

Making the invisible visible: introductory books on the Baha'i religion (the Baha'i Faith)

Denis MacEoin*

Formerly Newcastle University, UK

ABSTRACT The present review examines five books, one by a non-Baha'i, three by a Baha'i academic, and one by a Baha'i non-academic. The non-Baha'i volume, which is very short, is by a Danish sociologist of religion, Margit Warburg. It forms a solid explanatory text informed by a lengthy experience of the Baha'is both in Denmark and abroad. This review discusses, *inter alia*, three volumes by a Baha'i sociologist, Peter Smith. While the three titles are very different books, taken together they form an intelligent presentation of the religion from the perspective of a thoughtful insider. Finally, the article looks at a completely different sort of book, an intelligent portrayal of Baha'ism from its spiritual and moral perspectives by Moojan Momen. This last brings readers closest to typical fare for believers and new converts.

KEY WORDS Baha'i; Baha'ism; Baha'i faith; Babism; religious minority; new religious movement; world religion; Baha' Allah; Baha'u'llah; Bab; 'Abd al-Baha'; 'Abdu'l-Baha; Shoghi Effendi; Iran; sociology of religion

Five introductions to the Baha'i faith

Momen, Moojan. 2008. *The Bahá'í Faith*. Oxford: Oneworld. First published as *A Short Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith* (1997)

Smith, Peter. 1996. *The Bahá'í Faith: A Short History*. Oxford: Oneworld: 176 pp. + index.

Smith, Peter. 2008a [2000]. *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*. Oxford: Oneworld. 396 pp. + index

Smith, Peter. 2008b. *An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 229 pp. + index.

Warburg, Margit. 2001. *Baha'i*. Studies in Contemporary Religion. Turin: Signature Books. 91 pp. + index.

Baha'i: the invisible religion

Baha'ism (the Baha'i Faith) has had a curious reception from academics. In the 19th century, it and its precursor movement of Babism were taken seriously by some Western scholars like Edward Browne, the erudite and prolific scholar of Persian, who devoted several books and not a few articles to the subject. But as Babism

faded into a politically quiescent Baha'ism, and as Baha'ism itself made its first stirrings outside Iran, interest dropped off rapidly. It was not until the sociologist Peter Berger wrote his PhD dissertation entitled 'From Sect to Church: A Sociological Interpretation of the Baha'i Movement' (1954) that the possibility of further work on the subject was even raised. But Berger never published his thesis; his own reputation grew rapidly, but that did not carry with it any temptation for others to follow in his footsteps as far as Baha'ism was concerned.

Baha'ism was in any case an unusual religious movement. As Margit Warburg puts it: 'Members of the Baha'i religion are not particularly visible in western societies' (2001: 43; see below; Ruff 1974). Even in Berger's day, Baha'i numbers were pitifully small everywhere, despite strenuous efforts that had been made to spread the religion globally. By the 1970s, scholars of religion, especially sociologists, were much more interested in groups like the Unification Church, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or the Church of Scientology than in relatively stable or uncontroversial new religious movements like the Baha'is or the Ahmadis, which were, in any case, rather too demanding for any scholar who lacked Persian and Arabic or a sound knowledge of Islam. In a way, academics pursued groups most widely known or notorious rather than obscure, dealing with topics like 'brainwashing' rather than the daily grind of prayer and administrative work that characterised the Baha'is so well. There were no scandals in the Baha'i world or, if there were, they were well hidden. Baha'ism was certainly too uncontroversial for its own good, so far as publicity was concerned.

Early introductions to the Baha'i religion

Like the adherents of any proselytising religion, Baha'is are image conscious. Understandably, they typically present themselves in the best possible light, and so introductory texts have been around since the early phase of their long sojourn in the West. The best-known introductory work, still published but in increasingly bowdlerised versions, is John Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* (1923). It is still listed in the top ten Baha'i books. Most of the books we propose to review have also been written by Baha'is, but their resemblance to Esslemont is limited, mainly because scholarship on Baha'i history and texts has advanced greatly since Esslemont's day. Where they do not differ is in the degree of control over publications exercised by the Baha'i authorities – a point to which we shall return. It is notable that outsiders still play little part in writing introductory material. Over the years, a number of Christian writers (notably J. R. Richards, a former missionary to Shiraz and later Bishop of St David's: *The Religion of the Baha'is* [1939] and William Miller, a Presbyterian missionary to Iran: *The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teachings* [1974]) have written polemical works about the Baha'is, and for some time (and mostly in recent years), Iranian clerics have composed their own refutations of Baha'ism, mainly packed with errors and deliberate falsehoods. While the books we have reviewed here do offer some substantial benefits to the beginner, there is still room for improvement. No doubt that is still to come.

The beginnings of Baha'i academia and its clash with fundamentalism

At the same time, in the 1970s, a number of young Baha'is acquired the necessary academic skills to carry out research that would either continue Browne's remarkable

labours or break new ground. By the 1980s, some good-quality work had appeared in the form of articles in specialist journals or, in a few cases, books. Despite this, no non-Baha'i academics chose to follow in Berger's footsteps. But within the Baha'i community, academic scholarship received a severe blow because of a renewed emphasis on a ruling that forbids a Baha'i to publish anything without the prior endorsement of a review panel (MacEoin 1990). The Baha'i authorities have made it clear that academic standards must be sacrificed to religious dogma.¹ All Baha'i academics must have their work reviewed and possibly censored by a committee of non-specialists (as concerns their knowledge of the subject to hand). Even a projected Baha'i Encyclopaedia on which almost US\$1 million had been spent was ditched and its editorial board dismissed when the Universal House of Justice decided its entries were too academic and liberal. That and other actions taken to control or expel Baha'i academics have taken place within the context of growing fundamentalism within the Baha'i ranks and on its institutions. Inevitably, this has led to disaffection among some Baha'i scholars, to bitter debate, and to a rash of apostasies. The application of 'apostate' to some ex-Baha'i intellectuals gave rise to controversy in the pages of this journal (Momen 2007; Stausberg 2008, followed by comments from Denis MacEoin, Sen McGlinn, Eric Stetson, Frederick Glaysher and Moojan Momen).

Outside the Baha'i system, however, there are still too few non-Baha'is and former Baha'is carrying on academic work in this field. As far as the present author is aware, there are only five: Danish academic Margit Warburg at the University of Copenhagen; Oliver Scharbrodt at the University of Cork; Manfred Hutter at the University of Bonn;² Moshe Sharon, who holds the Chair of Baha'i Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; and me. Perhaps there are more, but it's still not a very impressive showing. As time passes, if the Baha'i authorities become more hardline in their wish to control everything written or said about their faith, or to discount anything written from a 'materialist' viewpoint, the number of engaged scholars will surely diminish. In the meantime, the growth of the Baha'i religion, though aching slow in most regions, is sufficient to

¹The House of Justice accepts that many scholarly methods have been developed which are soundly based and of enduring validity. It nevertheless questions some presumptions of certain current academic methods because it sees these producing a distorted picture of reality. The training of some scholars in fields such as religion and history seems to have restricted their vision and blinded them to the culturally determined basis of elements of the approach they have learned. It causes them to exclude from consideration factors which, from a Bahá'í point of view, are of fundamental importance. Truth in such fields cannot be found if the evidence of Revelation is systematically excluded and if discourse is limited by a basically deterministic view of the world.' Letter from the Universal House of Justice to Dr Susan Maneck, 8 February 1998, available at: http://bahai-library.com/uhj_academic_methodologies. 'Scholarly training and professional experience will have sensitized you to the implications for the study of religion of certain assumptions about human nature and the processes of civilization that a purely materialistic interpretation of reality has imposed on scholarly activity of every kind, at least in the Western world. A related paradigm for the study of religion has gradually consolidated itself in the prevailing academic culture during the course of the present century. It insists that all spiritual and moral phenomena must be understood through the application of a scholarly apparatus devised to explore existence in a way that ignores the issues of God's continuous relationship with His creation and His intervention in human life and history. Yet, from a Bahá'í point of view, it is precisely this intervention that is the central theme of the Teachings of the Founders of the revealed religions ostensibly being studied.' Letter from the Universal House of Justice to Dr Susan Maneck, 20 July 1997. Available at: http://bahai-library.com/uhj_scholars_administrative_order

²See his recently published study *Handbuch Baha'i: Geschichte - Theologie - Gesellschaftsbezug*, Stuttgart, 2009. See the review by Armin Eschraghi in this journal (40/2010: 356–358).

demand good explanations of what Baha'ism is, how its history unfolded, what its scriptures say, and what its practitioners do.

Five books and their presentation of the subject

The present comparative review examines five books by three writers, one a non-Baha'i sociologist (Margit Warburg), one a Baha'i sociologist (Peter Smith), and one a Baha'i doctor (Moojan Momen) who has written widely as a private scholar on Baha'i topics. The choice of books was dictated as much by the titles publishers chose to send us as by our own wishes, and this has resulted in some imbalance in their nature and origin. There are, of course, many more books of an introductory nature, but many are pro-Baha'i polemic, while others (like Francesco Ficicchia's *Der Bahá'ismus - Religion der Zukunft?*) are anti-Baha'i counter-polemic. The present titles are aimed at different audiences, partly in terms of style, but also by intent. Warburg's exercise in brevity is informed by her academic understanding of the subject and her interest in the sociology surrounding a complex movement with roots in 19th-century Iraq and Iran and a modern following native to most parts of the globe. The book's ideal readership would be the educated enquirer looking for a brisk but informed run through the history, tenets and organisation of the movement.

By contrast, Momen has his sights on a different reader, one who wants to know the answer to questions like 'How can we be happy?' (Momen 2008: 1) or to read about physical and spiritual health or the nature of the highest reality (God). Of course, there is also plenty about world peace or the equality of men and women, and a useful chapter on the Baha'i administrative order. But the text leaves the really enquiring mind hungry for something more substantial, something they will find more readily in Warburg or Smith. That's not to say that Momen's *The Bahá'í Faith* has no merit. Far from it. For anyone looking for the emotional and 'spiritual' undertext of Baha'ism, for the way the Baha'i heart beats, it's a well-paced, well-constructed little guide.

Smith's encyclopaedia achieves excellent balance. The raw beginner will find it confusing, but someone who has read one or two books on the subject or attended a few introductory meetings should be able to dip in and out of it at random. Equally, someone with a good knowledge of the general subject or a long-standing Baha'i will be able to get something from it. Thinking what entries to put into it was clearly quite an intellectual feat, since the author passes well beyond obvious topics like 'eschatology' or 'dress' to 'excellence' or 'fear' or 'craftsmanship'. Some articles are genuinely informative and more like short articles than simple entries, such as 'expansion', which runs from p. 137 to p. 154, or 'Baha'u'llah, writings of', from p. 79 to p. 86. Others are surprisingly curtailed, like 'sin', 'heaven and hell', 'religion and science', or 'free will'. To be fair to Smith, some of these topics are marginal to Baha'is: there is no clear picture of what heaven and hell consist of, and no one talks about them much. (At the same time there is a very rich and complex thread in Babi thought, where the perfection of anything is its heaven. Like most Babi concepts, this is overlooked everywhere.)

The writers

The three writers present important contrasts in their backgrounds and approaches. Warburg presents us with the brief clarity one may find in a well-written

encyclopaedia piece, but does so with greater depth. Her understanding of the subject is rare among non-Baha'i academics. Her Dr.Phil dissertation (2007) was entitled 'Citizens of the World. A History and Sociology of the Baha'is from a Global Perspective' and broke new ground as the first sociological study of Baha'ism to be set in the framework of New Religious Movements (NRM) studies. (A version was published by Brill in 2006 under much the same title). She herself had previously co-edited (with Britain's Eileen Barker) a collection of essays on NRMs: *New Religions and New Religiosity* (1998). Her study of the Baha'is has continued for almost 30 years. Her dissertation was, of course, the first serious sociological study of the movement since Peter Berger's unpublished PhD in 1954 and Peter Smith's 1982 dissertation, later published as *The Babi and Baha'i Religions*.

Smith is a British sociologist who has spent his entire academic career at Mahidol University outside Bangkok. He has written or edited seven books, all about the Baha'is, including five introductory texts. Unlike Warburg, he seems not to have worked on New Religious Movements and does not see Baha'ism as a NRM.

Momen, a medical doctor, is a British Baha'i of Iranian parentage and a leading figure in the broad area of internal Baha'i scholarship. He has produced numerous articles of high quality on Babi and Baha'i history, and on most other areas relating to Baha'ism. His work is limited by his commitment to the official Baha'i position that academic work must always be subordinate to the demands of the Baha'i authorities. His standpoint may best be described as that of a committed Baha'i seeking to put a more intelligent slant on Baha'i history, law, doctrine and administration.

The books vary greatly in style, attitude, contents and presentation. Each has to be examined on its own merits.

Warburg's portrayal of the Baha'is

Warburg is concise, yet manages to include 19 pages of photographs, two maps, several tables, a calendar diagram and two small religious images that neatly encapsulate the feel of the movement. Textually, it comes close to an expanded encyclopaedia entry, yet still feels like a short book, and not just any book, but a volume with some weight and authority. She paints on a much smaller canvas to the others, but does so with deft brush strokes and an ability to stand back from what she portrays. Chapter four, 'Baha'is in the World' (with its nice ambiguity) makes Baha'ism come to life through a series of vignettes: numbers and distribution (pp. 43–46, where she stresses how Europeans make up no more than 1 percent of the world Baha'i population and Westerners as a whole a mere 3 percent, while Asians are by far the largest group); temples (pp. 46–49), which she describes as 'conspicuous, imposing symbols' of the religion, calling for a study of their architecture; the Baha'i World Centre in Israel (pp. 49–53), where the shrine of the Bab stands at the centre of nine concentric circles that radiate worldwide, so that 'From Mount Carmel, the signal that is communicated is that this is a global religion with all local Baha'i communities on equal footing and all looking to Haifa for direction' (p. 53); Baha'i mission strategies (pp. 53–57), where she interprets Baha'i 'pioneers' as missionaries and gives some out-of-date mission statistics, but reveals Danish figures that show that 80 percent of those who had attended firesides (home-based proselytisation meetings) drop out; social-development projects (pp. 57–58), indicating that, as with Christianity and Islam, 'education and conversion are the twin sisters of efficient missions' (p. 58); and Baha'i work through international organisations (pp. 58–61). These

topics are presented in a concrete manner, with an emphasis on statistics, finances, the pragmatics of administration and the mission field. But Warburg also devotes a chapter to topics not found elsewhere, schisms, internal opposition and persecution. Her coverage is brief, but it takes us into fresh territory, away from the notion of Baha'ism as a single, undivided faith, with the myth that it never has and never will have any sects.

Baha'i texts avoid mention of modern sectarian groups under the Baha'i banner, but Warburg takes time to look at all of them and to continue with a discussion of Baha'i persecution in modern Iran. She understands what *nijasat* is about (ritual uncleanness, which puts the Baha'is beyond the pale) and uses the concept for an intelligent discussion of current Shi'ite attitudes to what is seen as the greatest heresy of them all.

The use of photographs

Like Warburg, Smith makes effective use of photographs in his *Short History* and, copiously, in his encyclopaedia, where he puts faces to many names, and not only the well known. Although the majority are simple shots of places or unexceptional portraits, a few are more striking: several Iranian military officers grinning as they take a pick-axe to the Baha'i National Headquarters in Tehran (p. 2007); ten Baha'i women executed in Shiraz for the crime of participating in community work (p. 235); a page of 'revelation writing' purporting to represent the word of God as dictated to Baha' Allah's secretary, but which is totally illegible (p. 294); and the demolition of the House of the Bab in Shiraz in 1979 (p. 314).

One photograph neither Warburg nor Smith publishes is either of the two known portraits of Baha' Allah. One of these is on display at the Baha'i Archives in Haifa, where it is shown to pilgrims under conditions of reverence, and it also makes an appearance at important conferences, where it is again viewed under strict conditions. Public display and publication are considered deeply disrespectful. The influence of Islamic strictures against the portrayal of holy figures is obvious here, but Baha'is do not take this to extremes, permitting widespread publication of scores of photographs of 'Abd al-Baha' and a few of Shoghi Effendi, who strove hard to avoid a cult developing around himself and was, therefore, very seldom photographed. Of course, photographs of Baha' Allah are not hard to find on the Internet, where opponents of the Baha'is use them in a derisory way.

Momen uses no photographs, but breaks up his own narrative by large boxes of quotation from scripture and tables, some of the former running to as much as three pages. Not only that, but his text is further fragmented by in-line quotations on almost every page. There is little to commend this approach. The reader is drawn to break off from the basic text every few paragraphs, and since this is a *Beginner's Guide*, one can only guess that many beginners come away confused.

A world religion or a New Religious Movement?

For many non-Baha'is, confusion begins with definition. Baha'ism does not fit easily into any of the routine classifications used by sociologists or scholars of religion for the groups they study, whether world religion, church, sect or New Religious Movement. Defining a large, long-lived religion like Judaism, Christianity or Hinduism remains fraught with questions about contrasts between great and little traditions,

sectarian divisions, mystical movements and so on. But they can simply be defined as 'world religions' without doing much damage to their sense of inner complexity. In the case of Baha'ism, not just the overall definition is in dispute, but the very name. The present writer has long used 'Baha'ism' to conform to existing usage, such as Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and so on. Baha'is regard this as offensive, yet continue to use identical terms for other religions and to use their own official title of 'The Baha'i Faith'. Some call it 'Baha'i' (e.g., Warburg), but turning a Persian adjective into an English proper noun designating an entire religion rather than an individual follower can only be confusing.

Be that as it may, the chief area of confusion lies in the question of whether Baha'ism can be usefully catalogued as a cult, New Religious Movement or world religion. Warburg comes down neither on one side nor the other: 'Baha'i,' she argues, 'is one of the oldest of the "new religions of the west"' (Warburg 2001: 3), but soon after broadens her perspective when she points out that 'The Baha'is believe that their religion, which they call the *Baha'i Faith*, will one day establish a new world order of peace and harmony that will unify all people across all nationalities, races and religions'" (Warburg 2001: 4) – something that would, of course, transform Baha'ism into the fully blown world religion its adherents conceive it to be. She continues: 'The relative size and age of the religion, compared to the smaller and newer movements, merits a closer look at its mission and how its members seek to realize it'" (Warburg 2001: 4).

In his *The Baha'i Faith: A Short History*, Peter Smith finds a way to present the movement that is neither unduly local nor swaggeringly global. In Chapter eight, he presents pen-portraits of five Baha'i communities between 1866 and 1921. His choice of locations is intelligent and possibly surprising to some: Iran, the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, India and Burma, Russian Turkistan and Caucasia, and the West. Chapter 11 covers the period 1922 to the present, where 1921 signified the death of 'Abd al-Baha' 'Abbas and 1922 is the effective beginning of the career of his grandson Shoghi Effendi as head of the faith. There are fewer communities here, but they are all widely spread and help give a picture of Baha'ism as a religion that has grown extensively beyond its original boundaries. The three communities discussed are the Islamic heartland, the West again, and the Baha'i 'Third World'. This chapter includes a necessary account of the persecution of Iranian Baha'is under the Islamic Republic. Inevitably, Smith conceives of Baha'ism as a world religion and provides some interesting insights into how it may develop in future. He takes a similar approach in Chapter six of his *An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith*, where the regions discussed are more finely divided.

He does, however, present an orthodox viewpoint in his *Encyclopedia*, under the heading 'Baha'i Faith', where he defers to the Baha'i leader Shoghi Effendi: 'For Shoghi Effendi the Baha'i Faith was unquestionably a world religion, by dint of the nature of Baha'u'llah's claims; the religion's growth in all continents; and its possession of its own distinctive laws and administration' (Smith 2000: 67).

In the work presented here, Momen extols the way 'in the brief course of its 150-year history, the Baha'i Faith has transformed itself from a little-known Middle Eastern religious movement into a fast-growing global religion'. He continues: 'Now established in every country of the world, it is rapidly emerging out of obscurity to take its place alongside older and more established world religions' (Momen 2008: vii). Because this is a book wholly informed by official Baha'i doctrine, Momen seldom asks questions that an outsider might ask. In one place, for

example, he declares that one of the fascinating things about the religion is ‘the way in which it has been successful in attracting large numbers of people’ (Momen 2008: x). An outsider might well say that there is nothing very fascinating about a religion attracting numbers of converts. Momen illustrates this by reference to Iranian Muslims, urban Christians, Amerindian Catholic peasants, Hindu villagers and Buddhists. Nowhere, however, does he ask – as a non-Baha’i reader might – what will happen to the religious and local cultures of these people, who will find themselves assimilated to a half-Iranian, half-Western Baha’i culture (with its many deficits in respect of literature, art, music and drama). The assumption, of course, is that loss of their existing beliefs will be good for these converts, and this itself says something important about how Baha’is (like evangelical Christians or Muslim *da’is*) view the mission field.

However, Momen does address this issue well in a paper entitled ‘Is the Baha’i Faith a World Religion?’ There, he tries to tackle the problems posed when Western Baha’i missionaries address Buddhists, Hindus and others. He sums the matter up as follows – ‘the question asked in the title of this paper: “Is the Bahá’í Faith a World Religion?” can be answered thus: it has the potential to become a world religion but as yet that potential has only been manifested to a limited degree’ (Momen 1989: 64). It is a pity he was not as forthright in the present text.

Smith’s one-volume encyclopaedia

Smith’s *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Baha’i Faith* succeeds in creating a more rounded picture of the faith than any other publication known to me. This does not get over the objections to Baha’i claims to be a universal religion, but it does show quite vividly how this might one day be possible.

It seems a premature thing to write an encyclopaedia of any length about a religion with such a shallow basis in culture, such a short history (168 years) and such a limited amount of scholarship. There have been plans to produce a full-scale Baha’i encyclopaedia for several years now, but they seem to have run into problems, partly because content would be controlled by Baha’i, not academic, standards – and because there simply isn’t enough material to go round. Baha’ism is not a huge subject with endless ramifications, and Smith has produced a smart one-volume text that provides a good overview of the topic and allows the reader to browse and to come away well informed. He doesn’t just provide entries for the obvious (‘the Bab’, ‘Baha’ Allah’), but includes topics that might not turn up even in larger encyclopaedias, like ‘civilization’, ‘cleanliness’, ‘communism’, ‘public recognition’, ‘publishing’, ‘language’, ‘law’, ‘health and healing’, ‘detachment’, ‘family life’, ‘fate’, ‘fear’, ‘ethics’, ‘evil spirits’, ‘excellence’, ‘dress’, ‘dreams and visions’, ‘drama and dance’, ‘Dizzy Gillespie’ (the jazz trumpeter who converted to Baha’ism in 1968), ‘language’, ‘social evolution’, ‘socio-economic development’ and much more. These entries, though short, help give a richer picture of the religion than a more academically slanted volume might provide. Although, like Warburg, Smith is neither a Persianist nor an Arabist, he does provide a large number of very useful biographical sketches of Iranian Baha’is, Persian and Arabic writings, some general Islamic topics and recondite terms (*mubahala*, *‘ulama*, *bada*). My only complaint here is that he chooses to use the official Baha’i system of transliteration for both Arabic and Persian words despite its being inadequate for the purpose.

It should be clear at once that most of the above (and many more of the topics given a place here) would be hard to fit into the narrative sequence of any standard introductory volume. Smith has thus succeeded in fleshing out parts of the Baha'i religion that many Baha'is are ignorant of, and creating a book that will at once frustrate, enlighten and surprise its readers. For example, the entry under 'Bahá'u'l-láh, writings of' continues for several pages as a detailed chronological guide not just to the well-known titles, but many more. I have read all of them at one point or another, but I venture to say that the average Baha'i does not even know their names. To compile that list required hard work.

The net result of Smith's taxonomy is that, claims to being a world religion aside, we are shown something of the depth of Baha'ism as it really is, its richness of scriptural texts, its legacy of teachers, missionaries and martyrs, and its capability to touch on a wide range of religious and philosophical subjects. Disappointingly, this encyclopaedia, like the other books reviewed here except for Warburg, does leave out something that might have seemed central to any study of a religion: ritual. Smith's entry under this heading is just a short column. Baha'is often deny that they have any ritual practices, but the truth is they have plenty (see MacEoin 1995), even if many are not in practice or are not understood for what they are. Warburg's treatment of the subject is observant and probably enough given the limitations of space she has been given.

Of course, Smith is unable to take his entries beyond a page or two, or, in most cases, just a paragraph. His picture of the faith is built up through these small increments, and it is one of texts, of lives, of lives in the past that are relevant today, of an ideology that expands to take in family life, fasting, economics, film and drama (acting being disapproved of as a career), racial harmony, secret societies (forbidden) and much more. While Baha'ism lacks the historical and cultural depth of earlier faiths like Judaism, it touches on all the areas of human concern that they touch on. Smith's panoramic view does help, in particular, to reinforce the fact that Baha'ism does not qualify as a cult, in the tabloid-newspaper sense. There are strange things in it, but not much that is weird and wonderful even for modern Westerners, unless they are exposed to some of the genuinely bizarre ideas and practices found in Babism.

Smith's biographical entries – all 224 of them – are in some respects at the heart of his little encyclopaedia. Every so many years, the Baha'is have published a (frequently thick) volume entitled *The Baha'i World* to serve as a record of international and national events over so many years. Each volume carries obituaries of prominent individuals who have died during that period. This concern with biography – or, more accurately, hagiography – has its roots in Islamic and, in particular, Shi'ite collections of pious accounts of prophets and imams, of the early companions of Muhammad, Sufi shaykhs and scholars ('ulama'). For the most part, such hagiographies tell us little about their subjects, and the same is true of most Baha'i biographies, notably the bland biography of Shoghi Effendi, *The Priceless Pearl*. Smith succeeds in breaking with this tradition of pious utterances about the dead and gives us historically unembellished accounts of major and minor figures, without the flowery language that disfigures both Persian and English-language accounts, and without falling back on long-winded descriptions of his subjects' spiritual experiences.

There are, of course, occasional lapses. The account of 'Babi and Baha'i Studies' (Smith 2008a: 61) focuses heavily on 19th- and early 20th-century scholars but says

very little about modern academics, including those he often cites as sources elsewhere. Nor does he say more than a sentence about the conflict between the Baha'i authorities and internal or external writers. This important issue deserved at least a column or an entry to itself.

The opening section of the entry 'The Baha'i Faith and Other Religions' (Smith 2008a: 68) is weak. Smith quotes Shoghi Effendi to the effect that Baha'ism does not distort the teachings of other religions, but does not examine the obvious distortions that Baha'i teachings create for Jews, Christians, Muslims and others. It is quite easy to see that key doctrines in all other faiths are contradicted by Baha'i beliefs and that there are no simple ways to reconcile them. A discussion of some of these issues would have been an improvement on the bland statement that Baha'is believe in the 'eternal verities' of other faiths. A comparison with Christian views of Judaism or Muslim views of Judaism and Christianity might have been of interest.

Smith's Introduction

The same writer takes a similar approach in his *Introduction to the Baha'i Faith*, where he provides a less rich but satisfying smörgåsbord, drawing, as he says, on material from his encyclopaedia (Smith 2008b: xv). A historical overview gives a sense of how Baha'is see themselves as believers in a faith with deep historical roots, followed by an intelligent passage through Baha'i texts, divine knowledge and guidance, being human, Baha'ism and other religions, social teachings and the vision of a new world order, the spiritual path, community membership and Baha'i sacred law, Baha'i administration, aspects of Baha'i community, and Baha'i activities and the wider world. This is comprehensive, leaving us with a portrait of a religion which, however much it may be lacking in cultural and political breadth, does have a coherent body of doctrine and communal resources.

Let us pass on to another work by Smith, a more conventional introductory volume. Previously, he wrote an excellent survey entitled *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*, published in 1987 by Cambridge University Press. It was a solid volume that tackled all the main issues with academic vim, and it won a place in the present writer's heart as the only modern text by a Baha'i to meet the criteria of academic neutrality.

The Baha'i Faith: A Short History (1996) is both less and more than that. It's much shorter, of course, and it seems aimed at a more popular readership. It is Warburg at greater length. The first 50 pages are devoted to a brisk account of the rise and fall of Babism. Chapter six strays from the historical theme to present 'The Writings and Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh', while Chapter eight is devoted to a survey of several Baha'i communities between 1866 and 1921. Chapter nine deals with Shoghi Effendi, his writings and translations, the development of his administrative order, and more. Chapter ten covers the Universal House of Justice, their writings, social issues, and the Baha'i involvement with the United Nations; Chapter 11 is devoted to Baha'i communities between 1922 and 'the present' (1996). There is also a conclusion that takes us through 'Charisma, Organization and the [Baha'i] Covenant', 'Major Religious Motifs' and 'The Future' – none of them subjects one might expect to find in a history at all.

Smith, as noted above, gets going with a sturdy and informative run through the story of the Babis, placing them and their often peculiar beliefs into context by

providing sufficient detail about Shi'ism and the Shaykhi sect. Here he matches Warburg, who presents the Shaykhis and Babis as part and parcel of her narrative. Smith has more space at his disposal, and even more in his *Introduction*, giving substantial accounts of the Babis and a good sense of the Shi'ite background. Of course, it's hard to say how much the general reader will glean from such topics. Shaykhism is an immensely complicated sectarian system, with a vast quantity of profound but difficult texts, mainly in Arabic, whose doctrines cannot be summed up in a chapter, let alone in a single paragraph. This is, of course, a perennial problem for writers of general guides to religions, where doctrines and writings of great complexity have to be squeezed into a few pages. He writes: 'The writings of the Bab ... and to a lesser extent those of Baha'u'llah are pervaded by Islamic concepts; and many Babi and Baha'i practices bear an obvious resemblance to those of Islam' (Smith 1996: 13). Of course, this is rather misleading. Babi and Baha'i practices and, for that matter, writings and doctrines do not just resemble those found in Islam: they are derived, sometimes wholesale, from them. Baha'ism has two *hajj* pilgrimages, lesser pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) a month-long fast, ritual prayer (*salat*), a system of religious law (*shari'a*) an aversion to homosexuality, a stress on the divine unity, and so on, and it is only right that these debts be recognised for what they are.

Although Smith provides us with a largely accurate account of Baha'ism, there is little or nothing here that would not pass muster by any orthodox Baha'i censorship committee. There are areas of controversy to which outsiders have often drawn attention, but Smith does not go near these. One is the prohibition on women serving on the Universal House of Justice, another the restrictions placed on Baha'i writers, including academics, poets and songwriters. Given that Smith is a sociologist, I was surprised to find him describing Baha'ism as 'a world religion' (Smith 1996: 151, 152) without caution. The jury is certainly out on this. The Baha'i religion cannot compete in terms of history, culture, numbers, multiplicity of adherents in at least one nation state, literature, sacred places, and so on with any of the faiths routinely described as world religions. The present writer prefers to call Baha'ism a New Religious Movement, placing the faith closer to the Unification Church or Scientology. It is clearly not in any real sense a world religion, whatever it may become in future. But it is not a church nor a denomination nor a sect. In respect of more modern studies, it does not qualify as a cult. That leaves us with few choices, of which the best is that of NRM, with respect to its age, its limited membership, its mixture of Eastern and Western themes, and its lack of a serious presence in any one country or culture. Even if Smith preferred the world religion term, as a sociologist he was obliged to explain how that could be possible in reality. It is a real weakness.

The account of Babism is solid and well documented throughout. But the first signs of a bias towards the Baha'i narrative occurs in Chapter two, where we are given an inadequate summary of events in Baghdad between 1853 and 1863. Although he had access to accounts which made many of the developments in this period clear, Smith manifestly chose not to allude to them. I am thinking here of the numerous claims to spiritual status and leadership of the Babi remnant, including Baha' Allah's early claim to be the return of the Shi'i Imam Husayn. By leaving out this complex set of events, Smith leaves us with the false impression that Baha' had only one rival, his brother Mirza Yahya Subh-i Azal, and that Azal was weak and incapable.

Generally, Smith shifts between a measure of academic detachment (e.g., ‘... the actual process of the revelation of verses was now seen as a miraculous proof of the Bab’s divine power’ [Smith 1996: 9]) and statements that seem better suited to a work of Baha’i proselytisation (‘... the *Aqdas* and its supplementary texts also had major significance, of course, underlining Bahá’u’lláh’s prophetic role by indicating that he was also a lawgiver as Muhammad and Moses had been before him’ [Smith 1996: 32]).

The rest of the book covers all that needs to be covered, and in great detail. But there is no real critical engagement. Smith can be accurate, and is not willing always to follow standard teaching. For example, he refers to how the Babi heroine Qurrat al-‘Ayn (known to Baha’is as Tahirih) was not a feminist, as Baha’i myth presents her, but was motivated by religious enthusiasm. But on the next page, discussing the Baha’i belief in gender equality, he elides the debate about the doctrine that women may not serve on the Universal House of Justice. To be honest, it’s too much to expect a practising Baha’i to write objectively about his faith. And, in his favour, it is clear that his books succeed in presenting a balanced picture of the religion. But he is a sociologist, and that carries the implication that he has taken a more rigorous academic approach. This is a criticism, but it is not wholly damning. This is the first book I would give anyone to read on the subject, once they had taken on board Margit Warburg’s gem.

Momen’s Baha’i faith

This book creates a picture somewhat different to the one provided by Smith in *The Baha’i Faith: A Short History*. Momen’s aim is to proselytise (or, in Western Baha’i terminology, to teach).

We do not come to history until Chapter eight. The first seven chapters deal with ‘The Individual’, ‘The Family’, ‘Society’, ‘Global Concerns’, ‘The Baha’i Community’, ‘Baha’i Laws’ and ‘Theological Teaching’. Now, this is not an altogether improper way of going about things, but it is somewhat odd. Apart from a couple of pages in the Introduction, the reader is given no proper context for what follows. The introductory pages make no reference to Islam at all, and that is a serious defect in any serious introduction. Momen, however, is not writing academically but as a believer seeking to impress outsiders as to the virtues of his faith, and this he does well.

To this end, there are copious quotations from the extensive Baha’i Scriptures, letting newcomers see selected passages in the context of this or that discussion. Many of these quotations are set out from the main text in boxes, giving the reader a chance to go through them as blocks of sacred writing that can be read and understood in their own right. Since practically all scriptural quotation in English comes from works translated by the ‘Guardian of the Cause’, Shoghi Effendi, they are mellifluous and are likely to make an impression on Christians, given their quasi-biblical style. Their artificiality, given the direction of modern English since the 1930s, may seem off-putting to others.

Some sociologists of religion have observed that conversion to NRMs tends to take place as the outsider becomes socialised into the group, and that an understanding of what the new faith actually teaches (a process known to Baha’is as ‘deepening’) only comes after that integration process has taken place. From that

perspective, it is arguable that Momen's book is less for raw beginners and more for individuals who have already accepted Baha'i belief as normative and now want to learn what it is they have brought themselves into. This book is ideally structured for that purpose. Momen takes us straight into the Baha'i mind and lets the reader do more than simply read a text: there is a sense of participation, of feeling beyond simple reporting of belief or action: 'Humanity's arrogant misuse of nature' (Momen 2008: 45); 'much of the economic activity in the world today is wrongly conceived because it is built upon incorrect assumptions' (Momen 2008: 54); 'Only religious faith has the power to transform people and thus cure this spiritual disease [of society]' (Momen 2008: 59).

Although this is immediately useful to the spiritually minded inquirer or the newly converted, it is also of service to academics, who may want to get closer to the emotions of Baha'is. As explained above, Momen has breathed a Baha'i atmosphere from birth and enjoys good connections with the different circles of the complex Baha'i administrative order. His own scholarship has been conscientious and intelligent. This means that, although numerous books of this type exist, he has the advantage of presenting an informed Baha'i overview. It is, of course, informed but not critical. He tells us, for example, that women, though deemed the equals of men, may not serve on the Universal House of Justice, but rather than say anything helpful about this (a regular source of controversy in the movement, as we have mentioned elsewhere), he falls back on a 'God knows best' defence: 'Bahá'ís must take this apparent anomaly as a matter of faith for the present' (Momen 2008: 44). Why, one asks, is this anomaly only 'apparent'? It is as big an issue for Baha'is as women priests are in Catholic Christianity or female rabbis (*rabba*) in Orthodox and Haredi Judaism, and it has made a deep impact on liberal Baha'is. 'God knows best' is an inadequate response to the issue. Nor is Smith exempt from criticism on this score: his *Encyclopedia* fobs readers off in almost the same way and gives no hint of the controversy this topic has engendered.

Not infrequently, other potentially difficult teachings are glossed over. In a section on 'the true religion', Momen looks at the question of conversion to Baha'ism: 'To become a Bahá'í ... does not entail an automatic rejection of one's previous religion. In the first place, in view of the Bahá'í teaching that the prophet-founders of all the world religions are the reappearance in the world of the same reality, conversion to the Bahá'í Faith involves no rejection of the founder of one's previous religion' (Momen 2008: 119). This is disingenuous, and Momen must know it. Baha'ism is a thoroughly Islamicate religion, even if its modern form conceals this from both insiders and many outsiders. Qur'anic and post-Qur'anic writing presents doctrines very different from those held by Buddhists, Hindus, and even Jews and Christians. Like Islam, Baha'ism turns Abraham and Jesus into prophets. Baha'is also revere Buddha as a prophet preceding Jesus and Muhammad. The doctrine of *mazhariyya*, which turns all religious founders into 'Manifestations of God' derives from the esoteric systems of Shi'ism and Sufism, which means that most Sunni Muslims will find it repugnant. Other components of the world religions, from the Jewish *halakha* to the crucifixion (which Baha'is accept, but which Muslims deny) to the Trinity to circumcision (which Baha'is have abandoned) to Holy Communion to performing the *hajj* all have to be consigned to the dustbin. Shoghi Effendi insisted that new Baha'is should leave their churches (and mosques and synagogues), indicated that believers should not celebrate Christmas and other religious festivals, and inveighed against the various

rituals and the clergy of other faiths. Momen knows all this (he has written books on world religions and even one on Buddhism³), so why does he pretend that converts do not have to reject any of their old religious beliefs? Simply, I believe, because the Baha'i doctrine of a single revelation that has progressed from one 'Manifestation' to the next entails the assumption that all religions are basically the same, even when they are not. This is misleading for the less-informed reader, but still an excellent guide to Baha'i thinking on the matter.

There are other oddities of imbalance in these books. For example, Momen devotes a chapter to Baha'i laws, covering topics from prayer, reading of scripture and meditation, fasting, marriage and divorce, death and burial and cruelty to animals. It is only when these have been dealt with that he adds a mere 11 lines on abolitions and prohibitions. This last section (Momen 2008: 104) introduces a range of prohibitions, including holy war, asceticism and monasticism, confession of sins, the use of pulpits, drugs, alcohol, gambling and homosexuality. These are all matters of interest and are closely linked to Baha'ism's Islamic origins, but the last, homosexuality, surely cannot be passed over in such a careless fashion, given our modern understanding and acceptance of different forms of sexuality. For many people, the Baha'i claim to be free from all forms of prejudice may seem to founder on this one prohibition alone. Given that Momen is a medical doctor and may be thought well informed on modern theories about sexuality, it seems bizarre that he has not paused to discuss this shibboleth even for a paragraph. To be fair to him, sex is not something much discussed in Baha'i circles anyway, where there does not seem to be anything in the form of counselling on personal matters similar to what we now find in most Christian churches, Jewish organisations, or even Islamic websites like *IslamOnline*. But Baha'is are hot on the elimination of prejudice, so one might have expected comment on the main form of discrimination found within their world.

Whereas Smith does, on the whole, address what he perceives to be the concerns of his readers, Momen writes what are practically official Baha'i publications which tell readers what Momen, guided by the Baha'i authorities (who censor everything he writes), feels they should know. It is telling that every single book cited in Momen's further reading list was written by a Baha'i and that some of them are very out of date. Smith's bibliographies are much more eclectic.

The Babi-Baha'i writings and the links back to Islam

Even small religions have an official body of doctrines and a system of organising and administering their scattered followers. Baha'ism is striking in both cases, for what it uses as its doctrinal base and for the linkage it forges between doctrine and what one might term its ecclesiastical vision. Perhaps it is because of her training and experience as a sociologist that Warburg says next to nothing about Baha'i scripture. Equally, Momen does not devote a separate chapter or section to the topic, although he does at least quote from scripture at length. In his *Introduction*, Smith devotes considerable space to the writings of Baha' Allah, in his *Short History* the balance changes, with discussions of the writings of the Bab, and in

³*Buddhism and the Baha'i Faith*, Oxford, 1994.

his *Concise Encyclopedia* he writes briefly but well of the writings of the Bab, Baha' Allah, 'Abd al-Baha' and Shoghi Effendi.

What none of these writers really does is to show in any detail the trail that leads from Shi'ite Islam to Shaykhism to Babism to Baha'ism (through its own stages). I don't mean that none of this is addressed. Smith's *Short History* has a useful first chapter on the Islamic and Iranian background, and both here and in his other books he presents decent accounts of Babism. Momen says nothing about Islam and presents Babism as simply the earliest phase of the Baha'i faith, something to which Baha'i writers are prone. But without a proper discussion of Islamic and Babi doctrine and scripture, it's easy to fall into the trap of seeing Baha'i teachings as wholly original, which they are not. Oddly enough, Babism here is less important, given its eccentricity (though the Bab and the Babi martyrs have a profound emotional resonance for modern Baha'is); but so much of Baha'i doctrine is coloured by Islamic teaching and practice that an introduction without it leaves the reader in the dark. More confusing to the newcomer, however – and these books are all aimed at the fairly uninitiated – is the breach between Babi writings like the *Bayan* and the rich mix of Baha'i scripture and semi-scripture (by which I mean the letters of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice). Although the writings of the Bab are still considered the word of God, only a tiny selection is known to or used by modern Baha'is (even Iranians, for whom access to Babi texts is nigh on impossible). The Bab's writings are frequently incomprehensible, obscure and muddled, and the teachings in them are visibly idiosyncratic. It is little of a puzzle that they have mostly fallen into desuetude. Likewise, the Bab's laws are bizarre in the extreme, with the result that Baha' Allah abrogated all but a few of them. And both the Babi and Baha'i *shari'as* are best understood in the context of Islamic law. In the end, the enquiring reader really does want to know about these things, the academic most of all, but only Smith is willing to spend much time on them.

A missing subject

An odd thing happened to the Baha'is in 1957. Shoghi Effendi died aged 60 on a visit to London. He died without issue. But, like the Shi'ite Imam 'Ali, he was supposed to be the first in a line of Guardians or *walis*, without whom, as he himself had written, the Baha'i religion would be deprived of hereditary guidance.⁴ By the time of his death, he had excommunicated his entire family (except for his wife), which meant that the guardianship could not be continued in perpetuity as planned. A six-year period followed, during which a body known as the Hands of the Cause acted as stewards to the international community until they

⁴Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship the World Order of Baha'u'llah would be mutilated and permanently deprived of that hereditary principle which, as 'Abdu'l-Baha has written, has been invariably upheld by the Law of God. "In all the Divine Dispensations," He states, in a Tablet addressed to a follower of the Faith in Persia, "the eldest son hath been given extraordinary distinctions. Even the station of prophethood hath been his birthright." Without such an institution the integrity of the Faith would be imperiled, and the stability of the entire fabric would be gravely endangered. Its prestige would suffer, the means required to enable it to take a long, an uninterrupted view over a series of generations would be completely lacking, and the necessary guidance to define the sphere of the legislative action of its elected representatives would be totally withdrawn' (Effendi 1938: 148).

facilitated the election of the first Universal House of Justice (*bayt al-'adl al-a'zam*) in 1963. This is something Baha'is never write about, at least not in the terms I have just done. Yet it is a crucial moment, because it changes the tenor of the new faith without any real possibility of alteration. The guardianship (*velayat*, from *wali*, as in Khomeini's modern usage, *velayat-e faqih* or 'rule of the jurist') had been set up to continue the Shi'ite tradition of an inspired male interpreter of the faith, and its absence left a void that has never been properly filled. Quite by coincidence, Shoghi's death replicated the situation that affected the Shi'i world on the 'disappearance' of the twelfth imam in 874. Nevertheless, the Baha'is have succeeded well in turning their nine-man international body, the House of Justice, into a substitute for a guardian, while acknowledging its primary role as the source of future divine legislation. Similarly, with the deaths of the Hands of the Cause and no way of appointing more, Baha'is now turn to individuals known as Continental Counsellors for day-to-day guidance in religious and administrative matters.

Although the Baha'is have handled the post-Guardian issue very well, it is remiss to leave out all discussion of the crisis his death really represented. A number of schisms, all quite tiny, emerged out of it, and it's far from impossible that others will do so. Academically, it is a pity not to see this matter made prominent, since there are bound to be sociologists who might choose to study it and the mechanisms that were chosen by the Baha'is to save the day.

The books examined here have, I fear, all made a botched job of this series of events, making it very hard indeed to understand the sequence through which authority has passed in the movement and how different strands of authority operate today, to some degree in reaction to the vacuum that was created at that time. What happened in 1957 had an unexpected effect on everything since then. Not even Warburg, who is up front about schisms after Shoghi Effendi, gives us a proper sense of what his demise without issue meant and still means. A sociological analysis of authority shifts would have been worthwhile. Smith and Momen just give the fact of his death and continue their narratives as though nothing untoward had taken place. In all cases, it is a serious betrayal of historical truth in favour of a version that prefers the explanation of the current Baha'i authorities, and for little reason. This is surely the greatest gap in all these books.

Other doctrines, other influences

Baha'ism is (so far, at least) unusual among religions in that it has little in the way of schismatic variance, and no serious schismatic doctrine. As a result, writers, whether within or without the faith tend to present what is essentially official doctrine. The largest exception to this is, as we have mentioned earlier, the very eccentric yet wide-ranging body of Babi doctrine, coupled with the extensive doctrinal and philosophical theories of the main body of Shaykhism. These do not form part of Baha'i doctrine, of course, yet they constitute an important background to it. Another body of teachings to which Smith alone alludes in his *Encyclopedia* is Sufism, the system of mysticism and religious brotherhoods that played a central role in traditional Islam. Baha' Allah lived for a time as a Sufi and picked up ideas from his Naqshbandi teachers in Kurdistan, Baghdad, and possibly elsewhere (see Cole 1984) He had earlier had an affiliation to the Iranian Ni'matullahi brotherhood. Many of his writings are saturated with Sufi belief, just as the Bab's

are filled with occult and magical conceits. For many readers, these may not seem essential to a basic understanding of Baha'ism; but to exclude them completely only helps perpetuate the myth that the Baha'i corpus came into existence *sui generis* and is free from external influence. That myth itself owes much to the Islamic understanding of the Qur'an, which is deemed to be the pure word of God, transmitted to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel. But just as Western scholars can find in the Qur'an a conspicuous influence from Judaism, Christianity and Arabian paganism, so non-Baha'is must look for these primary influences in the Baha'i writings. They must also consider the likelihood of direct influence on Baha' Allah and 'Abd al-Baha' from Western thought, another topic that is, again, passed by in silence. Official doctrine excludes the possibility of such latter-day influence, yet even the slightest familiarity with the Baha'i texts shows the presence of Western ideas, if only that most of them predate the Baha'i corpus (see Cole 1998).

The impact of Baha'i censorship on academic writing

One further issue has to be raised if we are to gauge the relative values of these five books. We have already mentioned the issue of review, which places severe restrictions on the freedom of any Baha'i, academic or not, to write about the religion without subjecting his or her work to external censorship. What impact this has is not easy to evaluate in individual cases, but we do know that one Baha'i-owned publishing house in the United States has been forbidden to sell its books to Baha'is through Baha'i channels for several years. Although Baha'is were technically allowed to buy their books directly from the press, the implication was that their books (which included many prayer books and other titles of unimpeachable correctness contained doctrinal errors), and their sales dropped accordingly. It can only be assumed that other Baha'i presses will have exercised tight control over their output. Smith has never been a dissident of any kind, and that rings certain alarm bells in my mind. He does not take on any of the thorny areas that Warburg or other non-affiliates might tackle. But he does not just parrot official hand-me-downs either, and he remains largely honest to his academic calling. How far the review process tangles with this is a matter for his conscience to decide. That he retains an open attitude to things outside Baha'i convention may be gauged by one thing. Many Baha'i writers consciously choose not to use or list anything written by the present author, but in his extensive and useful bibliographies, Smith gives a large number of my books and articles. Maybe that's a weak test, but it does resonate and it does compare Smith favourably with many other Baha'i authors. This is not to say that he does not steer a comfortable path along the coast of what is acceptable, just that he does so with some judgement. Momen's writing stands in some degree of contrast to this, staying firmly within the boundaries laid down for the doctrinally pure. His personal commitment is evident throughout. No bad thing, and certainly a plus for anyone looking for the inward dimension of Baha'ism. But it is still more than a little at odds with Momen's claims to be a Baha'i intellectual and to be committed to at least some standards of academic writing.

There is no single book here that would serve as a textbook within a class on world religions or in the sociology of new religious movements or dedicated to Baha'ism alone. If there's to be a brief discussion, perhaps only an hour or so, then Warburg's little book will serve the needs of teachers and students admirably.

If there is to be a more detailed study, either Smith's *Introduction* or *Short History* will fit the bill, perhaps alongside Smith's *Encyclopedia*. And if the class takes place in a religious atmosphere, Warburg and Momen will make a suitable pairing. For more serious university-level work, though, Smith's *Introduction* has plenty of meat, especially for students in Middle East or Islamic studies, for whom it has a very helpful bibliography.

Until Baha'is are free to publish without the need for an imprimatur from their national or international authorities, we may not expect to find fully balanced titles as guides for the educated and enquiring reader, unless Margit Warburg or another non-Baha'i comes up with a longer, more academic study. For all that, we do have some that come close, and that is a relief.

Denis MacEoin is a freelance writer working from Newcastle upon Tyne, where he previously taught Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University. His most recent academic book is *The Messiah of Shiraz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism*, Brill, Leiden, 2009.

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