

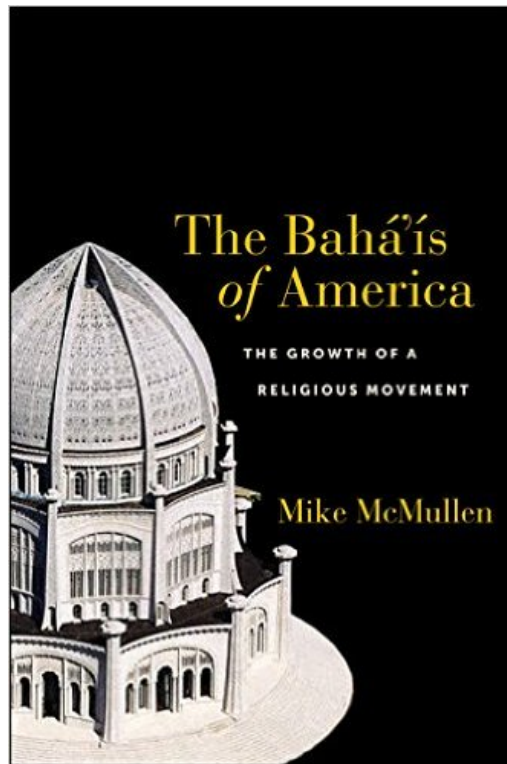


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## The Bahá'ís of America

The Growth of a Religious Movement



Mike McMullen

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## Review

What is the “Bahá’í Faith?” It’s a question of category and nomenclature. This book’s title characterizes the Bahá’í Faith as a “religious movement,” opening with this categorical statement: “The Bahá’í Faith is a little-studied religious social movement that had its origins in nineteenth-century Shi’ite Islam. Although initially labeled as a sect of Islam in its native Persia, the Bahá’í Faith has grown beyond its native Iran to become the second most geographically widespread religion in the world” (1), [“native Persia” is now “native Iran”]. Author Mike McMullen goes on to say that the Bahá’í Faith “came to identify itself as an independent world religion” (8). With a presence in virtually all countries the world—except for the Vatican and North Korea—the Bahá’í Faith is statistically and sociologically significant for its remarkable “diffusion,” despite its relatively modest numbers, estimated at around seven million adherents.

The sociology of religion offers profiles and local snapshots, in historical time, presenting a verifiable picture of religious communities of interest. In America, the Bahá’í Faith fairly recently became newsworthy once again based on the 2010 US Religion Census conducted by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, which found that this new religion is the second-largest faith community in South Carolina (Reid Wilson, “The second-largest religion in each state,” *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2014). Bahá’ís are characterized as “‘situated universalists’ people with a global vision of world order who are situated in the local community and are helping build a global civilization at the local level” (4).

Bahá’í institutions, broadly construed, are the fundamental cause of the growth and development of the Bahá’í community worldwide, to wit: “A foundational premise of this book is that Bahá’í institutions provide powerful motivations, direction, identity, and legitimacy for Bahá’í actions, values, and is globally unifying worldview” (3). The **primary program of growth** is the successive, goal-driven “Plans” for expansion and consolidation in a systematic way. These strategic Plans are conceived, promulgated, and overseen by the international Bahá’í administrative council—known as The Universal House of Justice—elected every five years at the Bahá’í World Centre in Haifa, Israel. Taking the American Bahá’í community as a case study, sociologist Mullen has “showcased the evolution of one aspect of the Bahá’í experience in the United States: teaching and institution building as understood through the Plans developed by the Universal House of Justice” (252).

The “Introduction” declares that the sociological methodology pursued in the instant research is as follows: “By tracing the development and deployment of these Plans ... we can track the expansion and maturation of the Bahá’í Faith in the United States and come to understand how an Iranian-born religion emerged from obscurity in the diverse religious marketplace of American religion to become the most racially diverse faith community in the United States” (2, 3). Part-and-parcel of the specific research method employed is a “qualitative content analysis” of fifty Bahá’í “Ridván” messages over a fifty-year period (1964-2013), **along with qualitative “content analysis of thousands of Bahá’í documents in archives as well as those available on the web” (6), as well as documents produced by the National Spiritual Assembly [NSA] of the Bahá’ís of the United States, “as they translated the global directives of the Universal House of Justice ... into national Bahá’í direction and goals” (7).**

As a road map, *The Bahá’ís of America* features the following chapters: 1) “Bahá’í History, Beliefs, Outreach, and Administration”; 2) “Ridván Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1964-2013”; 3) “Institution Building, Mass Growth, and Racial Unity”; 4) “Persian Immigrants and Emergence from Obscurity”; and 5) “New Directions and Bahá’í Community Development.” The book’s cornerstone “Conclusion” is rounded out with Notes, Bibliography, and an Index.

The Bahá’í religion, for decades, has aimed for “entry by troops”—a significant influx of new adherents, with sustained growth, sufficient to result in a measurable impact on the wider society (30, 31). As with all religions in America, such a dramatic surge in numbers and influence has remained an elusive goal. The aim of the recent series of systematic “Five-Year Plans” issued by the Universal House of Justice—and implemented by National Spiritual

Assemblies around the world—is to “advance the process of entry by troops” by **developing systematic processes by which individuals, communities and institutions can build their capacities**. Given space constraints, this review will highlight McMullen’s conclusions.

Three “Phases of American Bahá’í Community Growth and Development” have been charted in Table C.1: Phase I (1964-1977); Phase II (1979-1996); and Phase III (1996-2013) (251). “New diversity” in the Bahá’í faith-community comprises significant and successive influxes of “African Americans” (Phase I), “Persian immigrants” (Phase II), and “multiracial and multiethnic” adherents. Internally, Phase I was characterized by accelerated “institution building,” with Phase II marked by “institution maturation,” and culminating in Phase III, distinguished by “human resource development (core activities)” (251).

Since the present time represents a continuation of Phase III (251), a brief overview of its salient features deserves mention. One part of the Phase III dynamic is what was characterized as “interest by troops”: “The NSA [National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States] promoted various proclamation activities (especially using media to promote the Bahá’í perspective on race unity and the equality of women) to raise interest in the Bahá’í Faith (leading the NSA to say that based on responses to the toll-free Bahá’í phone number and website, the American Bahá’í community had reached ‘interest by troops’)” (248). And further: “Interested seekers were funneled into core activities (children’s classes, junior youth groups, interfaith devotionals, and study circles) where they cooperatively engaged in human resource development (through spiritual study of Bahá’í Writings)” and community development that often culminated in a service project” (248).

Meanwhile, the American Bahá’í community has continued its ongoing efforts to “tackle racism” (characterized as America’s “most challenging issue”), to promote ideal race relations (“race amity” and “race unity”), which efforts have, as previously mentioned, “resulted in the American Bahá’í community being the most racially diverse religious community in the United States” (248).

Perhaps the most dramatic new development in Bahá’í community life is one in which “the Universal House of Justice asked Bahá’ís to re-conceptualize their community life to include all people in a Bahá’í jurisdiction,” whereby “both Bahá’ís and non-Bahá’ís can engage in core activities as building-blocks for a global civilization” (251).

Based on solid research, carried out over the summers of 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 (7), with a clear goal, straightforward method, and useful conclusions, *The Bahá’ís of America* contributes to the academic study of religion in America in general, and to academic Bahá’í studies in particular. As a watertight study and useful informational resource, *The Bahá’ís of America* is recommended for university research libraries, and as a possible textbook for courses in the sociology of religion.

If and when a revised edition is contemplated, *The Bahá’ís of America* might benefit by the inclusion of anecdotal evidence, illustrative interviews and narratives, and selected photographs, whereby to bring alive and vivify the salient points made along the way.

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