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Special Issue Editor\*

## Baha'i Religious History

The Baha'i Faith is heir to the distinctive Abrahamic cluster of myths and religious grammars or styles of piety so familiar to scholars and students of religion. The inheritance has a pronounced islamicate tonality because of the time and place in which the Baha'i Faith arose as an identifiably Iranian version of the venerable Abrahamic religious elan. (This, of course, means that it also displays certain features suggestive of more purely Iranian religious phenomena such as Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism.) For example, the earliest extended doctrinal work by the founder of the Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah, is a commentary on the Qur'an and Hadith having to do with the end of time and the return of the Hidden Imam of Shi'i Islam. Perhaps the single most striking and defining element of the Baha'i Faith, and its precursor, the Babi religion, is the conviction that God has spoken to the world again — and would continue to speak to the world as long as it lasts — through a specifically chosen individual of the same type he had spoken to the world through in the past: Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, to name only three. Such a prophetic history — what Baha'is term “progressive revelation” — is also Islamic in form; but, by going beyond the confines of usual Islamic belief which states that there will be no prophets after Muhammad, the Baha'i Faith casts itself in the unique and problematic position of being inherently Islamic in structure while being beyond the pale in actuality. So a question could arise: is the Baha'i Faith a legitimate or an illegitimate heir to islamicate Abrahamic ethical monotheism?

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The record of history of prophets and their claims and communities is considered divine revelation. In the Baha'i instance, the most recent recipient of the revelation bears the title "Baha'u'llah," an Arabic combination of two words: the first one, *baha*, means splendour or glory; the second is the usual word for God in Arabic, *Allah*, slightly transformed here, due to the laws of grammatical liaison, into the above ligature which then may be understood as "the splendour of God" or "the glory of God." The semantic substrate need not detain us except to notice that in the extra-Qur'anic Arabic word *baha* we should also hear references to beauty, light, and precious treasure and understand thereby that through the linguistic algebra inherent in the poetics of the epithet it also connotes knowledge and wisdom of the highest value. The religious teachings, books, doctrines, and institutions identified with this name date from after 1853; however, the Baha'i era or cycle of history — an elemental feature of what may be thought of as a Baha'i philosophy of history or *Heilsgeschichte* — is held to have begun on 23 May 1844 when a young merchant laid claim to direct contact with the Hidden Imam of Ithna-'ashari (Twelver) Shi'ism. This figure, who is most widely known today as "the Bab" (Arabic for "gate, door"), was the founder of a short-lived religion whose chief purpose, Baha'is believe, was to prepare the way for the coming of Baha'u'llah; however, Baha'is also recognize that the religion of the Bab was a distinct, freestanding system of beliefs and values articulated in the specially charged atmosphere of Shi'i messianic expectation. The twelfth or Hidden Imam of the Shi'a had gone into hiding a thousand years earlier and a large part of Twelver Shi'i piety, belief, and practice developed around the religious problem(s) connected with the identification and validation of true spiritual (and, as it happens, temporal) authority in the absence of the leader whose return is expected to inaugurate that glad day when injustice will be changed to justice throughout the world. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Shi'i messianic expectation ran very high, especially in Iran. The success of the Bab's claims to be simultaneously the representative of the Hidden Imam and the return of the Hidden Imam himself, was due in part to the intensity of this expectation and the way in which this expectation had acquired a unique technical and discursive language in the writings of a particular sect of Twelver Shi'ism, known to history as the *Shaykhiyya*. All of the Bab's earliest disciples and followers were either members or sympathetic to their philosophical and rationally based discussions of the otherwise supra-rational tenets of Twelver Shi'ism, a chief one being, in this instance, the unnaturally prolonged life of the Hidden Imam from the year of his disappearance in 874 to the time of his reappearance or advent (*zuhur*) in 1844 (1260 AH).

For Baha'is, history has both a horizontal and vertical dimension: it is both problem and sacrament. It is through what the uninitiated call "history" that the will of God becomes more accurately known and participated in by humanity. According to Baha'i teachings, 1844 marks the beginning of a new cycle or era in this history, one that is destined to be characterized by the spiritual maturation of the human race, perhaps a variation on the well-known Islamic mystical doctrine of the Perfect Man or Perfect Humanity (*al-insan al-kamil*).

This is frequently expressed in Baha'i literature in reference to the fact that the days of prophecy are finished and that we are now living the days of fulfillment. Muhammad can thus retain the title "seal of the prophets." Whereas formerly, humankind was expected to wait for perfect guidance, Baha'is believe that this perfect guidance has now come. It remains only for this guidance to be properly followed, embodied, realized.

In typical Baha'i discourse, Baha'u'llah is not called a prophet or a messenger or even an Imam, as one might expect given the Shi'i Islamic context of his teachings and his claims. Rather the operative term used to describe his status and to indicate the nature of his religious authority is one taken from the mystico-philosophical lexicon of Islamic intellectual culture: manifestation of God, or, more accurately, "divine manifestation" or "manifestation of divinity" (in Arabic, *mazhar ilahi*). The most proximate source, apart from the Qur'an and the Hadith, for such terminology and the style its use would ultimately assume, is the characteristic, not to say poetic, Shi'i mystical and philosophical theology developed over several centuries, to be bequeathed to the Baha'i tradition through the numerous dense and influential works produced by the first two masters of the above-mentioned *Shaykhiyya*, Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i (d. 1826) and his successor, Sayyid Kazim Rashti (d. 1843). To a greater or lesser degree, this process was heir to the vast "ocean without shore" of one whom current scholarship has come to regard as possibly the greatest mystic of any tradition, Muhyiddin ibn al-'Arabi "Ibn Arabi," (d. 1240), whose prolific writings, including his seminal theorizing on the previously mentioned topic of the Perfect Man, would influence all later Islamic spiritual and philosophico-theological discourse. The manifestation in question is, in reality, the *place* where something appears, not the thing that appears. A mirror is the place of manifestation for the reflection we see in it. Because the relationship is so close — beyond contiguity, as it were — there is thus frequent confusion about who is who and what is what. This has been a fecund and generative trope in islamicate mystical poetry from the very beginning. Ibn Arabi's achievement was to provide conceptual and terminological tools for a refinement of the discourse, a contribution of the first water to the ongoing and perhaps impossible task of making love reasonable.

In the Baha'i writings, those who were formerly known as prophets and messengers (for instance all of the twenty-five figures explicitly named in the Qur'an, from Adam to Muhammad and presumably the 124,000 others theorized by the extra-Qur'anic learned tradition) are now best understood as having been divine manifestations, or places where the divine appeared most perfectly to the world. The number 124,000 may sound odd, both too precise and not precise enough. It should be remembered, however, that such doctrines were developed at the height of Islamic cosmopolitanism during which the religious sciences began consolidating and elaborating the basic religious spirit and identity indicated in the Qur'an, which insists that historically there has been no human community without a divine messenger;<sup>1</sup> that each messenger

1. Qur'an 10:47.

spoke or revealed the will of God in the language of their community<sup>2</sup> and the racial, linguistic, and cultural differences which seem to separate the members of the human family are, in reality, designed so that all may share the mutually enriching experience of getting to know one another — not to despise each other.<sup>3</sup>

The Baha'i Faith is interesting to historians of religion because it provides an example of how heresy becomes orthodoxy. It began in the middle of the nineteenth century in Iran — or Persia, if you prefer — emerging from within the bosom of its parent religion, Ithna-'ashari (Twelver) Shi'ism. Using terms such as "heresy" and "orthodoxy" in the study of Islam and its various interpretations is quite problematic and should usually be avoided. Nevertheless, in the case of the Baha'i Faith it is useful at least to think of its genesis and development within Islam as heretical or at least heterodox, even though from its very beginning, during the Babi phase of what is referred to in the literature as the Baha'i era, it is quite clear that such heresy or heterodoxy was not the function of a lack of piety and devotion to the central symbols and figures of Islam, especially Shi'i Islam. What is clear, however, is that from the very beginning, the new religion espoused an uncompromising anti-clericalism (as distinct from being anti-Islamic) even as many of its strongest intellectuals and preachers had themselves been qualified at one degree or the other in the Shi'i clerical hierarchy. The two most important figures were not, however, members of the priestly class. I am referring here to the actual founders, Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819–1850), known to history as "the Bab," founder of the Babi religion, and Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (1817–1892), known chiefly as "Baha'u'llah," founder of the Baha'i Faith proper.

If the Baha'i Faith is anti-clerical, it is also fully committed to a notion of religious authority that encompasses both the spiritual and temporal realms. In the process of articulating the role and nature of such authority a number of central themes acquire absolute importance. Not least of these "sacraments," history itself is understood as a shared experience through which the particular ethical monotheism of the Baha'i Faith acquires and produces meaning. Thus when we speak of "religious history" in connection with the Baha'i Faith we are engaged in pleonasm because, in a sense, all history is religious. As in the Qur'an and Islam, the experience of humanity on earth has been punctuated over time by the appearance of prophets and messengers, all of whom are implicated in the primordial divine covenant that the Qur'an describes as having occurred at a mysterious time and in a mysterious place before creation.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Islam (and the Baha'i Faith) this myth of the covenant is also a myth of the birth of consciousness and history. The difference between Islam and the Baha'i Faith here is quite simple: the latter teaches that two new, post-Muhammad, divinely guided messengers have appeared with new revelations and new religious laws, and that such

2. Qur'an 14:4.

3. Qur'an 49:13.

4. Qur'an 7:172.

messengers will continue to appear for the purpose of teaching humanity to carry on an “ever-advancing civilization.”

The Islamic teaching that Muhammad was the seal of the prophets is well known. It is therefore important to point out that Baha'u'llah himself refers to Muhammad with devoted respect as the seal of the prophets and, as far as I know, never assumes for himself, the designation “Prophet” (*nabi*), though there are rare appearances of the word “Messenger” (*rasul*) in his writings, just as there are very infrequent occurrences of these words in the writings of the Bab. These seem to exist to draw attention to the terminological refinement theorized and put forth in the use of “Divine Manifestation” the preferred term, mentioned above, for the cognate role of one who receives divine revelation. The basic teachings of the Baha'i Faith are an insistence on the oneness of humanity, the oneness of God, and the oneness of religion through a universally applicable historical narrative. Such a preoccupation with unity is also obviously Islamic. But its centrality now seems to spring from two sources: the timeless and eternal metaphysical “Abrahamic” oneness familiar to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and explicated and theorized through neoplatonism, plus a kind of communal and existential exhaustion with the disunity and mutual animosity abroad in the greater Islamic world, especially during the age of European colonialism and adventure, when the Baha'i Faith was born.

Other central teachings of the Baha'i Faith may have an islamicate genesis, such as the commitment to the harmony of “science and religion,” the primacy of education, the equality of men and women, the centrality of community life and so on. For the interested reader, there are numerous sources available that outline the central tenets and history of the Baha'i Faith. While the articles included here may touch on some of these questions, none of them is devoted to the highly interesting and extremely important problem of the doctrinal and intellectual genesis of the Baha'i Faith “out of” Islam. After all, each of its most important “theoreticians” was Muslim and its earliest literature was cast in the form of scriptural, viz Qur'anic, commentary. There is thus much to attract interested scholars with the necessary languages (Arabic, Persian, sometimes Turkish) and specific historical and cultural knowledge. The articles included here are occupied with more self-contained problems, that is to say problems and questions arising from within the “Baha'i ghetto,” whether in Iran, Australia, Canada, Camerons, or the United States.

For a number of reasons, the Baha'i Faith has not captured the attention of the academy to the extent one might have predicted when, at the beginning of the twentieth century, its ideas were embraced in the West as not only exotic and refreshing spiritual truth from the more spiritual and mysterious East, but also because they seemed to be remarkably in tune with the challenges and concerns of contemporary global society. When 'Abdu'l-Baha (see photograph, p. iv), the son of Baha'u'llah, visited Europe and North America in 1911, 1912, and 1913 he was given a reception befitting a true holy man and sage with meetings and audiences in churches, synagogues, and universities all

along his highly publicized itinerary. His central concern, on the eve of World War I, was peace. And his central conviction was that peace is impossible without religious harmony. This became the mantra and desideratum of the small but growing Baha'i community: to privilege social and "political" peace as a religious value and to work for it with religious devotion. Here religious and social unity is an icon or reflection of the divine unity that serves as its central teaching and wellspring. This same Baha'i community was equipped with numerous teachings from the central figures, the Bab, Baha'u'llah, and 'Abdu'l-Baha, his son and "Center of the Covenant." These teachings included new prayers, new religious principles and laws, and what is considered a divinely ordained new system of organization whose purpose was, in the first place, to safeguard the unity of the Baha'i community itself so that it might, in the second place, reflect an image and example of such far flung and variegated unity to a world divided and at odds in every conceivable way. While Baha'i history and teachings have interested and existentially engaged individuals from all walks and strata of life, they still have not become a central concern in the academic world. The logical place for their scientific and systematic study and analysis is in university departments and faculties of religious studies. As perhaps the only "Islamic movement" of recent history to have "escaped the gravitational pull of Islam" and acquire a distinctive post-Islamic identity, it is clear that the Baha'i Faith offers an important cluster of questions to scholars of religion. Again, the articles collected in this issue are only tangentially or accidentally concerned with Baha'i doctrines and practices or institutions per se. No article takes a particular Baha'i belief or teaching and discusses it in terms of a broader and more inclusive or comparative religious history.

The articles included in this issue, however, are written by many of the leading experts in Baha'i studies. They are arranged in rough chronological order according to the central problem or event discussed, beginning with Momen's historical overview of the first years of the Baha'i Faith's history in Qajar Iran. In the course of this investigation of the way in which the Baha'i community of Isfahan safeguarded and consolidated its own special identity against the adverse pressures of society, both political and religious, we are given insight into the subtle and complex workings of identity formation. In the next article, Ghaemmaghami focuses on a single topic, eschatology, to consider how the Baha'i insistence that the time for waiting had ended may have influenced the work of one of the more prominent and prolific Shi'i scholars of the late nineteenth century. It will be remembered that in Twelver Shi'ism there is no more important doctrine than that of the Hidden Imam and the concomitant waiting for his return. This article illustrates perfectly just how acutely (and phobically) the new interpretation could be felt in some religious quarters. Vejdani has nuanced and explored the fascinating problem of Baha'i community identity and community formation through the *optique* of bibliographic history and, most importantly, print culture. In the process, he has also identified and privileged two important Baha'i religious "modalities" — communion with the divine word and universalism or

transnationalism — and their problematization vis-à-vis technologically and deceptively “neutral” agencies such as printing.

Baha’i teachings are quite specific: if a family can afford to educate only one child, it is the girl who must be educated because she stands to become the primary educator of the next generation through her maternal role. Zabihi-Moghaddam’s article regarding the pioneering attempts by an Iranian Baha’i community to provide schools for women and girls highlights the central Baha’i value of obedience to its religious teachings and its eventful and influential history in a specific case. Echevarria singles out the early Baha’i community of Canada to study the ways in which Baha’i women assumed roles of administrative agency, perhaps in advance of similar developments in the wider Canadian society. The approach here is sociological and enriched with meticulous qualitative and quantitative research. Racial harmony has been a central Baha’i preoccupation from the very beginning. Buck tackles a somewhat vexed episode, or series of episodes, in the history of the American Baha’i community, specifically as it engaged with the African American population it was trying so hard to reach, during the Jim Crow era of legalized segregation. The intensity of Baha’i efforts to counter this pernicious, painful social disease may be thought to have been far in advance of that obtaining in the general public of the time. This is borne out by the initial attraction, (discussed here), to Baha’i teachings of “race amity” by the brilliant, eloquent, and influential W. E. B. Du Bois, among others within black intelligentsia. Hassall offers a rich and probing investigation of the character of the relatively small Australian Baha’i community during an obviously crucial phase in its growth. He raises many questions for further consideration, especially as one considers the relationship of the Baha’i community to the “host” religious institutions of the time. Lee focuses on Africa and the spread of the Baha’i Faith in the Cameroons during the 1950s and early 1960s. In the early 1950s, the Baha’i Faith was introduced to West Africa and grew rapidly; but beyond growth, Lee attempts to investigate the social forces that contributed to early Baha’i conversions and allowed it to develop as a religious movement in the British Cameroons. He also demonstrates how this spread depended upon the way in which the new Baha’i principles and administrative order came into conversation with existing religious forms and debates. Finally, Yazdani brings the discussion up to more recent date exploring in great detail the systematic othering of the Baha’i community in Iran through the writings of Ayatollah Khomeini, especially in the period leading up to what was once characterized as the most successful revolution in modern times. In this fascinating article, it is also shown that it was not only during the nineteenth century that Shi’i messianism loomed as an influential social and religious mobilizer, but that it continued to play a crucial role in the Iran of 1979–80.

It is hoped that these nine articles will be of interest to the professional historian of religion as well as to the more general reader. Unlike at the beginning of the twentieth century when the Baha’i Faith acquired notoriety for its ideas, its “social gospel,” today when it is encountered it is frequently in the



deplorable context of its continued persecution in its motherland. These articles combine to demonstrate that the worldwide Baha'i community has continued to maintain its dedication to its challenging and lofty religious ideals even if it has from time to time been distracted from directly pursuing them in order to fight for its very survival, particularly in Iran.