

A Short History of the Bahá'í Faith

Author: Peter Smith

Publisher: Oneworld, Oxford, 1996, 168 pages

A Short Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith

Author: Moojan Momen

Publisher: Oneworld, Oxford, 1997, 150 pages

Reviewer: Christopher Buck

If the academic study of religion could be thought of as a graph, the x-axis might represent the history of religions, while the y-axis would represent the phenomenology of religion. The former is diachronic (historical), the latter synchronic (systemic, structural). This is one way of appreciating how usefully the two volumes by Peter Smith and Moojan Momen complement each other.

Peter Smith's *A Short History of the Bahá'í Faith* is really a history of two religions, the Bábí movement and the Bahá'í religion itself. The structure of Smith's historical epitome is evident in its eleven chapters, conclusion and appendices, to wit: 1. The Islamic and Iranian Background; 2. The Emergence of the Bábí Movement; 3. The Development of a New Religion; 4. Conflict and Collapse, 1848–53; 5. Bahá'u'lláh; 6. The Writings and Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh; 7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá; 8. Bahá'í Communities, 1866–1921; 9. Shoghi Effendi; 10. The Universal House of Justice; 11. Bahá'í Communities, 1922 to Present; Conclusion; Chronology of Important Dates; Further Reading; Bibliography; Index.

According to Smith, the Bahá'í Faith is “a small-scale world religion” (10). This is honest and accurate. The author is careful not only to nuance the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to its historical grandparent, Islam, but to distinguish the Bahá'í religion from its mother religion, the Bábí movement. The author frames this thought-provoking paradox: “Although the Bahá'í Faith grew out of the Bábí movement, and its followers regard the Báb as one of the founders of the Bahá'í Faith, the two religions are very different. Rooted in mid-nineteenth-century Iranian Islam, Bábism may seem alien to many modern Western readers” (9). This is due to the fact that the Báb wrote within a Shí'í context, addressing Shí'í concerns, which are not easily universalized.

Given the often arcane nature of the Báb's writings, which are highly idiosyncratic even from a grammatical and stylistic vantage, and at times esoteric, qabbalistic, and rhapsodic in the extreme, as well as susceptible to a range of interpretations, Bahá'u'lláh has “stabilised” Bábí doctrine “by making unambiguous sense of the Bábí revelation,” as the researches of Todd Lawson

skilfully demonstrate.¹

After treating the Shí'í and Shaykhí background of the Bábí movement, Smith distinguishes the paradigm-shift that took place in the latter part of the Báb's ministry: "Although still employing Shí'í and particularly Shaykhi terminology and concepts, these later writings indicate that, as well as superseding Islamic law, the Báb was also now presenting a new religious framework distinct from that of Islam. There was a clear contrast with his earlier writings, which were written within an Islamic paradigm" (37). This succinct statement has profound implications for a nuanced understanding of the transitions that took place within the Báb's thought, which unfolded in such a way as can be mapped out in developmental stages, coincident with the Báb's sequenced self-proclamation that began as an eschatological "door" (*báb*) or portal eventually leading into a full-blown religious universe that was, for all its Islamic features, clearly distinct from Islam and having an utterly new revelatory locus in the form of a post-Islamic hierophant. Even so, this still required an interpretation of the Báb on the part of Bahá'u'lláh.

Early in his meteoric and compressed prophetic career, the Báb had focussed so intensively on Shí'í imamology that his super-Islamic focus stood in tension with Bahá'u'lláh's emphasis on universalism, which was clearly supra-Islamic. Even so, it would seem that the majority of Bahá'u'lláh's legislation in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* did in fact have Bábí roots, and that Bahá'u'lláh extended the Báb's originality by divesting the latter's prophetology of its parochial imamology. While Smith does not dwell much on these vexed questions, he clearly distinguishes between the two religions, nuancing the continuities as well as the disjunctures. In this regard, Smith is not given to what Denis MacEoin has termed a "conflation" of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions. What, then, represents the paradigm-shift from Bábism to the Bahá'í Faith? Smith writes: "The Bahá'í concept of the future millennium has also become linked with a specific programme of social reform and transformation. This does not have any real precedent in the Bábí movement" (156).

Readers familiar with Smith's groundbreaking sociological study, *The Babi and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*² will appreciate Smith's succinct motif analysis of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions given in the conclusion (154-57). The conclusion does not so much recapitulate what was stated previously in *A Short History*, but rather what was presented in *The Babi and Bahá'í Religions*. This is vintage Smith, and is the payoff for admirers of Smith's earlier work. As an "engaged" scholar, Smith demonstrates that Bahá'ís are unafraid of their history but are still coming to terms with it, because

1 According to Lawson, the Báb is "one of the truly remarkable minds in the history of ideas" (personal communication). Lawson's publications on the Báb have, in my view, received insufficient attention and are a foundation for future scholarship.

2 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

the Báb of faith, and the Bahá'í popular view of the Bábí religion, have yet to be integrated and reconciled with historical and sociological considerations.

A minor correction in Smith's book: The birth of the Báb is erroneously given as 1817 (17) rather than 1819, as is correctly given on page 19. From a production standpoint, the kerning of diacritical subdots in Smith's book is a typographical monstrosity, and the absence of diacriticals would have been preferable. The utter absence of curly quotes and double quotes in favour of single straight quotes is jarring, as is the Friz Quadrata-like typeface (a display font rather than a text font) in which the book is typeset.

Turning now to *A Short Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith*, author Moojan Momen presents the book as follows: Introduction; 1. The Individual; 2. The Family; 3. Society; 4. Global Concerns; 5. The Bahá'í Community; 6. Bahá'í Laws; 7. Theological Teachings; 8. History of the Bahá'í Faith; 9. The Bahá'í World Today; Notes; Bibliography; Further Reading; Further Information; Index. The sequencing of these chapters seems to have a practical teaching focus, engaging the curious reader first at the personal level, and then global, reserving the history of the Bahá'í Faith for later. In this respect, the Bahá'í teachings contextualize history rather than the other way around. Without anachronism, retrojection, or romanticization, Momen's approach is the inverse of Smith's and this is another aspect of their complementarity.

Steering clear of any historicism or similar reductionism, the author also distances Bahá'í teachings from any alleged eclecticism or syncretism. Allowing that "all religions, including the Bahá'í Faith, will, to some extent, contain echoes of each other," Momen states his intent: "I hope to show that the Bahá'í Faith also has its own teachings that are new and innovative" (3). Does the author deliver on this promise?

Momen's elaboration of Bahá'í teachings is systematic, clear, and, in all major respects, comprehensive. However, precisely which of the teachings are, in fact, new is, for the most part, left for the reader to decide. Momen does speak of "a new work ethic" (51), in which Bahá'u'lláh exalts work performed in the spirit of service to the rank of worship (although we may trace such an idea to the great Islamic mystic, Ibn al-'Arabi). The author finally does identify the distinctiveness of the Bahá'í paradigm towards the end of the book: "The key difference between the Bahá'í Faith and the main established religions of the world is the fact that its vision was created within the last hundred years, and so has an immediacy and relevance that visions that had their origins a thousand years ago or more lack. ...The Bahá'í Faith presents a unique integrated vision of the present state of the world and its future direction. This vision embraces politics, economics, environmental considerations, social issues, social administration, community development, ethical issues and spirituality" (139).

I would estimate that close to half of Momen's book is comprised of selections from Bahá'í scriptures and recorded oral discourses. Numerous

sidebars draw attention to Bahá'í teachings, not only in their pure, authenticated form, but also in their less rigorously attested form. Thus, the number of selections from such sources as *Paris Talks* and *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* as well as pilgrims' notes and other unauthorized sources, like *Portals to Freedom*, *The Chosen Highway*, and so on, may give a false impression that all of these sources are considered authoritative and scriptural, which is not the case. The uninitiated reader is, however, unlikely to be aware of such technicalities, and the advantage of citing selections from such apocryphal sources is that these tend to be more anecdotal, serving to elucidate Bahá'í principles more effectively, even if less reliably on a textual level.

The editing of Momen's volume is of a reasonably high quality, with only occasional oversights, such as "close-mindedness" (98) and the odd "Mírzá Yahya Azal" (121) where the informed reader would expect to encounter Mírzá Yahyá Subh-i Azal. The main body of the text appears to be typeset in Times Roman, a great improvement over the Smith volume. But the numerous sidebars strike me as very "dark" in typographic "colour", the sans-serif font that is used almost looks smeared. These are production considerations over which Momen presumably had no control.

Comparing the two books is instructive. Of the two authors, Momen has a deeper background in Islamic studies. (Yale University Press, for example, has reprinted Momen's textbook on Shi'ism.) Yet it is Smith's book that treats the Islamic structures that inform both Bábí and Bahá'í doctrine, while Momen is careful to present the Bahá'í Faith in its own right and on its own terms. Momen himself rightly classes Smith's *A Short History of the Bahá'í Faith* as "the best brief general history of the Bahá'í Faith" (147, giving 1995 as the publication date); Momen's *A Short Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith* has a similar status.

While the two books certainly complement one another, they do not require each other, especially since Momen, as indicated above, has a chapter on Bahá'í origins and history. Smith deftly combines a history of religions-grounded and unobtrusively sociological approach, while Momen is more "personal" in its orientation and appeal. Smith is artfully disciplined without calling attention to the disciplines that inform his approach. While Smith and Momen are both richly informational, Momen adopts a mildly didactic tone that occasionally borders on the sermonic, especially in his use of those universal, rhetorical questions a truth-seeker might ask. Thus, the two volumes not only have different literary personalities, they also have distinct, albeit overlapping, objectives.

If a revised edition were contemplated for each, I would respectfully suggest that Smith further develop his discussion of what is Islamic and what is not in Bahá'í teaching, thereby crystallizing, from genesis to fruition, the paradigm-shift in the direction of what is genuinely "new" and distinctive in the Bahá'í paradigm itself (as well as that of Bábism). I think that Smith has already advanced such an analysis well beyond most of the other literature, thereby rendering previous

reductions more problematic. A similar wish for a revised edition of Momen's work: Having given such a comprehensive overview of Bahá'í teachings, an effort to further highlight the distinctiveness of Bahá'í teachings (as already asserted on page 139) would serve to advance Bahá'í self-understanding on a synchronic level, just as Smith has done in a diachronic mode.

One distinctive dynamic evident in the Bahá'í paradigm has not received sufficient attention: that Bahá'u'lláh made peace, equality and unity sacred. In incorporating theretofore secular concerns, from disarmament to gender equality, Bahá'u'lláh generated a process that may be characterized as "sacralizing the secular." Peter Smith's *A Short History of the Bahá'í Faith* and Moojan Momen's *A Short Introduction of the Bahá'í Faith* provide complementary diachronic and synchronic approaches, translating the essence of what Smith refers to as "the latest research on the two [Bábí and Bahá'í] religions" (9), and making this information both available and accessible to the non-specialist. To the credit of these two academics, the drawbridge of the ivory tower has been lowered across the moat of disciplinary obfuscation above the murky and forbidding currents of academic discourse, over which the scholar must walk in order to speak to an audience for whom matters of the head are also matters of the heart.
