

HINDUISM AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

Author: Moojan Momen

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Moojan Momen's short book *Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith* is a welcome addition to the growing secondary literature on the Bahá'í Faith and its relation to other world religions. It is especially welcome because until now there has been virtually nothing substantive written about the connection between Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith, and, as Momen notes at the end of his book, India currently has the largest Bahá'í community in the world. The vast majority of Indian Bahá'ís were formerly Hindus.

This book is intended primarily as an introduction to the Bahá'í Faith for those of the Hindu tradition but will also prove useful to those Bahá'ís who would like to know how their Faith links with Hinduism. It begins with a brief introduction outlining some central concepts of Hinduism: *Brahman* (God); *dharma* (ethical or social law); reincarnation; and *moksa* (the religious goal) and its three principal means of achievement: *karma* (action), *jnana* (knowledge), and *bhakti* (devotion). The author then goes on to say that the Bahá'í Faith aims to move Hinduism to a further stage of its evolution (not to supplant it), to resolve some of Hinduism's differences, and to unite it (xi). The next few chapters examine further the concepts mentioned above, with the liberal use of quotations from various Hindu scriptures relating Bahá'í beliefs to these quotations. Included are sections on image worship and Hindu prophesies. To facilitate comparison, Hindu terminology is used in the Bahá'í context, as for example "the Bahá'í *darshana*" (theological or philosophical point of view). The last third of the book reviews the social teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bahá'í community, the Bahá'í laws, observances and holy days, and ends with a quick overview of Bahá'í history, highlighting those episodes that may be of particular interest to Hindu readers. This last third too is interspersed with quotations from and comparisons with Hinduism.

Given that this book is so brief and that "Hinduism," as Momen himself rightly points out, is really a collection of religious traditions containing a great deal of diversity in which it "is hard to find any concepts or doctrines about which all the strands of Hinduism are agreed"(ix), Momen is to be credited for his reasonably successful attempt to represent "Hinduism" (albeit a rather academic version) fairly. The task is assuredly easier with the doctrinally consistent and historically recent Bahá'í Faith. I found some of his comparisons between aspects of the two faiths personally illuminating—especially his section on Hindu and Bahá'í "vision" (the literal translation of *darshana*) of the spiritual world. Although I am not so sure that a non-dualist Vedantin would be as convinced that her or his views really were reflected in the Bahá'í writings as a Hindu theist would, it is interesting to note that within Hinduism itself (notably in the *Bhagavad Gita*), one can find acknowledgement that there are not only different "paths" to God but also different ways of describing and knowing God—or Ultimate Reality. As Momen shows, the Bahá'í teachings underscore this. Because human minds are limited and finite and evolving, there can never be any complete description of God or of the world.

I would like to mention now a few weaknesses that primarily relate to the Hinduism side of the book. First, a glossary would have been helpful for the non-Hindu. Second, the section called "The question of idolatry" betrays in its few paragraphs a superficial understanding about Hindu image worship. It may be considered insulting by Hindus since Momen suggests that educated individuals do not need "idols" to worship God. Also, the Hindus I know do not (contrary to what Momen says) think of the deities they worship as "different aspects" of the one God but *as* the one God itself. Third, Momen should have specifically mentioned that there is a vast storehouse of primary and secondary scripture in Hinduism and cautioned that it is possible to pick and choose whatever view one wishes to validate, especially when translation itself is an act of interpretation. Then again, the dangers of quoting out of context (and indiscriminately across the tradition) must be weighed against the interests of brevity and the aim of merely indicating points of convergence. Fourth, I found myself wondering what evidence there is to show that the *varna-jati* (caste and subcaste) system ever "ensured prosperity and progress for all" (22), as Momen says. Did the lowest (*Shudra*) caste benefit from being accorded a ritually impure status, disqualifying them from, among other things, Vedic study? Fifth, Momen not only uses gender-exclusive language—surprising in a book published in 1990—but also almost totally omits women from his account. In the Hinduism context, this may be related to the facts that Momen's portrayal of Hinduism is "bookish" and that Hindu scriptures, like most other scriptures, accept the male sex as normative and the female sex as adjunctive. So, for example, by apparently accepting the *varnasramadharma* schema as reflecting social reality, Momen omits the Hinduism not only of untouchables and *Shudras* but of women too. Women and *Shudras* (together making a majority of Hindus) were excluded from at least two of the *ashramas* (four stages of life): the student and ascetic stage. I mention these last three items to make the point that it is important to at least acknowledge (especially in very old traditions like the Hindu one) whose version of the tradition one is mostly discussing.

I could find several more small points to argue with and enumerate in this review. However, that would unnecessarily distract the reader from my overall positive appraisal of Momen's book. Seen as a general introduction for Hindus to the Bahá'í Faith, the book accomplishes its task. Further, many academics now shy away from attempting or even encouraging any kind of comparative religion work. This is so for several reasons among which is a justifiable reticence against purposely or inadvertently biasing one religion in favor of another or judging "competing truth claims." But because the Bahá'í Faith accepts all religions as part of an organic, evolving whole, the problem of competing ideas, theologies, and praxis is set in a new light. By first emphasizing the fundamental unity of religion on the levels of source: revelation from the one God, and purpose: the education of humanity, one can then begin to appreciate the diversity as a confirmation of the richness of humanity's response to the divine. It is from this stance that the author has written his book and from this stance that I appreciate his work as a service to both Hindus and Bahá'ís. Let us look forward to more expansive studies examining the interconnectedness of Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith.

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