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Rituals in Babism and Bahaim by Denis MacEoin

Review by: Christopher Buck

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the story as told in Genesis and subsequent Jewish legendary material were important in authenticating the ancient Egyptian historical and cultural setting of the story and in demonstrating the extent to which Joseph had become Egyptianized after being sold into slavery. What is remarkable is the irrelevance of these critical issues to the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>anic retelling of the tale. Goldman argues that in the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>anic retelling it is the didactic force of the tale that is important, not the tale's Egyptian background. In fact, it is "this didactic intent [that] distinguishes Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>anic tales as a genre" (p. 73).

The book of Genesis concludes with Joseph's impending death and with his brothers taking an oath that they will ultimately lay him to rest in Canaan, the land of his forefathers. *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men* concludes in the same way. Like most sacred figures, Joseph became a far more potent figure of veneration after his death than he had been while he was alive. Hence, in Chapter 6 ("Joseph's Bones: Linking Egypt and Canaan") Goldman studies this phenomenon through an examination of Jewish, Samaritan, and Muslim veneration of Joseph and his tomb at Shechem–Nablus (Joshua 24:32). Unlike the Biblical account, in which the Joseph saga serves as the crucial link between the Hebrew patriarchal age and the occupation of Canaan under Moses' lieutenant Joshua, the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an makes no mention of Joseph's death or his burial. Such issues simply are not important to the didactic nature of the sura. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that we find a secondary Muslim tradition that Joseph's tomb may be located in the Haram al-Khalil in Hebron. Goldman speculates that such a tradition may have developed because of the persistence of an aggadic tradition that Joseph had wanted to be buried in Hebron or in response to Samaritan claims that Joseph's tomb could be found in their home region of Shechem–Nablus.

Finally, no review would be complete without a few comments on the production of the book itself. The choice of black-and-white reproductions over color plates is regrettably understandable for purposes of making the book affordable, and inconsistencies in the transliteration will annoy only specialists. However, it is truly unfortunate that Goldman's accessible and readable prose is marred by SUNY Press's sometimes shoddy editing of the text. Production flaws aside, *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men* is a welcome and thought-provoking contribution to our understanding of the enduring vitality of the Joseph story in Middle Eastern cultures and of the importance it played in post-biblical Jewish and medieval Muslim communities' understanding of themselves, of their proper relationship with their co-religionists, with God, and of His expectations of and relationship with His human creation. *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men* will prove rewarding for students of the Hebrew Bible, the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an, comparative religion, literature, folklore, and gender studies alike.

DENIS MACEOIN, *Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism*, Pembroke Persian Papers, Vol. 2, published in association with the Centre of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge (London: British Academic Press, 1994). Pp. 204.

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Bahā'ism—the "Bahā'ī Faith" as known by practitioners, press, and public (lexicalized "Baha'i" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1:885)—is variously treated as an independent world religion, as a new religious movement (NRM), or, in older literature, as a "sect of Islam."<sup>1</sup> Baha'is believe that Babism's prophet–founder Sayyid ʿAli-Muhammad Shirazi, the Bab (d. 1850), was the co-originator of the Baha'i religion in his role as precursor to the prophet–founder Mirza Husayn-ʿAli Nuri Baha' Allah (OED spelling, Baha'u'llah; official Baha'ī spelling, Bahá'u'lláh, d. 1892), succeeded by ʿAbd al-Baha' ʿAbbas (d. 1921), Shoghi

Effendi Rabbani (d. 1957), and now the Universal House of Justice (Haifa). Foundational for the academic study of these two religions is Peter Smith's *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge, 1987).

Having taught for a number of years at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Denis MacEoin is an independent scholar who wrote his dissertation on the Babi movement at Cambridge (1979) and has continued to publish on Babi and Baha'i topics ever since. *Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism* is a text-centered, information-rich study of the prescriptive passages of Babi and Baha'i scriptures. It is a revision of a paper written circa 1980 when the author was teaching at the University of Fez (Preface). Following a brief "Introduction" (pp. 1–5), what are in effect two separate but related studies—"Babi Ritual Observances" (pp. 6–36) and "Baha'i Ritual Observances" (pp. 37–69), followed by endnotes (pp. 71–90)—comprise the main body of this compact, well-documented study. The reader is provided with a representative selection of texts (twenty-six "Appendices," pp. 91–168) translated from the Persian and Arabic originals, followed by primary and secondary works consulted (pp. 173–79). Four separate indexes, "Technical Terms," "Books/Texts," "People/Groups/Places" and "General Topics" (pp. 181–88), facilitate referencing.

The author has anticipated some inevitable criticisms. In his preface, MacEoin states: "This is not a penetrating anthropological study of the practices of two little-known religious groups. Babism all but died out well over a century ago, whereas Baha'ism was recently described as the second most widely distributed religion after Christianity. Of Babi ritual practice—if there ever was very much of it—we know next to nothing. . . . This is a book mainly about prescriptive texts, and only secondarily concerned with praxis" (p. xv). In the case of Babism, this approach has its merits. MacEoin's treatment of Babi observances derives from his comprehensive survey of known manuscript writings of the Bab, containing laws that were largely unimplemented: "Babism remained little more than a religion *in potentia*, fossilized in the memory of historical events and little-read texts" (p. 1). The author's description of Babi praxis is of purely theoretical interest unless otherwise historically attested.

For different reasons, Baha'i observances are treated in the same text-based way. "Needless to say," the author says, "this provides us with a prescriptive rather than actual picture of Baha'i practice" (p. 38). This is a telling admission. MacEoin's giving preference to text over real-life, veridical, day-to-day practices of a faith community appears to compromise the canon of believer-intelligibility (as advocated by W. C. Smith et al.) in the academic description of religion. There is a sharp methodological contrast between MacEoin's textual description and Peter Smith's sociology of the Babi and Baha'i religions. The two methodologies do overlap and complement each other. Yet, in the final analysis, there is little resemblance between the two resulting pictures of these religions. Baha'i laws have been implemented according to a principle of gradualism, in which far more has been demanded of believers from Iran and other parts of the Middle East than of the vast majority of other Baha'is, who are non-Persian. Considering that a study of scripture cannot be atomized in abstraction without any sociological control, Smith's monograph is "real-world" in terms of its correlation of method and data correlation, while MacEoin's is, at best, a partial match.

Equally problematic is the lack of any definition of "ritual" and "semi-ritual." MacEoin speaks variously of "quasi-rituals" (p. 34), of "pseudo-Baha'i practices" (p. 38), of "ritual and semi-ritual observances either prescribed or sanctioned by Baha'i scriptural texts in Persian or, more usually, Arabic" (p. 38), and a "generally ritual atmosphere, even when specific rites are not being carried out" (p. 34) in the case of Babism. Recently, Jan Platvoet provided an operational definition of "ritual," and cited an additional twenty-four theoretically influential definitions, in chronological order.<sup>2</sup> Based on these twenty-five definitions,

MacEoin's unstated definition of "ritual" appears to be any "patterned" (R. Firth, 1951), "stylized or formalized" (S. F. Nadel, 1954), or "repetitious" (E. M. Zuesse, 1987) performative behavior in a context of "rule-governed activity" (F. Staal, 1986), but without any explication of ritual as a "symbolic fusion of ethos and world view" (Geertz, 1966).<sup>3</sup> Such a sense of ritual appears to govern MacEoin's selection of texts.

Many Baha'is, especially in the North Atlantic world, have adopted a rhetorical stance of attempting to minimize the existence of ritual in their religion. Thus, they tend to downplay the ritual nature of such practices as the annual fasting month, attendance at a "feast" or meeting for worship, community business and fellowship every nineteen days, and daily obligatory prayers. That is, they appear to mean that the Baha'i religion has relatively simple, "low-church" rituals, rather than that it has none at all. At the grassroots level, it may be fair to say that Baha'is perform their obligatory prayers, fast, and so on and still say they do not perform any ritual, because it has not occurred to them that these practices constitute rituals. (Baha'is tend to associate rituals with the Catholic mass, and the like.) In other matters, they make a genuine attempt to avoid what they see as ritual. For instance, all Baha'i houses of worship are said by Shoghi Effendi to be utterly "devoid of all ceremony and ritual."<sup>4</sup> "Bahá'u'lláh has reduced all ritual and form to an absolute minimum in His Faith," according to an official statement. "The few forms [of ritual] that there are—like those associated with the two longer obligatory prayers—are only symbols of the inner attitude."<sup>5</sup>

The entire exercise in inventorying putative ritual is problematic in that a Baha'i would utterly fail to recognize his or her religion as ritualistic in MacEoin's depiction of it. His vocabulary of ritual runs counter to an explicit Baha'i rejection of all but the barest of ritual. Acknowledging, as the author does, the Baha'i faith's "fundamental injunction against excessive ritualism" (p. 69), the title of MacEoin's book is thus somewhat provocative and misleading. "Both Babism and Baha'ism," the author concludes, "possess a high ritual content, almost all of it of a prescriptive nature. There is virtually no customary practice" (p. 68). Yet he admits that "the majority of Baha'i devotional texts have no ritual associations" (p. 42); that, in pilgrimages to Mount Carmel, there is "virtually no ritual involved and care is taken to prevent its development" (p. 58); that for Baha'i holy days, "there are no specific rites" (p. 64); that in Baha'i temples, "no fixed forms are given for worship" (p. 66). This is not to say that there are no patterned or repetitive activities in Baha'i praxis. There are. Yet in the absence of a working definition of ritual, given the conscientious Baha'i disavowal of ritual, the informed reader experiences some conceptual dissonance. Moreover, MacEoin ignores ethical texts—the soul of ritual—and any ethical dimensions of ritual.

An engaging but disproportionate interest in the esoteric features of the Babi and Baha'i religions is illustrated by the fact that all five figures listed on page xi are talismans (one Shi'ci, four Babi). An entire section on "Talismans and Rings" (pp. 48–52) perhaps weights the subject of talismans too heavily, considering that Baha'i use of talismans "seems to have died a natural death" (p. 48). MacEoin points to a relatively obscure (among Western believers at least) statement by 'Abd al-Baha<sup>2</sup> in which the dissolving in water of the "Greatest Name" of God (*Baha*<sup>2</sup>) is, in MacEoin's words, "recommended . . . as a cure for illness" (p. 48). No cultural context is provided for this statement, and there is no cross-reference to the standard Baha'i practice of consulting one's physician, as Baha'u'llah exhorts his followers to do in *The Most Holy Book*: "Resort ye, in times of sickness, to competent physicians; We have not set aside the use of material means, rather have We confirmed it through this Pen, which God hath made to be the Dawning-place of His shining and glorious Cause." Baha'u'llah obliges Baha'is to consult physicians, whereas 'Abd al-Baha<sup>2</sup> does not even "recommend" the practice to which MacEoin refers. It is conditioned entirely upon faith, and was probably indicated for the benefit of one individual, not for an entire religion.<sup>6</sup>

Although the author speaks of the Baha'i faith's "uncompromising break from Islam" and its post-Islamic status as "without doubt a religion in its own right" (p. xvi), MacEoin's interest in "a study of their [Babi and Baha'i] religio-legal systems" serves as "a means of assessing the nature of Islamicity" (p. xvi). If the controlling interest resides in assessing Islamicity, it is done so at the expense of determining what is phenomenologically and distinctively Baha'i. The latter's professed abrogation of Islamic law in favor of observances aligned with a more universalist paradigm of world unity (distinct from the "unitarianism" of some modern Muslim reform movements) indicates something of a departure from, or at least a transformation of, Islamicity. The Islam-Baha'i paradigm divide (with Babism somewhere in between) is not clear-cut. Formal similarities in the few rituals common to Baha'is and Muslims may, in some cases, carry quite distinct symbolic and attitudinal values in actual practice. This is where descriptive nuancing is most needed. In both theoretical and anthropological terms, comparisons and contrasts between the Baha'i faith and Islam raise fundamental questions of similarity and demarcation.<sup>7</sup>

The recent publication of *al-Kitāb al-Aqdas*<sup>8</sup> may intensify a debate in Baha'i studies—as part of a larger debate in the study of religion—over whether the praxis of practitioners or the prescriptions of texts is taken as normative and as that which defines the religion, and whether or not the former ought to constrain weighting of the latter in the academic description of religion. As he himself admits, MacEoin's survey is not truly representative of Baha'i behavior and communal life in the real world. In so doing, the author overrules the prevailing Baha'i conception of itself as a religion "free from any form of ecclesiasticism" possessing "neither priesthood nor rituals" (p. 3).

Notwithstanding his preoccupation with the Islamicity of unimplemented Babi laws and gradually implemented Baha'i praxis, MacEoin's *Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism* is a provocative contribution to Babi and Baha'i studies. Its tacit challenge is that there are more rituals prescribed in the texts than have so far been implemented. While this is a valid point, the author's projection of which rituals should or will be implemented is doubtful. MacEoin surveys a selective range of legal and ritual texts with atomistic precision. Ethical texts, which are also prescriptive, which ensoul the ritual, and which also regulate behavior, are excluded. *Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism* is recommended strictly as a source book, so long as the reader is aware that the Babi section is purely documentary and that the Baha'i chapter treats in a predominantly philological fashion texts and prescriptive practices that are quite unknown to the vast majority of Baha'is in the world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I discussed its precipitous break from Islam—mediated by the Babi religion—in a recent monograph: Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret. Qur'an Commentary in Bahā'u'llāh's Kitāb-i Iqān*, Studies in the Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions, Vol. 7 (Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Jan Platvoet, "Ritual in Plural and Pluralist Societies: Instruments for Analysis," in *Pluralism and Identity: Studies in Ritual Behaviour*, ed. idem and Karel van der Toorn (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 25–51.

<sup>3</sup>Buck, *Symbol and Secret*, 42–45.

<sup>4</sup>Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1974 [1944]), 350.

<sup>5</sup>From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 24 June 1949, cited in Wendi Momen, *A Basic Bahā'ī Dictionary* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989), 198.

<sup>6</sup>Bahā'u'llāh, *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. Translated under the auspices of The Universal House of Justice (Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre, 1992), 60. Upon examination of MacEoin's source, 'Abd al-Baha's statement turns out to be an address (*khiṭābi*) presumably to an individual believer, rather than a written, authoritative "tablet" (*lawḥi*), although the latter cannot be ruled out. No "cure"

is promised, but the “influence shall be powerful” (*taʿṣīrāsh ʃhadīd ast*) if performed “with absolute devotion, with a pure heart and pure intention and with attraction of the spirit” (*bi-tavvājūh-i tāmm va qalb va niyyat-i pāk va injizāb-i rūh*). Fazil Mazandarani, *Amr va Khalq* (Bahāʿi-Verlag, 1986), 68–69 (MacEoin’s translation; my transliteration). I can scarcely conceive of such a “cure” as a “ritual” or even as a “semi-ritual” as its observance is now rarely, if ever, practiced among Baha’is.

<sup>7</sup>In terms of group dynamics, Jan Snoek’s hypothesis may be instructive here: “The more the groups from which one wishes to distinguish oneself (the out-groups), are similar to one’s own group (the in-group), the more rigidly will the distinguishing characteristics be formulated, and the more attention will be paid to these characteristics.” Jan Snoek, “Similarity and Demarcation,” in *Pluralism and Identity*, 53.

<sup>8</sup>See note 6.

ANDREW RIPPIN, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices. Vol. 2: The Contemporary Period* (London: Routledge, 1993). Pp. 183.

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This work, part of Routledge’s series, The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices (ed. John Hinnells and Ninian Smart), completes the author’s earlier Volume 1 on Muslim belief and practice subtitled, *The Formative Period* (1990). Because of the relative scarcity of scholarly works dealing with modern trends in Muslim belief and practice, the subject is important. Even though this book is principally meant as a text for university students and lay readers (p. ii), it contains much comment on recent Muslim debates and texts that is not easily accessible elsewhere. Thus, it is not without interest to the specialist, as well.

Rippin divides his book into an introduction and eight chapters. The introduction and the first two chapters (pp. 1–43) set out the theoretical problems of modernity and the place of the Muslims in it. These are followed by four chapters (pp. 47–112) on modern Muslim religious writing, especially in Egypt, focusing on the genres of the Prophet’s biography, hadith, and Qurʾanic commentary. This part contains many insightful comments on recent trends in Islam while focusing attention on a succession of modern Muslim religious writers and their works, which the author illustrates with well-chosen examples and apt quotations. Certainly, this section contains the author’s most valuable and original contribution in the volume, especially when he points out how modernism has influenced religiously conservative as well as openly modernist writers. The last two chapters contain a rather tentative exploration of potentially feminist interpretations of Islam by modern Muslim women (pp. 115–26), then a very brief description of contemporary Muslim religious practice and some of its problems (pp. 127–41, 141–45), which barely begins to deal with the diversity that characterizes the present Muslim world. The real conclusion (p. 145) is limited to a brief paragraph of a few lines. The bibliographical references in the notes include a wide variety of secondary sources, as one would expect from an introductory text.

Despite his valuable discussion of modern Muslim writings, Rippin’s theoretical framework is questionable, and his treatment of modern Muslims is unbalanced. One major problem is the broad application of the term “fundamentalism” to Muslims, a term that Rippin admits to using outside its historical context (p. 37) and that it is a term applied to Muslims mostly by Westerners (p. 38). The term seriously lacks content, as can be seen in the way Rippin uses it to brand writers as diverse as Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, Shah Wali Allah al-Dihlawi, Mawdudi, and Sayyid Qutb (pp. 30–31, 38–39). The term “radical Islamist,” equated with “fundamentalist,” is also used to bracket the latter two (pp. 76, 93). Such terms