

*The 24th Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture*

# Emergence from Obscurity: The Journey of Sociology in the Bahá'í Community

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## *Abstract*

The field of sociology and the Bahá'í Faith share important principles and both critically challenge beliefs that are often widely held. Yet there is a wall of relative silence separating them. Recent developments in both the Bahá'í community and sociology have made the wall more permeable, but what about the Bahá'í scholars themselves—how has the Bahá'í Faith shaped their approach to sociology? The surprising answer is that Bahá'í contributions to sociology are more implicit than explicit.

## *Résumé*

La sociologie et la foi bahá'íe ont en commun des principes importants, et l'une comme l'autre remettent en question de façon critique des croyances souvent largement répandues. Il existe cependant entre les deux un mur de silence relatif. De récents développements survenus dans la communauté bahá'íe et dans le domaine de la sociologie ont contribué à rendre ce mur plus perméable. Mais qu'en est-il des érudits bahá'ís – comment la foi bahá'íe façonne-t-elle leur rapport à la sociologie? La réponse, quelque peu surprenante, est que les contributions des bahá'ís à la sociologie sont davantage implicites qu'explicites.

## *Resumen*

El campo de la sociología y la fe bahá'í comparten importantes principios y ambos ofrecen un desafío crítico a creencias que a menudo son generalizadas. Sin

embargo, un muro de silencio relativo los separa. Avances recientes en tanto la fe bahá'í como la sociología han hecho más permeable este muro. Pero, ¿qué hay de los investigadores bahá'ís? ¿Cómo ha formado la fe bahá'í su enfoque hacia la sociología? La respuesta sorpresiva es que las contribuciones bahá'ís a la sociología son más implícitas que explícitas.

The Bahá'í story is filled with journeys. Every aspect of Bahá'í history features journeys: the journey of the Báb on pilgrimage to Mecca, the journey of Bahá'u'lláh from Persia to the Holy Land, the journeys of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the West, and the journeys of Shoghi Effendi, crisscrossing Africa and his journeys to England and Switzerland. The pages of our Bahá'í history are also filled with the journeys of the Knights of Bahá'u'lláh, pioneers, and itinerant teachers. No doubt, each member of this audience can recall other journeys in the annals of the Bahá'í Faith, and, no doubt, also the journeys that characterize each of your own personal lives. Even for sedentary Bahá'ís—I doubt whether any exist for we seem to have air roots—there is that most significant journey: the pilgrimage.

Hand of the Cause of God Mr. Hasan M. Balyuzi, for whom this lecture series has been named, was not one of the well-traveled hands of the Cause due to ill health. As a child he had gone with his father to India and lived there for a time. He traveled to Beirut to attend university and visited Haifa during that time and then he came to England. It is believed that he only returned to Iran once or twice after he came to England. After he was appointed as a Hand of the Cause, his travels are recorded in *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 13. One can only recall his speaking about a trip he made to various countries of South America. As for figurative journeys, he regarded each book he wrote as a journey of discovery. Dr. Moojan Momen, his closest research confidant, well recalls that each time he visited Mr. Balyuzi he would speak to him enthusiastically about some new discovery he had made or some amusing story he had encountered in his researches.

It is therefore not surprising that I use the journey as a metaphor for

my life as a Bahá'í and as a sociologist. As it so often happens, the physical journey reflects an inner journey. The act of putting one foot in front of the other exercises a powerful force on the world of the spirit. No one will deny that even having to go through the airport security gate in today's journeys causes either wonderment or consternation, and can be the source of inner change that can define the rest of the journey. It was Marcus Varro (116–27 BC), a Roman scholar and writer who was called the most erudite of all Romans, who lived more than two thousand years ago, and who had a remarkable vision about the future of travel when he proclaimed that “[t]he longest part of the journey is said to be the passing of the gate” (Cato and Varro 169).

The narrative begins with the two people to whom I am dedicating this lecture, Jameson and Gale Bond.<sup>1</sup> In 1966, Canada beckoned me from the Netherlands, where I was asked to leave school in grade 10, and, not knowing what to take on this journey, I decided to pack my suitcase with an encyclopedia set, a prayer book, and five pairs of socks. I was off. Thus armed with knowledge and faith and something for my feet, I soon found myself at the Bahá'í School in Beaulac, Quebec, learning for the first time about the Tablets of the Divine Plan from the Bonds. Soon thereafter, I traveled north via the Mackenzie Highway to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. I was at first very enthusiastic about the invitation coming from Jack and Eileen Boyd to pioneer to the north and work in a gold mine of which Jack was the mechanical engineer. Squeezed in their family's car, speeding on a graveled highway with dust entering every pore of my being, my initial enthusiasm to pioneer turned to suspicion: Jack wanted me to replace a trapped sampler in his mine who had hung upside down for ten hours in total darkness, screaming for help. That sampler's hope to become a minister of religion melted away during those ten hours. After his rescue, he had resigned from his job. I got the job. Within three days, I was climbing down one-hundred-foot ladders in that same darksome mine.

The sociological journey began when I started to “hang out” with aboriginal peoples in Old Town, Yellowknife. Later, I learned that “hanging out” constitutes one of the best sociological and anthropological fieldwork

methods. Although not educated, I was a Bahá'í and realized that I should try to receive an education. I was eager to learn about the folks in old Town who knew how to treat silence with respect. The door to further education opened when I realized that I could be admitted to university as a mature student—I had, after all, seven years of work experience. Forty years ago today, 18 August 1967, I was on my way to the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton.

But how did my motivation to study the people I hung out with translate into a meaningful connection between my studies (sociology, anthropology, and anthropological linguistics) and the Bahá'í Faith? The path, I now realize, turned into many paths, ending up in an unexpected place in Bahá'í Studies. My understanding about what it means to be a sociologist and a Bahá'í changed dramatically over those years.

There is no question that my primary motive to be a sociologist was to find a way to pioneer to remote lands. As far as I was concerned, moving to other countries, studying their cultures and societies, and learning new languages as an anthropologist or sociologist were ideal motives. The first country I chose for my master's and doctoral research was Iceland, which also needed pioneers.

As I sought to turn my studies and research into the practical ends of pioneering, it dawned on me that the Bahá'í writings provided some significant statements about my field of study. There are, to my knowledge, only a few direct references to sociology in the Bahá'í writings. First, 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "He [Bahá'u'lláh] wrote lengthy Tablets upon civilization, sociology and government. Every subject is considered. His Tablets are matchless in beauty and profundity" (*Promulgation* 155).

Shoghi Effendi referred to sociology several times: "Regarding the advice you requested from him concerning what studies you should specialize in with a view to teaching in the future: He would suggest either History, Economics or Sociology, as these are not only fields in which Bahá'ís take a great interest but also cover subjects which our teachings cast an entirely new light upon. Your knowledge would be of use to the Cause in teaching it in the future, and you could also perhaps introduce the Bahá'í ideas into your lectures as an educator" (*Scholarship* 12); and "Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís . . . to study history, economics, sociology, etc.,

in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings" (*Scholarship* 18); and "[T]he Bahá'í attitude in detail regarding such questions as sociology and economics must be formulated in the course of time and cannot possibly be elaborated on at this point" (Shoghi Effendi, *Light* 101). These quotes indicate that Bahá'í sociologists<sup>2</sup> can shed light on their own fields with the help of the Bahá'í teachings, and also are able to correlate those teachings with contemporary thought.

Too few in the Bahá'í community were familiar enough with this field to offer much encouragement to a young person lest he stray into a field of words that had no application to life. The approach taken by Bahá'ís in those days did not differ much from the prevailing sentiments in society as a whole, which Ray Bradbury summarized in *Fahrenheit 451* when one of his characters said, "Don't give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy."

Working as alternate representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations in New York between 1975 and 1979, I turned my attention from using sociology as an opportunity to pioneer to the heart of what the Guardian has said about correlating the solutions to the problems of the world with the Bahá'í teachings. Soon, a model of thinking and writing about these matters became second nature at the Bahá'í Office at the United Nations when we started to prepare statements on the environment, the equality of women and men, the prevention of drug abuse, and the elimination of racial prejudice, to mention some of the more frequent areas to which Bahá'ís were invited by various United Nations agencies and units to submit contributions to their discussions. It was rather breathtaking to see how the solutions to so many worldwide problems could be traced back to the fundamental need to recognize human unity. From this perspective, the unity of humankind is a reality; the belief in a disunited world is a social construction. How altogether different is the Bahá'í perspective!

Correlating the solving of social and economic problems of the world to the Bahá'í perspective has proven to be a more difficult task than I had originally conceived as a sociologist. Part of the problem lies in the fact

that sociology offers a more analytical perspective, rather than one oriented towards solving social problems. Besides, many more Bahá'ís from other disciplines took up this mission, namely psychiatrists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, economists, and even mathematicians, who turned their attention to economic, personal, and social problems. Moreover, over the years, the Universal House of Justice has provided the Bahá'í community (and the larger world) with its own statements proffering analyses and the way to go forward in solving the world's ills. One statement by the Bahá'í International Community, *The Prosperity of Humankind*, resonates with many sociological ideas, as does *One Common Faith*. So, among Bahá'ís, the main drive to look at the world's problems came primarily from the Universal House of Justice and the many experts I enumerated a few minutes ago: psychiatrists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, economists, and mathematicians. Not a sociologist in sight, however.

#### THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

To more fully understand the nature and method by which sociologists might undertake the study of the Bahá'í community, one must be clear about the distinctive nature of sociology that drives such studies. It readily becomes apparent that the Bahá'í community seems hesitant about such research. Similarly, one needs to consider the reception by sociologists in general, and sociologists of religion in particular, of such studies. There is hesitation on both sides though.

#### THE DISTINCTIVE NATURE OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology, the study of social patterns of interaction and of the structure of society, has a lot to recommend it. Sociology, as an outcome of Western culture, puts informal and organized human behavior squarely in a social context. This context insists that a critical appraisal of society cannot be accomplished through individualistic interpretations. Sociologists take note of social patterns that affect our individual activities. If we look around this hall tonight (to take an obvious example), we note the seating

patterns according to friendship relations, maybe by community of origin, perhaps by ethnicity, and even by prestige or status. Of course, perhaps all of you speak of the individual free choice you have exercised in deciding where to sit, and no doubt that might be the case for a few: the social mold is not and cannot be perfect. But how are social patterns possible (and they do exist) if free choice is total and complete? Anything that goes against the taken-for-granted assumptions about everyday life might be disavowed by the very people being studied.

A second feature that makes sociology stand out is the absence of normative statements. Religion has its duty to lay down moral laws. Sociology is not in the business of dictating any laws; rather, it seeks to find out what “is” rather than what “should be”—what do people do? For that reason, sociologists are more likely to speak of studying the Bahá’í community, rather than studying the Bahá’í *Faith*. Sociology does not speak from the angle of truth; it simply concerns itself with what believers do and what effect religious behavior has on society, or on the world.

Although there are many different kinds of strands in sociology, one of the main strands studies the “lived experience” of people. It studies “definitions of the situation.” When people define a situation as real, it is real in its consequences. And many sociologists today believe you cannot reduce, or explain, religion from any other standpoint than that of believers (Ryba 94); that is, sociologists admit that an understanding of religion comes from within the religion, not from the outside. Today, few sociologists would aver that their understanding of religion or religious experience supersedes that of believers. The Australian essayist Robert Dessaix speaks of the importance of “equivalence” in translation work that can be easily applied to the sociological study of religion: “The reality is that none of us is in a position to learn all the languages we’d need in order to come face to face . . . with the real thing.” Contemporary sociologists realize that their understanding of religion is an approximation, just like the translation of a literary text into another language.

And while this particular contemporary approach in sociology is respectful of people’s understanding of their own lives, it exists in dynamic tension with another facet of sociology, namely the tendency to debunk

myths or ideologies that sustain the social system, especially ideologies that perpetrate injustice. Ironically, among the most avid proponents of sociology as a debunking science is Peter Berger, whose own (never published) doctoral research was a comparative study of American and Persian Bahá'ís.<sup>3</sup>

These principles of sociology ought to resonate with the sentiments in the Bahá'í writings. First, the idea of structure and patterns of organizing society pervade the Bahá'í writings. They speak of world order and a world-embracing system of laws and institutions. There is even a direct reference about the function of society in shaping the character of the individual: "The object of life to a Bahá'í is to promote the oneness of mankind"; "Our aim is to produce a world civilization which in turn will react on the character of the individual" (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in Rabbani 161). Second, the Bahá'í writings stress the importance of behavior and how our behavior ought to reflect the spiritual lives we have committed ourselves to. Third, like sociology, the Bahá'í Faith critically challenges widely held beliefs. *One Common Faith*, for example, challenges the contemporary idea that religion is simply an "attribute of the individual person, an impulse not susceptible of organization" (19). We disavow rituals, the priesthood, and present-day social and economic arrangements. Thus, challenging common-sense understandings and attachments is not foreign to Bahá'í thinking.

By all accounts, then, there should be a generous acceptance of sociology in the midst of the Bahá'í community. But, there is a pronounced hesitation on the part of the Bahá'í community to consider sociological knowledge or analysis.

#### THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY'S HESITATION ABOUT SOCIOLOGY

I am somewhat perplexed by the Bahá'í community's hesitation about sociology. After all, there are a number of common perspectives that sociologists and Bahá'ís share, and the Universal House of Justice, itself, has offered generous statements inviting scholars to the study of the Bahá'í community. The study of the Bahá'í community, as it has emerged from



obscurity, has become a fact of life. In their message to the peoples of the world, *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice indicated that if “the Bahá’í experience can contribute in whatever measure to reinforcing hope in the unity of the human race, we are happy to offer it as a model for study” (24).

Just as this offer opens up many possibilities, it also creates new challenges which we as Bahá’ís can hopefully navigate successfully as we gain more and more experience and familiarity with the process of studying the Bahá’í community. However, a number of indicators point to the marginal status of sociology (and of the social sciences in general) in the Bahá’í community, related to the low levels of involvement of Bahá’í university students in the social sciences, the near absence of published sociological monographs, the low status of the social sciences within the Bahá’í community, the popular attachment to individualism as an explanatory factor for social change, and the fear that sociological studies might bring the Bahá’í community into disrepute.

### *Participation of Bahá’í University Students in the Social Sciences*

Let us assume that you are a young Bahá’í student in sociology. Your enthusiasm and devotion to serve the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh guide your studies. Very soon, however, a personal and academic dislocation occurs when you realize that sociology deals with interpreting empirical facts and developing theories. You learn about the “sociological imagination,” a distinctive term that aims to connect biography and history, or personal experience and society. The university also engages you in thinking about scholarly concepts. You become familiar with many new ideas: Marxism, postmodernism, functionalism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and the like. These concepts seem irrelevant and distant from the Bahá’í community, and seem to deny a spiritual foundation to life and the spiritual nature of humanity. Why bother?

Driven to make the Bahá’í Faith relevant, you decide to “prove” the validity of the Bahá’í teachings. This strategy fails. First, sociology does not engage in these ultimate truth claims—it does not accept revelatory truth

as the basis of evidence. And if you do decide to pursue the path of studying the relevance or importance of, let us say, the Bahá'í principles, you will discover that the world is already heading towards accepting these social principles,<sup>4</sup> and that, in any case, you will be required to more fully comprehend the larger social or economic context from a body of research and literature outside of the Bahá'í writings.

One cannot expect academics to accord the Central Figures associated with the Bahá'í Faith the same status as Bahá'ís do. Enthusiastic Bahá'í students greet this lack of acceptance of the Bahá'í Figures with dismay. After all, does not the Bahá'í Faith hold all truth in today's world? Is not Bahá'u'lláh the Messenger of God for this day? Shouldn't his truths be self-evident? The professor demands that the student push aside any pre-conceived notion of what constitutes revelatory truth while learning sociological principles. In other words, the student thinks he or she has become a prisoner. There is no way out except to claim that "secular" knowledge is somehow deficient, not worth one's efforts. According to Peter Khan, when one couples that feeling with the pressures on "young people not to make a long-term commitment of an educational nature" (the world is falling apart anyway; and we should concentrate on core activities), Bahá'í students give up on the social sciences and flee to the sciences, engineering, the medical-related fields, nursing and medicine, and computer science, where there is no such pressure. In the social sciences, as well as in the humanities, it will take at least ten to fifteen years of scholarly contributions to start making a difference in the field. The lack of purposeful knowledge about the social sciences (and I am mainly speaking about sociology) is sustained by the relative absence of sociological studies on the Bahá'í community which could have proffered legitimacy to sociology.

The lack of legitimacy of sociology might also be something of its own design. In recent years, too, there has been some worry about the predicament and decline of sociology. Andrew Abbott, for example, speaks of "sociology's failure to attract graduate students of abilities comparable to those attracted by anthropology, political science, or economics" (1150). Today, it is economists who have assumed the role of policy advisors to

government. Significantly, Abbott adds that “perhaps most depressing, sociology has lost much of its excitement” and that the science “has a tired feeling.” He speaks of “sociology’s exhaustion” (1151). One must wonder whether Bahá’ís entering this field will find themselves also disillusioned.

### *Published Sociological Monographs*

The relative absence of sociology is also felt in the lack of substantive sociological studies on the Bahá’í community. There are perhaps a dozen or so Bahá’ís who are active sociologists,<sup>5</sup> and an equal number of other sociologists-anthropologists who are not Bahá’ís<sup>6</sup> who have dedicated at least an article or thesis to the study of the Bahá’í community. There have only been six full-length sociological monographs published on the Bahá’í community. This number equals one book per one million Bahá’ís, a far lower rate than is the case of Bahá’í history books, which are roughly one book per 75,000 Bahá’ís.<sup>7</sup> Further, only two sociological studies predate 2000. Five were authored by Bahá’ís. Peter Smith’s 1987 *The Babi and Baha’i Religions: From Messianic Shi’ism to a World Religion* represents the first full-scale monograph, followed in 1996 by *The Origins of the Bahá’í Community of Canada, 1898–1948* (van den Hoonaard). Interestingly, the year 2000 saw the publication of two more monographs on the Bahá’í community, namely Michael McMullen’s *The Bahá’í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity*, and David Piff’s *Bahá’í Lore*. Again another two appeared in 2006: Margit Warburg’s *Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Bahá’ís from a Globalisation Perspective* and a Canadian study, *The Equality of Women and Men: The experience of the Bahá’í Community in Canada* (van den Hoonaard and van den Hoonaard).<sup>8</sup> It is of interest to note that only one was published by a Bahá’í-related publisher, namely David Piff’s *Bahá’í Lore*. All others were made available through non-Bahá’í presses. I will return to this particular facet of publishing and scholarly reviews at a later time in this presentation.

Outside of Bahá’í circles, however, sociology books about the Bahá’í community rate quite high. Of the ten most numerous books on Bahá’í topics found in libraries around the world, two are sociology books

(McMullen and Smith, with 470 and 434 copies, respectively), two are by a Covenant-Breaker and an avowed enemy of the Bahá'í Faith (527 and 519 copies, respectively), two are the Bahá'í writings (950 and 442 copies), and three are histories, including Peter Smith's *Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith* (1,239, 504, and 441 copies). *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, an older introductory book on the Bahá'í Faith, rates second highest, with 793 copies.<sup>9</sup>

The lead-in to contemporary sociological research on the Bahá'í community was a small group of graduate students in the United Kingdom, later dubbed the "Newcastle Seminar in Bahá'í Studies." Peter Smith, who produced the first contemporary published sociological study of the history of the worldwide Bahá'í community was a member of this group. Published by Cambridge University Press, his book became one of the most widely publicly available studies on the Bahá'í Faith. Other university presses followed suit. Wilfrid Laurier University Press produced *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada* in 1996 and is now considering the publication of yet another monograph on the Bahá'í community of Canada. Rutgers University Press published in 2000 *The Bahá'í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity*, a study devoted to the Atlanta, Georgia, Bahá'í community. *The Equality of Women and Men in the Bahá'í Community of Canada* appeared in 2006, eight years after the research was completed. This study was commissioned in 1995 by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, but there were no publishers, Bahá'í or otherwise, able or willing to publish it. Brill Publishers of Leiden, one of the most prestigious scholarly presses in the world, published Margit Warburg's major monograph-length study on the Bahá'í community, *Citizens of the World*, in 2006.<sup>10</sup> Warburg is the one major scholar outside of the Bahá'í community who has dedicated her life to the study of a Scandinavian Bahá'í community and is a major force in that country's media and government relations with respect to recognizing that community.

The modest output of sociological work on the Bahá'í community indicates, too, the modest status of sociology within the Bahá'í community. The shoestring operations of Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired publishers prevent

a wholesale acceptance of sociology books which so few Bahá'ís seem to want to buy in any case.<sup>11</sup> The lack of an international code of conduct for Bahá'í publishers (as opposed to many regular publishers which work with established contracts and royalties) and the long delay in moving books through the press are some of the other features that discourage sociologists in publishing books with Bahá'í presses.<sup>12</sup>

*The Low Hierarchical Placement of the Social Sciences in the Bahá'í Community*

The idea of acquiring knowledge occupies a high station in the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh, for example, exclaims that “knowledge is a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him” (*Tablets* 51). A Bahá'í prayer is dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge, and does not specify the field(s). The supplicant in the prayer asks the “loved ones to acquire knowledge and the sciences and arts, and to unravel the secrets that are treasured up in the inmost reality of all created beings” (*Bahá'í Prayers* 115).

Purely from my own experience, it appears that the Bahá'í community today privileges certain disciplines, reflecting the same attitude towards the social sciences as does society in general. It is a hierarchy in which the natural and medical sciences prevail over the social sciences. The Bahá'í community also attaches great importance to history.

Granted, there is no question that the style of *some* sociological writing can be off-putting. Its jargon proliferates obtuse prose. Its theories do not seem to take into account the sensibilities of believers. Bahá'ís would even be hard pressed to recognize their own religion in some earlier sociological studies. These studies, they claim, are secular and reduce religious phenomena to socioeconomic variables. There is some truth to these claims, but the claims generally pertain to older, more conventional sociological writing and thinking, and these claims are advanced by those in the Bahá'í community who are not so familiar with the post-1990, newer techniques, methodologies, and theories in sociology.

*The Canadian Experience*

Fifteen years ago in Canada, there were about as many Bahá'ís in the fields of medicine, engineering, and the sciences, as there were in the humanities and the social sciences.<sup>13</sup> Put in another way, the Canadian academic group has a distinctive style of Bahá'í scholarship with three mutually exclusive angles. One sees marked psychological, philosophical, social work, and other disciplinary flavors,<sup>14</sup> which used to characterize the work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies since its inception in 1975.<sup>15</sup>

The second group consists of Bahá'ís in the health sciences, engineering, and the natural sciences. Their contributions to Bahá'í Studies have led to further organizational developments and perspectives. But within the Canadian group there are differences of tone and purpose between this group, that is, the health scientists, the engineers, and the other scientists (who prefer a deductive orientation—a positivistic approach), and those who advocate an inductive approach, namely many of the social scientists, and sociologists in particular.

Significantly, the Canadian Bahá'í community has produced more social scientists than any other country. It is primarily sociological in its orientation and notable for its inductive research. What is striking about this part of this group is the prevalence of women in its ranks. The fact that the gender line falls among these methodological frames accentuates their differences. Most of these women occupy the lower echelons of academic life, as PhD candidates or as junior professors.<sup>16</sup> These social dynamics shape the structural placement of the social sciences in the Bahá'í community (van den Hoonard, "Unfreezing"). This dominance of women among Bahá'í sociologists (and in related fields, such as education) reflects the feminization of the field, which may also explain its low status in the Bahá'í community.<sup>17</sup>

*Individualism as an Exploratory Model of Social Change*

Contemporary Western society celebrates the individual and individualism. Bahá'í communities are not immune to these philosophies. The hesitation by the Bahá'í community to consider sociology might be related to

individualistic ways of thinking, namely what matters most in accounting for social change is individual effort. Individualism comes through in a variety of ways, and Bahá'ís need to move away from the concept of the community as merely an aggregate of individuals. And while individualism is cautiously celebrated by Bahá'ís, it ignores interactional patterns, age, gender, and other social markers that play into the kinds of communities Bahá'ís are creating.

In presenting to Bahá'í communities and summer schools across the country some of the findings in our book, *The Equality of Women and Men: The Experience of the Bahá'í Community of Canada*, Deborah and I sometimes note highly individualistic responses to what could be more logically interpreted as a systemic pattern of some aspect of Bahá'í community life. For example, we noted that some Bahá'ís talk about the division of labor in the household as merely representing individual likes or dislikes, but such divisions are systemic and social, and not given to individual inclinations. Rather than a question of individual or personal choice, the division of labor hinges on cultural background and which gender, for example, carries out the immediate or most urgent tasks, or who does the less urgent tasks. Similarly, the predilection of individual boys wanting to play soccer at a Bahá'í youth camp while girls watch is deeply embedded in culture. When boys and camps make this sort of decision, not all attendees of the camp are involved in the decision, revealing a systemic inequality which is passed off as individual choice. So, too, not infrequently, Bahá'í stories about teaching the Bahá'í Faith are portrayed as occurring on a one-to-one level, rather than as a succession of contacts with other Bahá'ís which would lead one to become a Bahá'í or to become more cognizant of the Bahá'í Faith. The practice of “serial teaching” is a social and spiritual reality which cannot be explained merely as individual practice.

### *Discomfort in the Bahá'í Community about Being Studied*

The Bahá'í community experiences discomfort when it is being examined by sociologists, both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í. It is not uncommon for small or marginal groups to dislike social analysis which is often equated with

social criticism. Bahá'ís, however, find it easier to accept comments about their personal behavior, but find it harder to accept comments about the community. What would give hope, however, is that the Bahá'í community, once apprised of a condition, could take remedial action. Research shows that Bahá'ís are fully capable of accepting fair social criticism as a basis for action and social change. Communities benefit from sociology.

Let us take the example of fasting. Awareness about fasting had been only at the individual level in a national Bahá'í community and it was only through sociological research that such patterns came to light. Robert K. Merton (1910–2003), a sociologist, speaks of “common ignorance,” when each member of a society is aware that only he or she is the one undergoing a particular experience whereas, in fact, everyone else is too. For example, when Warburg reported in a national community that of those who were not exempt from the Bahá'í fasting period, 54 percent kept the fast, more or less, but another 46 percent abstained from fasting for non-legitimate reasons:

“I derive no spiritual or physical benefits from it.”

“I have an austere daily life. I do not need the ecstasy [of the fast] and am not attracted by it. I do not want to go wild.”

“I practice other forms of self-control. I do not smoke and I buy as little as possible.”

“People would think I am half-witted.”

“The fasting does not go with the [our country's] climate.” (341–43)

It is reported, however, that once the Bahá'ís in this country became aware in 1998 of the rather common abstention from the fast, individual efforts to follow the fast did not apparently intensify (Warburg, personal communication, 31 July 2007).

In other instances, sociological research can lodge particular Bahá'í behavior in a larger cultural context. In the same study, Margit Warburg reports that a national Bahá'í community (of some 252 members) donated each year DKK 54,000, hardly enough to sustain the work of that national Bahá'í community (397). Such low contributions to the Fund, she explains,



are perhaps typical of Europe. According to Warburg, many countries in Europe “are accustomed to having collective goods paid for with their taxes” (420), as opposed to the North American system where so much runs on philanthropy and where, thus, Bahá’ís are in a frame of mind to donate more to the Bahá’í Fund.

Dr. Warburg uses her research on Bahá’ís to educate the citizens of her country about the need to improve relations with all minorities in that country. In fact, her motivation for doing the research in the first place is related to that point. During her twenty-five years of scholarship on the Bahá’í community, she has not only established enduring personal friendships with Bahá’ís, but more importantly, was eager to see how spiritual dynamics worked themselves out in Bahá’í collective and individual life.

Bahá’ís ought to be grateful to these scholars who are not affiliated with the Bahá’í Faith and its claims. They can ask questions that academics who are Bahá’ís cannot ask. “How much do you give to the Bahá’í Fund?” is the kind of question that falls outside our Bahá’í ways of knowing, but it is a question that a non-Bahá’í researcher feels less inhibited to ask. Similarly, such a researcher can ask about the personal prayer or fasting habits of individual Bahá’ís—again something that Bahá’ís do not ask of each other. Bahá’ís consider these issues to be private, a matter between the believer and God, and would be less inclined or perhaps feel quite uncomfortable in sharing answers with a scholar who is a Bahá’í. Warburg does not hesitate and weaves her findings into a larger discussion about the Bahá’í community, even couching advice to the Bahá’í community in the form of analysis. No doubt, the frankness of her Bahá’í research participants’ sharing so much about themselves is due to her own authentic and sympathetic approach.

No less praise should go to the Bahá’í community as a whole for allowing her to enter its world. Their mutual respect is evident in her study. A Bahá’í reader feels like a voyeur, catching glimpses of Bahá’í life that would otherwise have remained opaque. She covers a fairly complete range of what activities being a Bahá’í entails: prayer, fasting, attending Nineteen-Day Feasts, the writing of wills, participation in Holy Days, and the reading of Bahá’í writings. We learn that, on the average, 14 percent

of Bahá'ís did not participate in Bahá'í activities, 26 percent did so minimally, 18 percent at a medium level, and 43 percent to a high degree (Warburg 370). She takes these data further into her analysis of the Bahá'í community, as they affect the mobilization of resources and the manner by which Bahá'ís devote their energy and time in the strengthening and dispersion of the Bahá'í community. She describes the effects of 38 percent of Bahá'ís not praying on the dynamics of Bahá'í community life. She selects some Bahá'í “activities” that were a surprise to me. For example, the wearing of a Bahá'í ring in public (13 percent do not) would not be a topic I would have considered—I am too much on the inside—but am pleased that she has included it. There are numerous other fine details that emerge from her study, such as who is more likely to exhibit a portrait of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or the symbol of the Greatest Name: the Iranians or native-born nationals of the country? (The Iranians are more likely to have a portrait of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá displayed in their home, while non-Iranian Europeans favor the Greatest Name).

And yet Dr. Warburg’s data permit her to become a proponent of the Bahá'í community as she affirms that Bahá'ís “do not have a reputation for zealous or colorful mission, and they are not accused of brainwashing or dubious economic transactions.” The Bahá'ís, she asserts, “do not engage in the controversial spending and fund-raising practices that characterize some religious groups” (11). Bahá'ís take these elements of their religion for granted, but it takes an outsider to assert them.

Along these lines, her discussion of membership data is the result of a careful year-by-year scrutiny of membership rolls of “her” national Bahá'í community and, by extension, the worldwide Bahá'í community. No, Bahá'ís do not jig the figures. If there are discrepancies, they are slight, and more the result of administrative particularities. If anything, there is undercounting in some cases (Warburg 66 n170). Such findings are not the outcome of a sympathetic-outsider scholar, but of systematic analysis. Every study of a religion is subject to a debate on membership counting; Dr. Warburg does not shy away from that.

We also learn that Bahá'ís in that Scandinavian country represent proportionally more divorced people than the general population (although

there is no indication whether the divorce preceded their becoming Bahá'ís or not, or whether Bahá'í membership might have been the cause of divorce if married to a non-Bahá'í). Sixty-nine percent of Bahá'ís are married to other Bahá'ís. Bahá'ís generally have a higher level of vocational education, and a higher proportion are public employees, with a preponderance in social, educational, and health fields (Warburg 259–64). Work in the social, educational, and health fields is a more likely setting for people to become Bahá'ís.

Dr. Warburg attempts to understand the answers given to her question, “What does it mean to be a Bahá'í?” Without going into any great detail, we see that these terms mean something different for the Iranian Bahá'ís, and something different again for the native Scandinavian Bahá'ís. These distinctions pervade relations between the two groups and hit at differences in the way both sets of Bahá'ís express Bahá'í belonging. She vocalized unspoken distinctions while not diminishing the dignity of each.

Some of these normally closed areas are opened up to both non-Bahá'ís and Bahá'ís. She seeks to explain the data in the larger national and cultural context, bringing in the Bahá'í writings, too. Such delicate frankness can only serve as a model for other sociologists of religion.

#### WITHIN THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

When sociologists do fieldwork they usually adopt a sympathetic stance towards the group being studied. They usually will not become an insider, but will defend the Bahá'í community in the eyes of the larger world. Despite some shared perspectives between the sociologists and the Bahá'ís, there still will be two sources of such tensions. First, there is a temptation among Bahá'ís to perhaps misread the attempts of sociologists when “hanging out” around the Bahá'í community. Bahá'ís might see that as an attempt for a sociologist “to get closer to the Faith,” believing that eventually he or she will declare his or her allegiance to the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and they are perhaps puzzled if such allegiance is not forthcoming. After all, they claim, the sociologist must surely now understand the Truth. These misreadings are not unusual. There are many other

instances where minorities, political or religious, misread the intentions of sociologists.

Second, there is a nervousness about others finding out about how the Bahá'í community "really works." Typically, Bahá'ís know the everyday struggles Bahá'í communities face. We have internalized this implicit knowledge to such an extent that we are reluctant to discuss such matters about the community even in settings that warrant such reflections. When an outsider stumbles on these facets of Bahá'í community life, these facets gain legitimacy. Bahá'ís must uncomfortably acknowledge them or deny them. There is no way out. When one adds the fact that an outside observer might indeed miss some essential attributes of Bahá'í life and structure, Bahá'ís give these facts less credence. In the end, Bahá'í communities can be nervous about such studies.

Perhaps it is for this reason that studies on the Bahá'í community published through non-Bahá'í venues are not widely circulated (or even reviewed) within the Bahá'í community, but receive attention outside the Bahá'í community.<sup>18</sup> The only sociological book that was published through a Bahá'í-related press, David Piff's *Bahá'í Lore*, was never reviewed outside or inside Bahá'í circles. It is clear that Bahá'í publishers, including the Association for Bahá'í Studies, can contribute to a more widespread knowledge of the Bahá'í community by promoting more actively their books outside the Bahá'í community, while at the same time supporting the more useful books published through non-Bahá'í venues.

Overcoming fears or discomfort about how we are seen in the eyes of the larger academic world can be a tough challenge, but it represents a next phase in the emergence of sociology and the Bahá'í community from obscurity.

#### THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENTISTS WHO ARE BAHÁ'ÍS

Given the theme of this paper—the mutual invisibility of sociology and the Bahá'í community—I wish to dwell on the special responsibilities and opportunities for social scientists who are Bahá'ís. The first of these relates to the Bahá'í community; the second to sociology. The first of such

duties sums up the special need for humility on the part of the social scientists; the second chiefly requires integrity. However, both humility and integrity are sound ingredients in both cases.

#### HUMILITY

The current analytic framework in sociology still has an undertone of debunking myths which might instill skepticism. Skepticism is a powerful sentiment in sociology, especially as it pertains to questioning unjust authorities, social injustice, racism, and violence, to name a few issues that the sociologist wrestles with.<sup>19</sup> However, it does not take much to carry skepticism into the study of everyday life, but the Bahá'í writings are clear about the significance of avoiding skepticism: "Skepticism, cynicism, disbelief, immorality and hard-heartedness are rife, and as the friends are those who stand for the antithesis of all these things they should beware lest the atmosphere of the present world affects them without their being conscious of it" (Shoghi Effendi, in Hornby 543).

Humility on the part of the Bahá'í researcher is the only bulwark against the skepticism that seems to go hand in hand with social research. The Bahá'í social researcher cannot pretend he or she is not a Bahá'í, for doing so subverts the very essence of their consciousness.

One's "facts" or "findings" are never objective. The Bahá'í researcher configures them in a research setting that is surrounded by a social and cultural context, and he or she, as researcher, is not immune from their own culture. As a consequence, he or she cannot present "findings" about the Bahá'í community as facts. The Bahá'í researcher should be aware that the research on the Bahá'í community is shaped by one's own personal, social, and cultural context, which involves gender, race, status, and class. Thus both the way the researcher presents findings, and the tone of the work, should express humility. The social researcher offers these findings to the Bahá'í community, and respects the readers of their work by not robbing them of their dignity by not always spelling out answers and solutions. The researcher can leave some of that to the readers.

To that end, it makes no sense to even make recommendations in the

research. The social researcher is a Bahá'í who occupies no higher status than being a Bahá'í. He or she does not have any special privileges in the Bahá'í community. The researcher aims at presenting, like a mirror, the Bahá'í community, but it is up to the Bahá'í community to see what it chooses to see, either for reflection or action.

The sociologist aims also at approaching his or her data with humility or at least being aware of one's preconceived notions. The following statement by William Least Heat-Moon, who attempted to write the full history of a county in Kansas, sums up a humble approach from which both Bahá'ís and sociologists stand to gain:

I am standing on Roniger Hill to test the shape of what I'm going to write about this prairie place. For thirty months, maybe more, I've come and gone here and have found stories to tell, but, until last week, I had not discovered the way to tell them. My searches and researches, like my days, grew more randomly than otherwise, and every form I tried contorted them, and each time I began to press things into cohesion, I edged not so much toward fiction as toward distortion, when what I wanted was accuracy; even when I got a detail down accurately, I couldn't hook it to the next without concocting theories. It was connections that deviled me. I was hunting a fact or image and not a thesis to hold my details together, and so I arrived at this question: should I just gather up items like creek pebbles into a bag and then let them tumble into their own pattern? Did I really want the reality of randomness? Answer: only if it would yield a landscape with figures, one that would unroll like a Chinese scroll painting or a bison-skin drawing where both beginnings and ends of an event are at once present in the conflated time of the American Indian. The least I hoped for was a topographic map of words that would open inch by inch to show its long miles. (14–15)

#### INTEGRITY

The Bahá'í researcher is also a committed social scientist and faces a number of challenges from within the field of study itself. However, can one

be a committed Bahá'í and a committed researcher at the same time? In other words, can this researcher retain his or her integrity as a Bahá'í and his or her integrity as a social researcher? Every Bahá'í social researcher will have to find a satisfactory answer to this challenging question.

My own experience suggests that it is advisable not to undertake Bahá'í research early in one's career. Develop the research expertise and become well acquainted with all modes of thought and discourse. How can one correlate the Bahá'í teachings to the larger world if one does not become conversant with that larger world? When one has matured sufficiently and become adequately grounded in one's field, one can then undertake a study of the Bahá'í community or even correlate the Bahá'í teachings to the conditions of the world in a manner that is understood by thinkers outside the Bahá'í community.

As I indicated in the early part of my presentation, I found seeking advice and consulting with other Bahá'ís in my field to be indispensable. Trying out new research ideas and novel methods would also be part of that process.

Many sociologists, including perhaps some Bahá'ís, face the dilemma of either highlighting the “debunking or reductive interpretive frameworks” still so common in sociology, so that they can be regarded as “scientific” and as “*sociologist[s] of religion* rather than . . . mere ‘religious sociologist[s]’” (Robbins and Robertson 321), or entirely avoiding these frameworks, with the risk of being seen as “unscientific” by the scholarly community. Thankfully, the passage of time in the world of scholars has seen to it that this dichotomy is disappearing, but the question does appear during one's career. There is a huge middle ground between espousing apologetic or hagiographic research on one hand, and being obsessed with the (false) knowledge that facts are purely objective.

A special word needs to be said about sociological studies undertaken by Bahá'í scholars which, to the larger world, constitute apologetics. Numerous scholarly works are undertaken by other scholars who are believers in other religious groups. The works by the scholar-believer Leo Driedger on the Mennonites and those of Brigham Y. Card on the Mormons come to mind. Researchers, both believers and nonbelievers, need to wrestle between works that constitute genuine celebratory facets

of what believers do and what constitutes a lack of critical appraisal. A scholar-believer would see no reason to downplay the recognition of “positive service,” authentic accomplishments, or “good examples of sacrifice.”

Nevertheless, researchers who stand outside the community of believers quickly point to filio-pietism (or an uncritically positive presentation) as a baneful example of that type of research. For example, Agehananda Bharati, a non-Bahá'í, has taken exception to the work by James Keene, who used statistical analysis to show how Bahá'ís support worldmindedness.

#### THE SOCIOLOGICAL HESITATION ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

Shoghi Effendi's vision for engaging academics who are Bahá'ís in the development of sociology is quite strong. While there are a number of social scientists who are Bahá'ís, their (Bahá'í) impact on sociology seems negligible. When one surveys the mention of the Bahá'í Faith in the thirteen textbooks that introduce sociology to Canadian university student,<sup>20</sup> only one textbook (Hughes and Kroehler 354) refers to the Bahá'ís—within a short list of “other religions” in a chapter about religion. There is no reference to Bahá'ís or Bahá'í ideas in some of the commonly occurring chapters in these textbooks on topics such as globalization, poverty, gender, and equality of the sexes.

No doubt, the lack of sociological attention given to the Bahá'í community might sadden a number of Bahá'ís, myself included, especially when I personally know a number of these authors who also know of my Bahá'í scholarly affiliation and work. In response to my query as to why no attention is devoted to the Bahá'í community, one prominent sociologist of religion wrote to me and noted,

Even in new-religious-movement (NRM) studies, Bahá'í has had a very low profile until very recently—and what little attention it gets is related to scholars like yourself that have a personal stake in the religion. . . . The field—like the wider discourse in sociology of religion, and sociology in general—has long been preoccupied with the “controversial” religions (e.g., Unification Church, Scientology, Wicca)



because their status as “social problems” justified paying attention to groups that most sociologists have little interest in, or think are insignificant and irrelevant. The three hot issues have been conversion/brainwashing, violence, and maybe gender/child care-abuse issues. Bahá’í does not attract any headlines (good or bad). So it is overlooked. Statistically all the new religions are still too small to assert much importance for them. So in general I have argued . . . that the socio-cultural significance of NRMs should hinge, however, on their status as indices and agents of broader social currents and patterns of change, etc. Bahá’í fits that to a degree—but I have never thought to make the connection.

He elaborates further:

The hot issues make some sense—but the amount of work dedicated to them far exceeds their significance. The result is that a great deal of very basic and essential research about issues such as leadership and organizational structures—about the creation and the management of new religions—has been overlooked. Also we lack good comparative studies of the “religious experience” of people drawn to new religions and the means by which this experience is cultivated and sustained, etc. Some of this is being done re contemporary Paganism because it has grown so much and been partially legitimized by the mass media, etc. (Personal communication, 9 July 2007)

Thus, ironically, our good behavior is the cause of the lack of sociological attention. It is now also clear that, explicitly, sociologists pay very little attention, if any, to the Bahá’í Faith, its teachings, and its community. The following section discusses how sociology and the Bahá’í community intersect.

#### FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIOLOGY

While the study of religion still remains marginal within sociology, there is a wider recognition of religion as an important force within society. No

doubt, the recent recrudescence of religion as a social force has been responsible for this recognition. Sociology seems to have emerged from its objectivist and positivistic shackles and is now entering a new phase in the study of religion that allows for more subjective and interpretivist paradigms of research. It no longer sees the absolute need to look at religion from an objective, so-called neutral, perspective, but is now willing to look at religion on its own terms.

The breaking of the shackles started perhaps two decades ago when some sociologists, like Charles L. McGehee of Central Washington University, worried about the injurious impact of sociology as a debunking discipline on the lives of students: "Sociology is criticized for its preoccupation with debunking social myths. Limitless debunking leaves students ill-prepared for a world where values are necessary, injures their relations with others, and undermines their self-respect" (40).

He suggests sociology "must examine concepts such as honesty, duty, responsibility, generosity, etc., as well as the existence of consciousness, as necessary elements of an adequate understanding of society," and that the study of society cannot "be separated from the study of the source and purpose of life even if it makes research difficult, and to fail to seek such an integration is to add to the miseries sociology typically claims to oppose" (40). The "new" methodologies, or rather the adoption of some of classical fieldwork research, coupled with subjectivist approaches, have opened the way for a mature understanding of the Bahá'í community on the part of sociologists. For example, it was a telling moment when Dr. Margit Warburg of the Department of the History of Religion at the University of Copenhagen defended her recently published book, *Citizens of the World*, and one of the examiners asked her whether she felt that her work had been compromised because she worked rather closely with the National Spiritual Assembly. She immediately replied that she sees her work on the Bahá'í community as a collaborative venture and this had a positive impact on her research. It is this collaborative paradigm, partly fostered by feminist approaches as well as the emergence of participatory-action research, that may augur a new era in the sociological study of the Bahá'í community.

A number of social researchers have turned their attention to studying the Bahá'í community for its social and spiritual dynamics. In the words of one researcher, the following speaks of her interests, attraction, and approach to the study of the Bahá'í community as a non-Bahá'í scholar:

Indigenous [Bahá'í] history is vastly different in North versus Latin America but it's precisely this that motivates me to bring these fields into conversation with one another. Given that the Americas have been linked according to a shared (Bahá'í) spiritual geography, not to mention the concrete mobility of Bahá'í teachers and pioneers and teaching materials and methods, I'm very intrigued by the question of what it has meant to work towards unity in diversity, on the ground, in this vast region (in which national ethnic composition and state-based definitions of who constitutes an indigenous person have varied dramatically). . . . I feel . . . that it's important I adopt a framework that will allow me to more fully and appropriately incorporate non-Indigenous Bahá'í actors into my analysis, rather than focusing so exclusively on the experiences of Indigenous Bahá'ís. I hope that focus upon the question of building unity in diversity, in theory versus in practice, will allow me to do so. Also, while I would hope to position my analysis in a way that sought to challenge these boundaries. . . . I also feel that a transnational framework more effectively encompasses and speaks to the global nature of the Bahá'í community and is thus a more appropriate (and exciting) unit of analysis. (Horton, personal communication, 9 July 2007)

Still, it is quite a challenge for sociologists to capture a precise picture of the Bahá'í community. As one social scientist who is a Bahá'í avers, "Generally, sociological works reveal to me two problems: (1) the average Bahá'í is really not very well versed in the substance of the Bahá'í texts and the nuances of the teachings; (2) sociologists are often not very accomplished at providing a context sufficient to keep the reader from thinking that the ignorance expressed by some Bahá'ís actually constitutes what the Faith teaches. Sociological works by Bahá'ís have to capture

the Faith as lived while also surrounding everything with a corrective about what the writings appear to say in actual fact" (Collins, personal communication, 9 February 2007).

Until 2000, the wall of silence between sociology and the Bahá'í community was quite pronounced. What the future holds, no one is in a position to predict. However, there are some potentially useful orientations in the camps of sociologists and the Bahá'í community that might provide some form of engagement between the two. There are several opportunities that come from within the Bahá'í community which might contribute to a better intersection between the Bahá'ís and the sociologists. I now wish to address sociological studies from the perspective of the Bahá'í community.

#### HOW BAHÁ'Í NATIONAL COMMUNITIES ARE USING SOCIAL RESEARCH

There are better times ahead as some national Bahá'í communities are trying to make use of social or sociological research to further their own goals. Although I refer to three national Bahá'í communities, I note that the involvement of social research in each instance is quite diverse.

I have already alluded to the book, *The Equality of Women and Men: The Experience of the Bahá'í Community of Canada*, commissioned by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada in 1995. Originally conceived by the National Assembly as a survey exploring what Bahá'ís were doing to promote the equality of women and men, the researchers proposed using focus groups across Canada with a diverse sample of Bahá'í communities: urban, rural, youth, university students, Persians, and so on. The National Assembly worked fully with the researchers in approaching whatever Bahá'í community the researchers deemed useful for the study. Soon after the study was completed, the National Spiritual Assembly carefully went over the implications of the findings by meeting with the researchers. After this consultation, the Assembly agreed that the study could be published in any venue the researchers chose. Among the many things that surprised the researchers was the prevalence of some eight differing perspectives on how Bahá'ís see equality. They also learned that youth tended to follow the dominant values of their peers when deal-

ing with equality, but that the Bahá'í approach would come alive in their mid-twenties. Moreover, many focus groups found it a challenge to correlate the Bahá'í teachings on equality with the larger world. The size of the community, too, has impact on how the equality of women and men is experienced. The National Spiritual Assembly, as well as most of the twelve Bahá'í communities involved in the study, considered a similar study that would focus on race relations.

I have already spoken about a study by Dr. Warburg, who decided more than twenty years ago to make the sociological study of the Bahá'í community her central life interest. To facilitate her research, the National Spiritual Assembly appointed a coordinator, someone who would be of assistance to Dr. Warburg, but who would also serve as a channel of communication. This arrangement proved enormously successful for all parties concerned.

The third example comes from the United States, where the National Teaching Committee of the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly regularly makes use of social surveys and focus groups to get at the heart of what Bahá'ís need to repair and do to get the Bahá'ís on the path of teaching.

Thus, the walls of silence between the Bahá'í community and sociology are slowly and gradually coming down. But what can we say about how the Bahá'í Faith itself informs the sociologists who are Bahá'ís?

#### HOW ARE BAHÁ'Í RESEARCHERS FULFILLING THE GUARDIAN'S VISION?

As interesting and useful as studying the Bahá'í community is from a sociological perspective, this approach does not, of necessity, fulfill the Guardian's vision of how sociologists who are Bahá'ís can contribute to sociology itself. No doubt, the sociology of the Bahá'í community might reveal particular insights of use to the sociology of religion, but the Guardian specified a wider vision—a much wider vision—but he also asked Bahá'ís, in 1952, to temper their enthusiasm with patience:

[H]e urges you to devote as much of your time as possible to the actual teaching work rather than writing on technical or theoretical subjects, especially in relation to the Faith, because the Bahá'í attitude

in detail regarding such questions as sociology and economics must be formulated in the course of time and cannot possibly be elaborated on at this point. To do so would be premature. This does not mean that you should not make the best possible use of the manuscript you sent him, but he would not advise you to devote much time to a similar work in the immediate future. (Shoghi Effendi, *The Light* 101)

From what I gather from what fellow Bahá'ís sociologists are doing, we are not at a stage where we are developing an *explicit* Bahá'í sociological framework. Rather, our work indicates an *implicit* Bahá'í contribution to sociology. In the preparation of this lecture, I asked a number of my Bahá'í colleagues to tell me how being a Bahá'í influenced their research. In this light, I am reminded of the words of one Bahá'í academic, Tamalik:

I'm working privately and diligently to live up to the values and principles and the exhortation "let deeds, not words, be your adorning." By some believer's views I'm seen as "inactive," but in fact, I've never felt more active in my entire Bahá'í experience!<sup>21</sup> I was drawn to scholarship initially because I was truly blessed to be involved in an academic initiative which brought Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, atheists, agnostics—people from far reaching parts of the globe—together to train in leadership development and conflict transformation. . . . Our convener was a Mennonite in a Catholic institution. Here I learned the value of what I really had in the Bahá'í Faith. . . . and big picture framework that could work as a reference point for such diversity, difference, and sometimes conflict. It also challenged me to open my mind about the [Bahá'í] Writings, as we have developed and accepted common conventions in Canada about what the Faith is. To me, scholarship is a spiritual process primarily. It involves books, writing, research, peer review, evaluations and other things, but the exercise is all empty and futile for me without the key ingredient of spirituality. By that, I mean purposefulness. I have attached my own purposefulness to that measure, for my own motivation.

However, I respect that other Bahá'ís would have different purposes and directions. My spirituality is personal and based on my sense of my own life's purpose. I know that through my scholarship I have the potential to open doors to addressing injustice and inequality in the Canadian context. I am also deeply concerned with how certain populations are systematically shut out from access to "higher" education. Because of the Bahá'í Faith's strong emphasis on education, I am drawn to address this concern in my research and in my work. (Personal communication, July 2007)

Another scholar, Dr. Lynn Echevarria, tries to identify the processes by which the Bahá'í sacred writings shape one's identity. She is also developing a new interviewing methodology based on insights from the Bahá'í writings. Her dissertation research on Canadian Bahá'í women shows how Bahá'í administrative processes offered women the opportunity to become full participants in the Bahá'í community which, as a result, spilled over into the larger society outside the Bahá'í community.

There are other examples where the Bahá'í approach is more implicit than explicit as academics who are Bahá'ís are contributing to their respective fields. Dr. Deborah van den Hoonaard, in her work on Florida retirement communities, discovered that diversity is a key component of what makes a retirement community function better. Although it was her empirical findings that led to that conclusion, it was also her Bahá'í approach that linked those findings to her overall conclusion and facilitated her analysis.

Dr. Lyse Langlois, a researcher in the field of education in Quebec, outlined her Bahá'í approach as follows:

First, I pay attention to the Ridván messages [of the Universal House of Justice] so that I can obtain the necessary direction in what concepts I should highlight in my work. My intention is to do something useful and to be of service to the Faith. Thus, I got the idea of moral education as an important axiom for the future. . . . I stuck with the concept of moral education as more and more relevant and

exportable since 1992. I did my doctoral dissertation on this topic. I attended an [Association for Bahá'í Studies] meeting at Laval about universal ethics. I have also read a number of works by Bahá'í European researchers on ethics.

Dr. Langlois has found the works of Eloy Anello at Núr University relevant for her own interest in moral leadership. She consulted with Dr. William S. Hatcher and decided to use the model proposed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, namely "knowledge–volition–action" and has managed to integrate this model into her own work on ethics. She notes that professionals seem to have a thirst for this particular model of action. The Bahá'í writings, she further notes, have inspired her and have given her a very cutting-edge perspective. *The Prosperity of Humankind* statement by the Bahá'í International Community has given her a special impetus in that regard (personal communication, 1 August 2007).

If I am permitted to use another example—that is the one I am familiar with—it is the work on inductive research which, I believe, grew entirely out of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own statement about the value of induction in scientific work: "A scientific man is a true index and representative of humanity, for through processes of *inductive* reasoning and research he is informed of all that appertains to humanity, its status, conditions and happenings. He studies the human body politic, understands social problems and weaves the web and texture of civilization" (*Promulgation* 50; emphasis added).

Although this perspective also matches the sociological approach to field research and qualitative research, a Bahá'í sociologist would feel particularly encouraged to develop sociology along the lines of doing inductive research, especially if it draws on existing sociological forms of research.

#### CONCLUSION

I have tried to relate the emergence of sociology in the Bahá'í community to my own path in sociology. The Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture has given me the opportunity to exercise the "sociological imagination" (a



term coined by sociologist C. Wright Mills), where one's private life can be meaningfully connected to larger social patterns and historical forces. I have tried, in particular, to exercise this "imagination" with statements found in the Bahá'í writings and to explore developments in the Bahá'í community's attitude towards the social sciences.

The Bahá'í community, with few national exceptions, is reluctant to accept sociological research. Yet, sociology and the Bahá'í Faith share important principles which include the relevance of conceptualizing the world in terms of structure, collective action, and social patterns, rather than as mere actions of the individual. Both approaches underscore the importance of human behavior and the influence it exercises on the world at large. No less important, sociology, like the Bahá'í Faith, critically challenges widely held beliefs as a *sine qua non* of changing the world. In the final analysis the Universal House of Justice invited people to study the Bahá'í community.

Social scientists who are Bahá'ís are making implicit contributions to their chosen field of study. Their focus on the study of social injustice, of racism, of minority relations, or prejudice—to name a few—speaks to their own narrative as Bahá'ís and as sociologists.

I thank again the Association for Bahá'í Studies for having given me an opportunity to set out the journey of sociology in the Bahá'í community, and I thank you for your patience.

#### NOTES

I am deeply indebted to the following people who have assisted me with their fresh critiques of this paper: Mr. William Collins, Ms. Chelsea Horton, Dr. Lorne Dawson, Dr. Margit Warburg, Mr. David Bowie, Ms. Janet McGrath, and Dr. Deborah K. van den Hoonard. I also thank Dr. Moojan Momen for his help. I take full responsibility for any errors or omissions in this paper. A word of thanks to my daughter, Lisa-Jo van den Scott, who, at the Balyuzi Lecture, was responsible for reading aloud the relevant quotes in this presentation. This written presentation differs somewhat from the original talk given at the Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, August 2007.

1. Mr. Hubert Schuurman and Ms. Suzanne Schuurman were two other Bahá'ís who proved to be of great assistance in my choosing to be a sociologist.

2. For abbreviation purposes, I am using the term "Bahá'í sociologists" rather than the more accurate term, "sociologists who are Bahá'ís."

3. It should be noted that this sentiment was not universal in sociology. Thomas Ryba cites Robert Segal, for example, who believed that by abandoning the objective approach the study of religion is "hopelessly compromised." Similarly, Thomas Robbins and Roland Robertson cite Irving Horowitz, who asserted that, particularly, ethnographic research of religion confuses "empathy and balance with advocacy." Among some of the most prominent researchers of religion, Robbins and Robertson also believe that current sociology has been "too uncritical in their approach to religion." The culprit is the phenomenology of religion, "which is declared to be associated with a descriptive approach that brackets value-judgments and extends the American commercial truism to religious studies—the believer, like the customer, is always right." Still others, like Carl Raschke, claim that religious studies "must wean itself rapidly from its love affair with descriptive pluralism and agree to certain normative and theoretical, if not strictly scientific, standards."

4. Academic conferences are replete with Bahá'í-sounding themes. The theme of the 2007 Annual Conference of the American Sociological Association is "Is Another World Possible?" The 16th Conference of the International Sociological Association (ISA), held in Durban, South Africa, in July 2006 was "The Quality of Social Existence in a Globalizing World." In the early 1990s, the ISA organized a conference around the theme, "Sociology for One-World's Unity and Diversity."

5. Paula Drewek, Lynn Echevarria, Mark Foster, Hoda Mahmoudi, Leonda Keniston, Mandana Kerschbaumer, and the other dozen mentioned in this lecture.

6. Mary Archer, Robert Balch, Peter Berger, Fred Bird, Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Karel Dobbelaere, Helen Ebaugh, David Millett, David Nock, Ivan Ruff, Sharon Vaughn, and June Wyman.

7. I used my own Bahá'í library to calculate the rate of Bahá'í history books—and I am sure that the library does not contain all history books. I found 38 biographies, 21 popular histories, and 21 history books at the scholarly level, for a total of 80 books (or one book per 75,000 Bahá'ís). Even if one took only the 21 scholarly books, one would still come to a proportionally higher number (i.e., one book per 285,714 Bahá'ís) than is the case with sociology books.

8. I have excluded journal articles about the Bahá'í community and those historical and other monographs which would potentially not be reviewed in sociology journals. I have also omitted unpublished theses or dissertations from the list. The following enumerates the number of times sociological works about the Bahá'í community have been reviewed in non-Bahá'í scholarly literature: *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada* (van den Hoonaard, 1996): seven times; *The Bahá'í* (McMullen, 2000): six times; *The Babi and Bahá'í Religions* (Smith, 1987): three times; *Citizens of the World* (Warburg, 2006): twice; *Logos and Civilization* (Saiedi, 2000): once; *Bahá'í Lore* (Piff, 2000): never.

9. Source: WorldCat, available through University of New Brunswick libraries.

10. No doubt, one of the most erudite sociological approaches is found in Nader Saiedi's last chapters of his *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Not an empirical study of the Bahá'í community, it retains sociological insights. The recent promising work by Michael Karlberg bears watching, as does the research by Arash Abizadeh. Although not sociologists, their topics will interest sociologists.

11. It is of interest to note that amazon.com has more books by Shoghi Effendi available than the United States Bahá'í Distribution Service (<http://www.bahai-bookstore.com>), namely thirteen (as opposed to twelve for the latter). The Canadian Bahá'í Distribution Web site (<http://www.bahaibooksonline.com>) lists almost no sociology books on the Bahá'í community (accessed 24 July 2007). *The Equality of Women and Men: The Experience of the Bahá'í Community in Canada* by Deborah K. and Will C. van den Hoonaard is listed there, but *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898–1948* is not.

12. There might be other issues at work. Some believe that Bahá'í prepublication review requirements of pieces authored by Bahá'ís might further discourage publishing. In my own experience, prepublication review has always been limited to factual errors (such as dates of birth) and I found some suggestions helpful. It is impossible in this brief footnote to convey an analysis of its scholarly implications. Shoghi Effendi assures us that, in the future, "restrictions imposed on the publication of Bahá'í literature will be definitely abolished" (*World Order* 9). The Universal House of Justice stated in a 2004 letter that this requirement is "temporary and is meant to protect the interests of the Faith at the early stages of its development." In another letter from 1991, they explain

that “until its history, teachings, and practices are well known throughout the world, it will be necessary for the Bahá'í community to make efforts within itself to present correct information about the Faith in books, films or other media.” Given the fact that Bahá'ís are persecuted in parts of the world, any inadvertent comment or inaccuracy, especially by a Bahá'í scholar, might be seized upon and misconstrued to place Bahá'ís in even further danger. In any event, there is no Bahá'í review of research proposals, such as in all contemporary academic settings which require researchers to pass through research-ethics review. So, too, is “member checking” becoming more commonplace in sociology when researchers are required to return interview transcripts to interview participants for verification. There are both negative and positive features in member checking, including the fact that when interview participants read these transcripts, they are sometimes appalled by seeing their own spoken words filled with grammatical errors.

13. In 1992, I conducted a survey on behalf of the Association for Bahá'í Studies and learned that there were some 44 Bahá'í academics in Canada (15 in the social sciences, 14 in engineering and the sciences, 9 in the humanities, and 6 in medicine).

14. See Will C. van den Hoonaard, “Unfreezing the Frame” for a detailed comparison of the nature and contents of the various Bahá'í scholarly journals.

15. The Association was formed as a recommendation from a policy conference set by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, in response to a goal set by the Universal House of Justice to foster Bahá'í courses at the university level.

16. Today there is a higher proportion than in 1992 of Bahá'í women who are tenured in Canadian universities.

17. It is notable that the Bahá'í women in the American academic group who engage in qualitative research tend to have fostered links with their Canadian sisters.

18. I used the Book Review Cumulative Index to tabulate the reviews of all six books.

19. Sociology began as social welfarism, taking the plight of the dispossessed, the marginalized, and so on, under its wings. Its efforts to debunk myths were primarily directed to those ideologies that sustained inequality.

20. Brym; Giddens, Duneier, and Appelbaum; Henslin, Glenday, Duffy, and Pupo; Hughes and Kroehler; Kendall, Lothian Murray, and Linden; Knuttila; Lindsey, Beach, and Ravelli; Macionis and Gerber; Macionis, Jansson, and Benoit; Schaefer, Floyd, and Haaland; Schaefer and Grekul; Steckley and Kirby Letts; Tepperman and Curtis.

21. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers this statement: “All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight” (*Promulgation* 50).

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