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The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898-1948

Will C. van den Hoonard. Wilfrid Laurier University Press 1996. xii, 356, 39 b&w illus. \$39.95

Reviewed in [University of Toronto Quarterly](#) by Christopher Buck

The Bahá'í faith became the first religion in Canada to gain official recognition through an Act of Parliament when, in April 1949, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada (the annually elected governing Bahá'í council which oversees all 'Local Spiritual Assemblies' across Canada) was incorporated. Will C. van den Hoonard's *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898-1948* provides the background which led up to this unusual event and chronicles the transplantation, social adaptation, and development of an originally non-Western religion introduced in Canada in the early twentieth century.

Van den Hoonard succeeds in identifying some distinctive social features of this religious newcomer, the importance of which has been underscored by the recent appearance of several world religions texts that conclude with chapters on the Bahá'í faith as the latest of the independent world religions. While commonly classed as a new religious movement (nrm), the Bahá'í faith is something of an anomaly in that it broke decisively from its parent religion, Persian Islam, at an early stage. nrm's are typically classed as revitalization, reform, or restorationist movements, contextualized within the larger framework of the parent religion, while the Bahá'í religion escaped the gravity of its Islamic orbit and became a symbolic world unto itself.

Van den Hoonard periodizes Canadian Bahá'í history in five developmental stages, leading up to the 1949 Act of Parliament: (1) Initial Chaos (1897-1912); (2) Incipient Community Life (1912-27); (3) Administrative Institutions (1927-37); (4) Expansion (1937-41); and (5) Emergence of a National Bahá'í Identity (1942-48). This progression of implantation, incipience, institutionalization, expansion, and identity follows from the historical facts, meticulously charted and documented by the author, who displays an impressive command of the relevant archival (twenty-nine collections) as well as published sources. A number of individuals are brought alive through anecdotal accounts, as well as appearing in photographs among the thirty-nine plates that accent the narrative. Bahá'í community growth rates in various urban centres across Canada are charted and analysed, providing an empirical basis for ascertaining conditions favourable to growth (such as linkages to the wider community through organizational, kinship, or business ties) as well as the varying successes of teaching strategies (finding that a diversity of approaches enjoyed greatest success) for gaining new converts.

Despite a peripheral and precarious existence during its formative era, the tenacity of the fledgling Canadian Bahá'í community is ascribed by van den Hoonard to its distinctive 'religious singleness,' defined as 'the existence of a community of believers who, by virtue of their few members, express their faith in terms of their individual existence, while maintaining their individual ties to a wider society that does not share their beliefs.' Characterized during its first half-century as 'a religion of the living room and hotels,' the Canadian Bahá'í community was an essentially house-church ecclesia prior to its establishment as a visible Canadian religious presence, now evinced by the rise of 'Bahá'í centres' across urban Canada.

Van den Hoonard's study is an important contribution to much-needed 'detailed research on non-

Christian or non-Western styles of religious communities.' Methodologically, this book stands on sound ground. Both interpretive historical sociology and the sociology of social movements provide the conceptual framework that guides, along the contours of a 'shifting theoretical paradigm,' van den Hoonaard's analysis. The author prescinds from formulating 'a single, unvarying model.' More significant is the fact that the author, as an engaged scholar, bracketed the 'revelatory ... and ... motivational and supernal dimensions of religious life.' While the result may be construed by some as reductive, it would perhaps be better described as a disciplined sociology that is methodologically aware of both its own contributions and its limitations. The author adroitly and seamlessly combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide 'fresh theoretical orientations.' For the purpose of research ethics, he shared his findings with a representative few from among his research 'subjects.' In so doing, he wishes to make 'a distinctive contribution to the sociology of religion' in conversation with that community of discourse which has focused on the study of new religions in Western society.

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