

Book Review



Life Histories of Bahá'í Women in Canada: Constructing Religious Identity in the Twentieth Century, by Lynn Echevarria. Peter Lang, 2011. ix + 229 pages, including appendices and index.

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HOONAARD

With great pleasure I accepted the invitation from the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* to review Lynn Echevarria's book on the life histories of early Canadian Bahá'í women. As a sociologist who is a Bahá'í and who has always had a deep interest in gender and the equality of women and men, I felt particularly privileged to read and review this book.

Echevarria's stated purpose is

to offer a "sociological presentation of the women of the Canadian Bahá'í community through the years 1938-1960" (2). To this end, she interviewed twenty people who were Bahá'ís during these years as well as some Bahá'ís from a later era. Using a life-history method, she approached her topic from both feminist and symbolic-interactionist perspectives. The feminist perspective brings in questions that feminist theologians might ask about women's place in a religious community, while the symbolic-interactionist perspective explores social processes, such as acquiring an identity as a Bahá'í. This book succeeds in telling a fascinating story about women's experiences in the early days of the Bahá'í community of Canada while at the same time incorporating the discourses of sociology and the academic study of religion.

The early chapters of *Life Histories of Bahá'í Women in Canada* provide a welcome description of the setting and social context. In chapter 1, Echevarria tells the stories of early Bahá'í heroines in the context of the Bahá'í Faith's birth, Tahirih and Bahiyyih Khanúm, and in North America, May Maxwell and Dorothy Baker. These narratives serve the purpose of demonstrating the social context in which the Bahá'í teachings regarding the equality of women and men grew, as well as the importance of women in the Faith from its earliest days. Of note is the observation that these

women were mentors and examples of being Bahá'í—not just for women but also for men.

Chapter 2 looks at the social conditions in Canada from the 1940s through the 1960s, a time when the role of women in churches was marginal and supported by belief in the inferiority of women. The chapter successfully provides enough historical context to allow the reader to grasp the extent of the difference between understandings of gender and racial identity in the Bahá'í Writings and community when compared to the society of the mid-twentieth century at large.

During this period, the Bahá'í community evolved from a group of scattered individuals to a coherent community that welcomed marginalized people, in contrast to the “political climate and attitudes of racism” (49) that were rampant at the time. This chapter is particularly useful in avoiding what C. Wright Mills famously referred to as “historical provincialism,” which leads to our thinking that the present is “a sort of autonomous creation” (151). It allows us to understand the historical period in which Echevarria’s participants grew up and later confronted as they assumed their roles within the Bahá'í community of the 1940s to 1960s.

Historical provincialism, which is widespread, may lead to one’s evaluating the behavior and ideas of people from an earlier era by contemporary

standards. Particularly in the areas of gender and racial terminology, we are prone to judge people as if they were writing and speaking today. Hence, someone might look at early translations of the Bahá'í Writings, for example, and criticize the use of the word “man” to stand for humanity without understanding that this usage was standard before the women’s movement of the 1960s and later.

In chapter 3, the author provides an excellent example of how studies about the Bahá'í Faith can work within the existing academic framework to explain the social processes in the Bahá'í community. The chapter explores how theology affects the role of women in religious communities. It uses a framework developed by feminist Mary Farrell Bednarowski, who showed how some marginal religious groups of the nineteenth century “promoted and provided leadership roles for women” (55). Her list of criteria includes

1. a tempering or denial of the doctrine of the Fall;
2. a perception of the Divine that de-emphasizes the masculine;
3. a denial of the need for a traditional-ordained clergy; and
4. a view of marriage which holds that there are other roles for women outside the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood. (55)

Anyone familiar with the Bahá'í teachings will immediately recognize that this framework fits them quite well. It is important to recognize that Echevarria's work is inductive. She did not start with a theoretical construct and then shoehorn the Bahá'í Faith into it. Rather, she observed the important leadership roles of Bahá'í women and sought an explanation that might demonstrate how they work. The text explicates how the Bahá'í Writings compare with each of the four elements of the framework. This discussion also uses the work of Bahá'í scholars, for example, Michael Sours, who analyzed the female symbolism in the Bahá'í Writings to demonstrate that Bahá'í symbolism is not male-dominated.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus in on the narratives from Echevarria's interviews. Always the sociologist, she uses the generic social processes (Prus) of "acquiring an identity" through "living the life" and "acquiring perspectives" through deepening to frame the stories she recounts. In these chapters, I was struck by the role of mentors such as Dorothy Baker and the tremendous transformation the women experienced as they built their lives around their devotion to the Bahá'í Faith. The liberal use of direct quotations from the interviews brings the stories to life. I found myself inspired by the challenges these women faced to transcend their upbringing and the social climate in which they lived.

As Echevarria notes in the concluding chapter, the women (and men) who are the subject of this book were working to understand the Bahá'í vision of equality in an era when people did not understand that equality entailed more than rights. The constant reference to the importance of the equality of men and women by the Universal House of Justice in its statements (such as *The Promise of World Peace*) underlines how far humanity is from achieving equality and how fundamental it is for the establishment of world peace. The manner in which these early Bahá'ís met the challenges of implementing equality into their everyday lives is inspiring.

Life Histories of Bahá'í Women in Canada is an important contribution to Bahá'í studies on two levels. First, it presents stories of the experiences of early women in the Bahá'í community of Canada. Were it not for Echevarria's interviews, much of this knowledge might have been lost forever as the research participants reach the end of their lives. Second, the book provides an excellent example of how one can discuss topics related to the Bahá'í Faith and the Bahá'í Writings in ways that connect to the discourse of areas of scholarship not explicitly concerned with religion. There is no awkwardness to this process. The author successfully brings together the narratives of Bahá'ís, academic literature, the Bahá'í Writings, and the work of other Bahá'í scholars. I

warmly recommend the book to anyone with an interest in Bahá'í history, the equality of women and men, feminist approaches to religious studies, and anyone who would like to be inspired by a good read.

Lynn Echevarria has written a book that is of interest to academics, Bahá'í scholars, and the general reader. It is an accessible book replete with the stories her research participants told in their own words, as well as clear discussions of her more scholarly observations. I found it hard to put it down.

WORKS CITED

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