientation

It

is a common feature of all sects that their doctrines and dogmas are uncomplicated but nonetheless oriented toward the basic teachings of the major religion to which they claim membership. This orientation distinguishes the sect from the cult. The

52.

"To the extent to which exclusive claims give way to a more relativistic recognition and tolerance of other views, practices and fellowship (though they may appear inferior in sectarian eyes) the sect assumes denominational features, Quakers, Disciples, Brethren, Christian Science, Swedenborgians" (Wach, *Sociology of Religion* 18).

53. Mensching, *Soziologie der Religion* 241.

54.

Weber, *Sect, Church and Democracy* 1204; see Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* 380; Mensching, *Soziologie der Religion* 239.

55. From Greek, *pneuma*:

breath; in theology: the Holy Spirit; pneumatic: full of Holy Spirit.

56. Cf. Wach, *Sociology of Religion* 27ff.

57.

A community without legal institutions, without rule of men over men, solely governed by the *pneuma*; i.e., the Holy Spirit. Cf. Barion, Rudolf Sohm und die Grundlegung des Kirchenrechts 9; Sohm, *Wesen und Ursprung des Katholizismus* viii.

58. Weber, *Sect, Church and Democracy* 1207.

former

possesses a theology, be it ever so grossly simplified; whereas the sign of the cult is a minimum of theology. Here, great significance is placed on esoteric knowledge, ritual, and magic; on personal contact with a living guru or group rather than in institutions and issues of belief: "Its hunger is a hunger for ritual and mythos." [59] A notable characteristic of pseudoreligious cults is the severing of ties to the external world.

Initiates

are required to give up all contact with home, family, former occupation, and friends and to dedicate themselves instead to the living heads of the respective communities — requirements that can have disastrous consequences. [60] On the basis of these criteria, Rudolph defined the sect as follows:

A sect is a religious group or community founded within the framework of another religion (itself based on a founder, book, revelation or confession); in membership and in distribution it is generally overshadowed by, and in terms of its articles of teaching stands in deficit to, the official main community ("church"). In short, the sect is from a theological point of view a "sub-community" in contrast to the dominating "main community." [61]

The
Bahá'í Faith — A Sect?

On the basis of these criteria, one might try to describe the Bahá'í religion as a sect of Islam: it arose after all from within the Islamic cultural context and is in many ways — in history, in language and terminology, and partly also in theology — closely associated with Islam. For that reason, Islamic studies in the past generally treated the Bahá'í Faith under the rubric of Islamic sects. [62]

The fact that Bahá'ís themselves refuse to characterize their faith as a sect is in itself not sufficient grounds for exonerating them from this label. Rather, the Bahá'í Faith is not a sect precisely because it fails to fulfill the aforementioned criteria for sects.

In theology and teaching, the Bahá'í Faith is not a special movement within Islam. Neither does it claim to be a type of Islamic renaissance. Instead, the Bahá'í Faith claims to have its origin in a new revelation from God. This claim disqualifies the Bahá'í Faith from being a sect, since the sect always chooses to remain identified with the parent religion.

The basis of the Bahá'í Faith and of its law is the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í religion. The Qur'án is relegated to salvation history. As true documentation of religious history, the Qur'án is accepted as a holy book — a sort of "Old Testament" — but serves neither as the theological basis of the Bahá'í religion nor as the source of Bahá'í law. According to Bahá'í teaching, the dispensation of Muhammad terminated in the year A.H.1260 (A.D. 1844) with the dawning of a New World Era. Already in the year 1848, at the conference of Badasht, some of the followers of the Báb, recognizing the full implications of the new revelation, declared the abrogation of Islamic law. Therefore, the law of the Qur'án and the incontrovertible articles of faith of orthodox Islam (and its derivatives), such as the finality of

59. Bell, The
Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism 168.

60. See the references
cited in footnote 5 above.

61. Rudolph,
"Wesen und Struktur der Sekte" 253.

62. And sometimes
even in modern times (e.g., Khouri, Einführung in die Grundlagen des
Islam 139).

the
revelation of Muhammad, are not recognized by Bahá'ís. The
Bahá'í claims neither to be Muslim nor to have reverted to early
Islam. Bahá'u'lláh, not Muhammad, occupies the central
position of his religion. Missing is the purely reformatory, backwards-oriented
attitude that has been recognized as a significant criterion for sects.[63]
This fact has long been recognized in Islamic courts of law as the following
example demonstrates.

On
May 10, 1925, the religious Court of Appeals in Beba, in the province of Beni
Suef
in Egypt, declared three marriages to be invalid because the partners were
Bahá'ís. In the court summary, it was explained that

the
Bahá'í Faith is a new religion, entirely independent, with
beliefs, principles and laws of its own, which differ from, and are utterly in
conflict with, the beliefs, principles and laws of Islam. No
Bahá'í, therefore, can be regarded a Muslim or vice-versa, even
as no Buddhist, Brahmin, or Christian can be regarded a Muslim or
vice-versa.[64]

This official
pronouncement concludes with the following words:

If
any one of them [husbands] repents, believes in, and acknowledges whatsoever...
Muhammad, the Apostle of God...has brought from God...and returns to the
august Faith of Islam...and testifies that...Muhammad...is the Seal of the
Prophets and Messengers, that no religion will succeed His religion, that no
law will abrogate His law, that the Qur'án is the last of the Books of
God and His last Revelation to His Prophets and His Messengers...he shall be
accepted and shall be entitled to renew his marriage contract... [65]

In
response to the question whether Bahá'ís be permitted to bury
their dead in Islamic cemeteries, the Egyptian Ministry of Justice sought

instruction from the Muft'i,[66] in whose testimony of 11 March 1939 is written:

We hereby declare that this Community is not to be regarded as Muslim, as shown by the beliefs which it professes. The perusal of what they term "The Bahá'í Laws affecting Matters of Personal Status," accompanying the papers, is deemed sufficient evidence. Whoever among its members had formerly been a Muslim has, by virtue of his belief in the pretensions of this community, renounced Islam, and is regarded as beyond its pale, and is subject to the laws governing apostasy as established in the right Faith of Islam. This community not being Muslim, it would be unlawful to bury its dead in Muslim cemeteries, be they originally Muslims or otherwise.[67]

63.

It must not be overlooked in this connection that all revealed religions have striven for the purification of previous religions and the rehabilitation of the truth. The message of Jesus Christ is also directed against the Jewish scriptural scholarship (Luke 11:39-51; Matt. 23:1 -36), while Muhammad condemned the Christian dogma of the Trinity (Qur'án 19:91-94; 2:110; 4:169-171; 5:76-80). Thus the divine revelation is also a divine reformation.

64. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 365.

65. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 365-66.

66.

Islamic legal scholar who submits authoritative legal judgments (fatáwin) in issues concerning religious law (Sharí'ah).

67. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 368.

Neither

do the remaining criteria of the sociology of religion's definition of 'sect' apply to the Bahá'í religion. A study of Bahá'í teachings reveals neither a dogmatic one-sidedness nor an individualistic peculiarity, not to mention animosity toward worldly culture or any sort of elitist arrogance.

The

Bahá'í religion is a universal religion. The message of Bahá'u'lláh is directed toward all of mankind. The forerunner and herald of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, had Himself appealed to the peoples of the West to become "as true brethren in the one and indivisible religion of God, free from distinction,"[68] and thus had not confined Himself to his own cultural context. Bahá'u'lláh seeks to lead all of mankind to unity. The only remedy for a mortally sick world, and therefore for the survival of mankind, is

the spiritual and political unification of all peoples in a worldwide federation
and in a common belief, free of the distortions of the past:

That

which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith.... The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.[69]

The extension of the principle of love to all mankind and the creation of a world-consciousness represent a central tenet of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings:

That

one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth....It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.[70] ...The utterance of God is a lamp, whose light is these words: Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship... So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.[71]

The

Bahá'í religion is thus universalistic in its origin and in its nature. The traditional religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are all universal religions because they direct their message to all of mankind and because, in their view, the world as a whole is to be moulded according to the message of God. This universalism is further enhanced in the message of Bahá'u'lláh through his concrete appeal for the political and spiritual unity of mankind and through the presentation of a structural order that is the framework for this unity.

Another

characteristic that fits poorly with the image of sect is the Bahá'í religion's active concern with the state of worldly society. One who is only concerned with personal salvation and who is blind to the social needs of the world — an egoistic attitude which moved Karl

Marx to his critical theses against religion — is renounced in the Bahá'í teachings. All aspects of life are encompassed by the divine message.

68. Qayyúmu'l-Asmá' in the Báb, Selections from the Writings of the Báb 56.

69. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 255;
286.

70. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 250.

71. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 288.

Society

as a whole, and not only the individual, is subject to redemption through the Will of God.[72]

Undeniably,

the message of Bahá'u'lláh is, like every revelation of God, first and foremost a guide to the individual. It is the ancient path, cleansed of the encrustments and encumbrances of the past, along which man can achieve life with God, enlightenment, and spiritual rebirth. The revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is not, however, limited to this "vertical" dimension. The Bahá'í religion is not merely a "creed"; it is a religion in an all-embracing sense, as it also has a fully developed "horizontal," a "political"[73] dimension.

According to Bahá'u'lláh, both the individual as well as the whole of humanity need enlightenment and guidance by the divine manifestations. These two dimensions can be found in the following verses of Bahá'u'lláh:

God's

purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established.[74]

Bahá'u'lláh

stresses the outstanding and indispensable function of religion for society, law, and order: "Religion is, verily, the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world, and of tranquillity amongst its peoples." [75] "...religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world." [76]

Bahá'u'lláh laid the keystone of a new order in which all peoples, united by their common belief in God and his revelation, will live together in peace and justice. He has come to establish the promised Kingdom of God: "...the establishment of world peace and unity represents the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth, the ultimate triumph of good over evil as anticipated in symbolic terms in past religions." [77] This kingdom will be a World Order, structured according to the revealed law of God and encompassing all of mankind. Its fruits will be the "Most Great

72.

Concerning the horizontal dimension and society's need for salvation, see Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion* 121 ff.

73.

The term political is here used in the Aristotelian sense: the total complex of relations that bind together the members of society, the art of science of government, oriented towards the idea of justice and the common weal. This political goal of world unity and a new world order, however, is not to be strived for using the political means at hand; rather, it is to be achieved through fundamental changes in consciousness and the development of new social and political structures based on the new message of God. The often emphasized non-political character of the Bahá'í Faith should by no means be misunderstood as the absence of political goals and indifference to society: the idea of the unity of mankind and the foundation of a world federal state is, far from a mere pious hope, an eminent political goal. The Bahá'ís are nevertheless committed to party political neutrality. They are obliged to shun the struggle for power and to refrain from political partisanship and participation in party politics (for particulars, see Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion* 148-51; Lee, *Circle of Unity: Bahá'í (Approaches to Current Social Issues, Introduction, xiii ff.)*).

74.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 79-80.

75.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 28.

76.

Bahá'u'lláh, "Isráqát," *Tablets* 125.

77. Hatcher/Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith* 137.

Peace." [78] It is God's Will, to bring about this world order. But the Kingdom of God will not occur solely by an act of God, instantly, magically, and supernaturally, changing everything at once, as Christian fundamentalists, interpreting the Bible literally, expect, but rather through the active participation of mankind in an historical process of radical transformation that encompasses the individual as well as the whole human race. [79]

This perspective differentiates the Bahá'ís from the adherents of those Christian sects which stress the notion of the Parousia and of the coming of the Kingdom of God, which naively and enthusiastically await the occurrence of a miraculous event in the visible heaven — the return of Christ, upon Whose entrance those who are not damned are redeemed and live together in blissful goodness. [80]

In this connection, we realize another striking difference in a central theological view of the Bahá'í Faith and previous religions: while the past religions and all their sects are still expecting the

eschatological events proclaimed in their sacred writings, for the Bahá'ís the eschatology of all the world religions has been fulfilled. The Christian sects still await the Second Coming of their Lord, the Muslim sects the coming of "the Hour,"[81] of the "Great Announcement,"[82] while the Bahá'ís proclaim that these events have occurred in Bahá'u'lláh, inaugurating the coming of the Kingdom of God.[83]

Another characteristic of the sect, seclusion from the world, from society with its accompanying attitude of antiworldliness, does not apply to the Bahá'í Faith. Clearly, the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh encourage a positive attitude toward the world and toward human civilization. It is true that Bahá'u'lláh, like the prophets of the past, points to the vanity of the world and the transitory nature of human affairs and earthly riches.[84]

78. Gollmer,

"Der lange Weg zum Grössten Frieden," Bahá'í-Briefe
50:128ff. and 52:107ff.

79.

For more details, see Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 157,162ff., 203ff.; Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* 121ff.; Hatcher/Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith* 127ff.; Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion* 127ff., 139ff.

80.

For more complete coverage of this theme, see Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion* 127-44; regarding Doomsday expectations, 93-94.

81. Qur'án

6:31, 7:187, 79:42.

82. Qur'án

78:1.

83.

Bahá'u'lláh Himself in his tablet to Pope Pius IX proclaimed to fulfil Jesus' prophecy on his return: "O Pope! Rend the veils asunder. He Who is the Lord of Lords is come overshadowed with clouds, and the decree hath been fulfilled by God, the Almighty, the Unrestrained...He, verily, hath again come down from Heaven even as He came down from it the first time. Beware that thou dispute not with Him even as the Pharisees disputed with Him (Jesus) without a clear token or proof..." (Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* 30). On the meaning of the "return of Christ," see Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* 150, 151, 158-60; Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion* 93-94, n. 42.

84.

"The world is continually proclaiming these words: Beware, I am evanescent, and so are all my outward appearances and colours. Take ye heed of

the changes and chances contrived within me and be ye roused from your slumber" (Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets 258). "The world is but a show, vain and empty, a mere nothing, bearing the semblance of reality. Set not your affections upon it. Break not the bond that uniteth you with your Creator, and be not of those that have erred and strayed from His ways. Verily I say, the world is like the vapour in a desert, which the thirsty dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 328-29).

The shortness of life and the transitory nature of worldly goods is a subject often repeated in his writings.[85] Nevertheless, these verses should not be misconstrued as escapist otherworldliness. Ascetic renunciation of the world is unambiguously condemned: "Eat ye, O people, of the good things which God hath allowed you, and deprive not yourselves from His wondrous bounties." [86] This positive attitude towards culture is clearly evident from the fact that the Bahá'í Faith views the progressive development of human civilization as a consequence of the creative impulse of the past revelations of God. The development of human culture is intimately connected with religion: "All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization." [87]

Exactly how little the Bahá'í religion is individualistic is demonstrated by the exclusion of individualistic and spiritualistic claims, and by the rejection of every form of pneumatic authority. Legal norms and legal institutions are the basis of order and of the community. The decision-making power and spiritual authority is vested in this constitutional order. Charismatic individuals and pneumatic spontaneity are subordinated to these institutions. The charisma of divine guidance resides solely in the institutions appointed by Bahá'u'lláh and democratically elected by the community of the believers — not in the individuals who hold these offices.[88]

Furthermore, the Bahá'í community does not see itself as an elitist group. It is expected that every believer live according to the teachings and commandments of Bahá'u'lláh, adopt spiritual virtues, be oriented toward the imperatives of the new ethic, gain self-knowledge, and strive for perfection. No prior achievement of a particular degree of perfection, however, is required of anyone who joins the community of Bahá'u'lláh. No one is required to give account for his or her prior life, no one other than God has the right to pass judgment on the morality of another. The fact that Bahá'ís consider the recognition of the message and of its bearer, Bahá'u'lláh,

85.

"Rejoice not in the things ye possess; tonight they are yours, tomorrow others will possess them.... The days of your life flee away as a breath of

wind, and all your pomp and glory shall be folded up as were the pomp and glory of those gone before you. Reflect, O people! What hath become of your bygone days, your lost centuries? Happy the days that have been consecrated to the remembrance of God, and blessed the hours which have been spent in praise of Him Who is the All-Wise. By My life! Neither the pomp of the mighty, nor the wealth of the rich, nor even the ascendancy of the ungodly will endure. All will perish, at a word from Him" (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Synopsis and Codification no. 6, 15 [also Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 138]).

86.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 276.

87.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 215.

88.

Shoghi Effendi made it very clear that such charismatic personalities "should never be allowed to eclipse the authority, or detract from the influence of the body of the elected representatives in every local community. Such an individual should not only seek the approval, advice, and assistance of the body that represents the Cause in his locality, but should strive to attribute any credit he may obtain to the collective wisdom and capacity of the Assembly under whose jurisdiction he performs his services. Assemblies and not individuals constitute the bedrock on which the Administration is built....To no one of the believers such a station has been conferred, which can place him outside and above the jurisdiction of any Assembly. Such an attitude...runs counter to the very spirit and purpose of the Administrative Order" (Shoghi Effendi through his secretary, in Principles of Bahá'í Administration 19). Nevertheless, it is certain that decisions without a motivating spiritual power to put them into practice are ineffectual. There is no doubt that the Bahá'í Faith is much indebted to numerous charismatic individuals using their gift to work in the service of the Cause.

to be of salvational significance is neither in itself unique, nor is it a sign of elitist arrogance. Belief is a necessary prerequisite of salvation in other religions as well.[89] According to Catholic teaching, salvation is available exclusively to members of its own community, to adherents of the Church in its role as mystical Corpus Christi.[90] The Bahá'í receives no entrance ticket into the Kingdom of Heaven solely as a result of an act of belief,[91] nor is the Bahá'í thereby spared the Judgment which Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed for mankind.

There remains the principle of free choice, which the sociologists of religion consider to be a criterion for sects. Is that true? Does this principle apply to the religious community of the Bahá'ís? And if that is the case, is that sufficient grounds for labelling this community a

'sect'? Evident in this principle of free choice is a point examined at the beginning of this paper, namely, sociology of religion typology's dependence on Christian occidental forms of religion, on a dichotomy of 'church' and 'sect' which cannot be easily superimposed on any religious community that confounds these alternatives because its legal structure does not conform to the existing framework.

Judaism shows that coercion and free choice are unsuitable criteria by which to distinguish a sect. The child of a Jewish mother is Jewish by birth; he or she is born into that religion. But this is also the case in the Jewish sect. Should the principle of free choice be considered an unerring characteristic of sects, then it would follow that there are no Jewish sects, since all special movements within Judaism, even the most extreme Hassidic groups, recognize the Jewish law that a Jew is one who has a Jewish mother. In Christianity, it is by no means the case that one is, as Gustav Mensching put it, "born into" the organization of the Church. One becomes a Christian through baptism, which imparts a character indelebilis and which stands according to canon law^[92] as irrevocable incorporation into the organization of the Church.^[93] The coercive nature of baptism — ignoring, of course, the fact that according to Church law it is impossible

89.

Cf. John 3:17-18; Qur'án57:7,48:28,2:59. That even in Zoroastrianism redemption from sin results only from repose in the "Mazdiasni religion," appears from the Dinkard where we read: "Be it known that a man becomes good in many ways: especially by putting faith in the religion of Ahurmazd; and thereby he becomes a holder of greater relations with the Creator Ahurmazd" (1:55). "Be it known that a man becomes through all his works and behaviour, possessed of thought and relating to the other world and fit for it, by reposing faith in all holy thoughts, i.e., the ordinances of the Mazdiasni religion" (2:68). For further explanation, see Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion* ch. 6.

90.

While for many centuries Cyprian's *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* was valid, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council has, for the first time in history, adopted a more conciliatory position in its explanation of the attitude of the Church to the non-Christian religions (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, no. 3).

91.

A Bahá'í should "forgive the sinful, and never despise his low estate, for none knoweth what his own end shall be. How often hath a sinner, at the hour of death, attained to the essence of faith, and, quaffing the immortal draught, hath taken his flight unto the celestial Concourse. And how often hath a devout believer, at the hour of his soul's ascension, been so changed as to fall into the nethermost fire" (Bahá'u'lláh, *The*

Kitáb-i-Íqán 194-95).

92. Can. 96, Corpus Iuris Canonici (CIC).

93. Semel

christianus, semper christianus [Once a Christian, always a Christian].

ever

to rescind membership[94] — is evident only in infant baptism. To be converted, to join the Church by submitting oneself to adult baptism, is an act of free choice. In the early years of Christianity, and today where Christianity is expanding and still gaining converts, baptism occurs as a result of a free act and decision. Under these conditions, the principle of free choice applies to the Church. Only where Christianity has long been established and is firmly rooted, where it is passed down through the generations, does the principle of forced membership by virtue of infant baptism predominate.

It

is evident that sociologists of religion have considered this latter circumstance to be the normal case and oriented their criteria accordingly. A recent tendency, at least in German Protestant churches, is to view infant and adult baptism as equal in standing. All this demonstrates that the principle of free choice is, as a criterion for discriminating between 'sect' and 'church', highly unreliable, and, as Joachim Wach aptly states, "not very helpful." [95]

Bahá'ís

are not born into the Bahá'í community. One becomes a Bahá'í through accepting the message of Bahá'u'lláh, whether this occurs as the consequence of personally motivated search or of parental education. There is no initiation, no ritual to which one is subjected without one's prior knowledge or consent. One becomes Bahá'í voluntarily, through personal choice. The Bahá'í principle of individual, independent search for truth, alone, rules out coerced membership in the community of Bahá'u'lláh, in whatever guise. If one were to call the Bahá'í religion a sect on the basis of this characteristic, then one must also call Islam a sect, where the conditions with respect to this criterion are similar.

The Judgment of
Contemporary Religious Studies

Whereas

the Bahá'í religion is mainly referred to in older works as a sect, more recent literature demonstrates a clear shift of opinion in the direction of the Bahá'í Faith's self-understanding as an independent religion. In his 1949 book about the Bahá'ís, the

Protestant theologian and religious scholar, Gerhard Rosenkranz, made it quite clear, despite his own personal critical distance, that the Bahá'í Faith "from a religious-historical point of view, was in its earliest stages a true prophetic movement," a "new religion" growing out of Islam. Rosenkranz stresses "that with Bahá'ísm we are confronted not with one of those modern pseudoreligions such as one encounters in the West, but a genuinely original religious movement." [96] In the Enciclopedia Cattolica, published by the Vatican, the Bábí religion is described by Alessandro Bausani under the keyword Babismo as "nuova religione," whereas the Bahá'í religion is described as "religione sviluppatasi dal Babismo." [97] Rudolf

94.

Resignation from the Church, which is impossible in Catholic Church law, first became possible through the secular State. Cf. Eichmann-Mörsdorf, Lehrbuch des Kirchenrechts aufgrund des Codex Iuris Canonici 1:183-84; 3:282-389; Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche 6:197-98, "Kirchenbann"; Münsterischer Kommentar zum Codex Iuris Canonici, Can. 1086 "Religionsverschiedenheit," no. 9.

95. Wach, Sociology of Religion 30.

96. Rosenkranz, Die Bahá'í 1, 56.

97. Vol. 2: 640, 692.

Jockel [98]

and Joachim Wach [99] come to the same conclusion. Even Kurt Hütten, former head of the Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen [Protestant Centre for Ideological Concerns] in Stuttgart, treated the Bahá'í religion as a religion rather than as a sect in his book, [100] despite an otherwise sharply critical stance. The late Helmut von Glasenapp, renowned scientist, who in 1957 had already treated the Bahá'í religion as a religion rather than a sect, [101] gave the following expert testimony on 3 October 1961:

It

is true that the religion of the Bahá'ís has its roots in Islam, but it represents an independent form of worship, not an Islamic sect.

Otherwise

one would have to consider Christianity to be a Jewish sect on the grounds that it has grown out of Judaism. [102]

In

his statement of 10 October 1961, Gerhard Rosenkranz elucidated his earlier stated position once again:

In

the recent history of religion, Bahá'ísm stands as an example of how a movement can arise out of an existing world religion — in this case Islam — which not only raises the claim of itself being a world religion, but which in addition has all the religious-phenomenological characteristics of one.

...It was the singular achievement of Bahá'u'lláh that he succeeded in extracting the basic elements from the independent religion already present from the time of the Báb. He succeeded in freeing these elements from their connection with the Shi'ite Faith and built upon them the structure of the Bahá'í religion, which makes the claim of being the fulfilment of, indeed of surpassing, all other religions. With this claim, through which it incorporates rather than rejects the other religions, Bahá'ísm cannot but be recognized as a self-sufficient religion.[103]

The Protestant theologian Friedrich Heiler also judged the Bahá'í Faith to be a religion:

...Bahá'u'lláh is the creator of a new religion. On the one hand, the relationship [of the Bahá'í Faith] to Islam is comparable to that of Islam to Judaism and Christianity. Categorizing the Bahá'í religion among the Islamic sects or sub-communities is as inappropriate as describing Islam as a Jewish or Christian sect. The very fact that Bahá'u'lláh, as bearer of the latest and most exalted revelation, assumes the station which in Islam is reserved for Muhammad, clarifies the independence of the Bahá'í religion with respect to Islam....As an historical phenomenon, the Bahá'í religion therefore stands in equal status with the other universal religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity.[104]

98. Jockel, Die Lehren der Religion-Religion 104.

99. Wach, Sociology of Religion 132.

100. Hütten, Seher, Grübler, Enthusiasten 317ff.

101. von Glasenapp, Die nicht-christlichen Religionen 60ff.

102. Published in Briefe-Briefe 14 (October 1963): 340.

103. Quoted from unpublished material.

104. Expert opinion

of 4 Dec. 1961, published in Bahá'í-Briefe 29 (July 1967):
735.

This

point of view has in the meantime found general acceptance. Rainer Flasche treats the Bahá'í religion as being based on a self-sufficient revelation [eigenständige Offenbarungsreligion][105] Ernst Dammann cites the interpretation of classical texts, the presence of a new Scripture, and the self-interpretation of a community [Selbstverständnis der Gemeinschaft] as criteria for recognition of the quality of originality of that religious community.[106] The Bahá'í religion fulfils these requirements. It possesses its own scripture, in the form of the revealed writings of Bahá'u'lláh; it interprets the holy writings, in particular those of the Old and New Testament and of the Qur'án, with respect to the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, seeing in Him the fulfilment of all the promises of earlier religions; and according to its theology, it is a new message of salvation from God to mankind.

Carsten

Colpe calls the Bahá'í religion a "world religion." [107] Peter Meinhold treats the Bahá'í religion similarly.[108] In justifying the application of this term, he appeals to the following criteria: the religion in question must itself lay the claim of representing a world-encompassing mission; [109] the modern experience of world unity must be part of its self-concept; [110] it must pose itself the question as to what part it can play in the solution of the world's problems; [111] and finally, the religion must come to terms with the plurality of religions "and resolve this question in a manner which does justice to today's world view." [112]

All

these criteria are met by the Bahá'í religion: The universalistic nature of the Bahá'í religion has already been discussed. The Bahá'í religion also provides an explanation for the plurality of religions. The annoying rivalry between competing claims to truth loses much of its poignancy when the various religions are understood, as Bahá'u'lláh teaches, to be manifestations of a progressive, cyclically recurring, and essentially indivisible divine revelation, in which the light of God is presented anew at each recurrence in a manner appropriate to the concrete cultural conditions of society at that time, to the state of spiritual development of that society, and to the powers of comprehension of its members: "Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity." [113] "For every age required! a fresh measure of the light of God. Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it

hath appeared." [114] "There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive

105. Flasche, Die Religion der Einheit und Selbstverwirklichung der Menschheit 188ff.

106. Dammann, Grundriss der Religionsgeschichte 101.

107. Colpe, "Drängt die Religionsgeschichte nach einer Summe?" 221.

108. Meinhold, Die Religionen der Gegenwart 317-38.

109. Meinhold, 20.

110. Meinhold, 22ff.

111. Meinhold, 23.

112. Meinhold, 24.

113. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 87.

114. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 81.

their

inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed." [115]

The

fact that the diversity of teachings and forms of worship stands in apparent contradiction to the essential unity of religion is a result of the divergent spiritual, cultural, and social conditions under which religion has had to take form, as well as a result of the centrifugal developments [116] to which all historical religions have been subjected, and whose consequences could not be averted through human attempts at reformation. Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ, and Muhammad are all "Messengers of God" Who have illuminated the world. All religions have played their part in the history of salvation: indeed, the history of religion is precisely the history of salvation. Goodwill alone is not sufficient to dismantle the barriers dividing the different religions. An atmosphere characterized by countering claims of exclusivity and finality cannot foster a true dialogue and cooperation between the different world religions. A necessary prerequisite to such a dialogue is the mutual recognition of equal worth and standing. The historical interpretation of the successive world religions as presented by the Bahá'í Faith could well provide the basis for reconciliation of the various dogmas, whose differences have instead so long divided humanity and fomented hate, strife, war, and suffering. For that reason, Bahá'u'lláh enjoined

his followers:

Through

each and every one of the verses which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed, the doors of love and unity have been unlocked and flung open to the face of men. We have erewhile declared — and Our Word is the truth — : "Consort with

the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship."

Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished. From the heaven of God's Will, and for the purpose of ennobling the world of being and of elevating the minds and souls of men, hath been sent down that which is the most effective instrument for the education of the whole human race.[117]

115.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 217.

116.

It is undeniable that in the course of time every religion has assimilated disparate, heterogeneous elements, and thus was in danger of losing its very centre. It was the purpose of the Reformation in Christianity to get rid of those accretions and to return to the pure source of the divine revelation. Moreover, in this endless process of reformation different groups focused on very different elements of the faith, emphasizing different aspects of the teachings, for example, the idea of healing, the advent of the Lord, baptism, the Pentecost. The result of these processes, common to all world religions, was the loss of the original unity of the believers and a variety of very different sects, all claiming truth. All-reformations led finally to an increasing theological pluralism and to a loss of the unity of the believers. Human reformation cannot solve this problem, as it lacks the fundamental prerequisites for any returns to the pure waters of divine revelation: a binding standard and a generally acknowledged authority. The true reformation comes from God. It is the new revelation, the "Straight Path" [As-sirātu'l-mustaqim].

(For more details, see Schaefer, *The Light Shineth in Darkness* 88ff.)

117.

Bahá'u'lláh, "Lawh-i-Dunyá," Tablets 87.

As the message of Bahá'u'lláh is directed toward all of humanity, the Bahá'í mission embraces the entire world. We are now only in the year 145 according to Bahá'í reckoning;[118] yet, Bahá'ís have already established themselves in nearly every country on earth. Bahá'ís live in over 112,000 localities around the globe; there are over 36,000 Bahá'í communities and 148 national bodies, called National Spiritual Assemblies. Ample evidence for the universalistic nature of the Bahá'í religion is presented by the fact that with its headquarters in Haifa, Israel, the Universal House of

Justice (an institution which was ordained by Bahá'u'lláh Himself and which consists of members elected by all the National Spiritual Assemblies) decides the destiny of the Bahá'í Faith for the entire globe. It is amply justified to call the Bahá'í religion a world religion.

Contributors to modern encyclopaedias have reached the same conclusion.[119] In the Protestant Theologische Realenzyklopädie, Fereydun Vahman rejected — with convincing argumentation — the categorization of the Bahá'í religion under the heading of 'sect', and maintained that

Bahá'ísm is to be ranked among the main religions of the world. In historic terms, it is the most recently established of the prophetic religions. In light of the fact that Bahá'ísm appeals to all of mankind and that it has established itself in most countries of the world, it can already today be counted among the world religions.[120]

118. A.D. 1988/1989.

119. E.g., Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th ed., s.v. "Bahá'í Faith," 1974.

120. Vahman, "Bahá'ísmus," Theologische Realenzyklopädie 5:131.

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