
BAHÁ'ÍS IN THE WEST

Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions

VOLUME 14

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Foreword

ALL RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS emerge within a particular socio-cultural context. For the most part, they remain within the social environment of their birth. They grow or decline in proportion to their success in articulating the cultural concerns of the society in which they are situated and in creating and channeling the enthusiasm of their adherents. Some religious movements, however, transcend their culture of origin, attracting followers from a variety of cultural backgrounds and perhaps eventually establishing firm roots in a number of societies. The resulting diversity entails a double existence for the religion in question. If it is truly multicultural, it exists in a number of distinct local cultural forms. At the same time, insofar as it retains its unity, it remains a single transcultural movement.

The Bahá'í Faith illustrates this multiple existence. Originating within the context of nineteenth-century Iranian Shí'ism, it has long since succeeded in transcending its culture of origin. Not only has it gained a worldwide following, but it has developed in culturally diverse forms. Thus, in the most general terms, we may refer to Bahá'í expansion as having taken place in three cultural-historical "worlds": the predominantly Iranian Shí'í world of the religion's origin; the Western world (the subject of the present volume); and the Bahá'í "Third World," from which most of its contemporary adherents are drawn. Each of these three worlds has had its own distinctive forms and chronologies of Bahá'í expansion.

II

THERE IS GOOD REASON to see the multiform development of the Bahá'í Faith in the West as a single process. The West, here defined as Europe and the culturally cognate territories of North America and the Pacific, is an area of considerable cultural and historical unity. This is grounded in part on the common inheritance of Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman culture and in part on more recent historical developments, such as European imperialism, industrial capitalism, and consumer culture. Within this area, Bahá'í expansion has followed its own distinctive pattern. Western Bahá'í communities have come to share many cultural characteristics with each other, both by dint of shared patterns of Bahá'í activity and by their common participation in the Western-dominated culture of modernity.

III

RECENT YEARS HAVE SEEN an impressive development in the academic study of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions. As much of this work has been by Western Bahá'ís, academic study itself represents an important aspect of Western Bahá'í development. Important though this work has been, there is still evidently much to be done in relation to the West. We now have several excellent studies of the early American Bahá'í community. Apart from these studies, the period of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visits to the West, and some very specific topics—such as the cultural aspects of recent Bahá'í conversions in the southern United States, there is very little material on the history and culture of the Bahá'í Faith in America. There are now detailed studies of only five other countries: Australia, Britain, Canada, Denmark, and New Zealand. As with the American studies, much of this work remains unpublished. There is next to nothing written about any other Western country. In addition to general historical studies, there are a number of biographies of prominent Western Bahá'ís, but only a few of these are scholarly in tone, and only a few leading Western Bahá'ís have received serious attention.

One general tendency in much of the work that has been produced so far has been a concentration on Western Bahá'í history and culture in its own context. This leaves a double lacunae. First, there is as yet

little research on the relationship between the Bahá'í movement in the West and its environing societies and cultures. Nor is there any systematic study comparing Bahá'í formation with other religious developments in the West. Second, the relationship between the Bahá'ís in the West and the Bahá'í Faith as a whole has yet to be adequately studied. Clearly, Western Bahá'ís have played a major role in the diffusion of the Faith outside the West, in the development of Bahá'í administration, and in the formulation of frameworks of belief and practice, but the details of this role have yet to be delineated.

IV

GOOD SCHOLARSHIP INVOLVES both individual effort and a collective endeavor. The progress of any scholarly field depends upon these two elements. We are fortunate, then, that both within the Bahá'í community (through the activities of the Association of Bahá'í Studies, originally the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith [1974-1981]) and independently (through the work of those associated with the Lancaster [1977-1980], Cambridge [1978-1979], and Los Angeles [1983-1985] Bahá'í Studies seminars and their successors), a growing network of scholarly communication and debate has developed. The appearance of publications such as the *Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* series reflects this growth. This present volume is a further contribution to the ongoing process of communication and debate.

As to the papers themselves, the first essay provides a general survey of Western Bahá'í history as a whole (Peter Smith), and the second essay studies the Bahá'í world from 1919-1920 (J. E. Esslemont's survey, edited by Moojan Momen). Studies of particular episodes in the history of the Bahá'í Faith in the West follow: György Lederer examines the newspaper reports of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Budapest in 1913; Jackson Armstrong-Ingram looks at the Henry Clayton Thompson episode of 1910; and Loni Bramson studies the development of the American "Plans of Unified Action." The final essays in the volume investigate the beginnings of three national Bahá'í communities: in Denmark (Margit Warburg), in Australia (Graham Hassell), and in Scotland (Ismael Valesco).

V

THE GESTATION PERIOD of this book has been unduly long. Most of the essays in this book were prepared for publication in 1988, but the project was delayed. A few editorial changes have been made to the original essays, but they remain essentially unchanged. I hope that readers will find them relevant even after this lengthy passage of time. I would like to thank the authors for their patience and cooperation in the preparation of this work. My thanks are also due to the organizers of the Los Angeles Bahá'í History Conferences, at which several of the following papers were first presented, and to Kalimát Press for its hard work on the production of this volume. My thanks to Anthony A. Lee for all his encouragement and perseverance during these years of waiting, and most particularly to Ismael Velasco for his help in preparing the book for final publication.

PETER SMITH
Bangkok
January 2004

PETER SMITH, PH.D. is chairman of the Social Science Division and former Deputy-Director for Academic Affairs at Mahidol University International College. He teaches courses in World History, Social Theory, and Anthropology. His publications include: *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1987) and *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith* (Oneworld, 2000).

BAHÁ'ÍS IN THE WEST

In ground-breaking essays, eight scholars probe the early history of the Bahá'í Faith in the West. In each case, this original research widens and changes our understanding of those crucial early years of development.

Peter Smith, in his sociological survey of the contemporary Bahá'í world, undertakes an analysis of Bahá'í growth and expansion in Western countries. Moojan Momen uncovers a similar analysis of the spread of the Faith written by John Esslemont in 1920. Together the two surveys demonstrate the astonishing development of the Bahá'í community in the twentieth century.

Uncovering important episodes in early Bahá'í history, György Lederer investigates 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Budapest (1913), Jackson Armstrong-Ingram takes a second look at "extraneous" events at an American national Bahá'í convention (1910), and Loni Bramson discusses the first plans of Unified Action undertaken in the Bahá'í world (1926-1934).

The first academic treatments of the beginnings of the Bahá'í Faith in three nations are also included: Graham Hassall writes on Australia (1920-1947), Margit Warburg researches the Denmark Bahá'ís (1925-1987), and Ismael Valesco discusses the first Bahá'í community in Scotland (1946-1950).

Together these scholarly investigations provide us with new information and new visions to deepen our understanding of Bahá'í history.

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