

## **The Bahá'í Community of Canada A Case Study in the Transplantation of Non-Western Religious Movements to Western Societies\***

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### **Abstract**

This study concerns the transplantation of non-Western faiths into Western settings, taking as a case study the origins and early life of the Bahá'í community in Canada. The article first indicates the historical origins of the Bahá'í Faith as a religious tradition and then gives a short history of the Canadian Bahá'í community. However, since the author's objective is sociological rather than historical, the substance of this study is an examination of various factors that affected the ability of the Bahá'í Faith to be transplanted into Canadian society.

### **Résumé**

La présente porte sur la transplantation de mouvements religieux d'origine non-occidentale en milieu occidental, prenant comme étude de cas les origines et les premières années d'existence de la communauté bahá'íe au Canada. L'article relate d'abord les origines historiques de la foi bahá'íe en tant que tradition religieuse puis résume l'histoire de la communauté bahá'íe canadienne. Mais puisque l'objectif de l'auteur est de nature sociologique plutôt qu'historique, l'étude examine essentiellement les divers facteurs qui ont affecté la capacité de la foi bahá'íe à être transplantée dans la société canadienne.

### **Resumen**

Este estudio se refiere al trasplante de creencias no-occidentales a marcos occidentales, usando como caso de estudio los orígenes y albores de la comunidad bahá'í de Canadá. El artículo primero indica los orígenes históricos de la Fe Bahá'í en su capacidad de tradición religiosa y sigue con un aporte breve sobre la comunidad bahá'í canadiense. Sin embargo, como el propósito del autor es sociológico antes que histórico, la esencia de este estudio es un análisis de los varios factores que afectan la capacidad de la Fe Bahá'í de ser trasplantada a la sociedad canadiense.

### **A Short History of the Canadian Bahá'í Community**

Although Canada's first Bahá'í adherents could be found in Ontario as early as 1898, it was not until the 1902 arrival of May Maxwell in Montreal that Bahá'í teaching work became permanently established. While she attracted a few people in the Montreal area, it was not until after a brief sojourn by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Canada in 1912 that the Bahá'ís formed themselves into a community. With the entry of several young people in 1927, including some of Jewish background, the community began to grow. A scattering of Bahá'ís could also be found in Saint John (New Brunswick) and Vancouver, in addition to a few other isolated parts of the country.

A marked change in the Canadian Bahá'í community occurred after 1937 when Shoghi Effendi gave the Bahá'ís a goal to establish a spiritual assembly in the major cities of every province. This goal was achieved in 1944. The Bahá'í community of Canada elected its own National Spiritual Assembly in 1948, thereby separating itself from the Bahá'í community of the United States. By 1948, the 263 Canadian Bahá'ís were thinly spread in over 40 localities. Today, Canadian Bahá'ís are found in some 1,400 places with a membership of ca. 22,000. Provinces and territories have legally recognized not only Bahá'í marriage but also Bahá'í holy days for the Faith's schoolchildren. Many of its governing bodies are incorporated, and the Bahá'í community of Canada operates a secondary school that grants the international baccalaureate.

The one defining feature that characterized the social and cultural adaptation of the emerging Bahá'í community in Canada between 1898 and 1948 is what I call *religious singleness*: the existence of a community of believers who, by virtue of their few members, express their faith in terms of their individual existence, while maintaining their individual ties to a wider society that does not share their beliefs. The “wider” society encompasses even small groups such as one’s family, as well as larger forms of social organization, such as place of work and social and civil institutions.<sup>1</sup> The challenge for such a new religious movement consists of maintaining a distinctive value system while having soft and permeable boundaries. This feature is particularly relevant today as the international context of new movements becomes more important than their localized expressions of community.

### **Transplant Studies: Methodological Issues**

It will be useful to look first at some of the themes and findings of other studies that have considered the social process of adaptation and development of transplanted religions. Not many scholarly treatments of the sociology of religion deal with or have devoted much space or attention to new, transplanted religious movements (more particularly, non-Christian religions) settling in alien settings.<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest sociological studies of this genre was Lofland’s *Doomsday Cult: A Study of Conversion, Proselytization, and Maintenance of Faith* (1966), a study of the “Moonies.” There have been others since then: Larry D. Shinn’s *The Dark Lord* about the Hare Krishnas, as well as another detailed study of the “Moonies,” by David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe, Jr. However, other treatments seem sparse. Bryan Wilson, for example, devotes only three paragraphs in *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism* (222–23) to the spread of new religious movements from their native culture to others. He speaks not only of the success of Western new religious movements in non-Western societies but also of the limited appeal of non-Western movements in Western society. Stark and Bainbridge discuss (*Future of Religion*) five groups, three of which are non-Western (although they do present some valuable Canadian data on new religious movements). Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (*Churching of America, 1776–1990* 239–44) discuss non-Western religious groups in the context of the nature of four “religious eruptions” in the twentieth century, two of which apply to transplanted religions, namely, the eruption of “religious novelty” in the 1960s and early ‘70s,<sup>3</sup> and the sudden influx of Eastern religions at the same time in conjunction with the efflorescence of the counterculture and youth culture (e.g., Needleman and Baker, *Understanding the New Religions*; Wallis, *Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*; Wilson, *Social Impact of New Religious Movements*). Such scholarly works involve a narrow band of the kinds of transplanted religions selected for analysis. In particular, they explore the new religious movements over a short time frame. The diversity of transplanted religious groups that have found a home in Western society is not something that appears as a prominent theme in such studies.

When we look at the diversity of Canada’s transplanted religions, it seems important to distinguish among several kinds of non-Western religious movements. There are those based on immigrant ethnic populations, such as Sikhs in British Columbia and Buddhists in Alberta (Coward and Kawamura, *Religion and Ethnicity*) and the Japanese in Canada (Mullins, *Religious Minorities in Canada*),<sup>4</sup> and those, like the Bahá'ís, whose national membership is mainly derived from recruits in the host society. Stark and Bainbridge (*Future of Religion*) would add another kind: imported cults that do not even have branches in the countries from which their founders came.

In an effort to explain the establishment (and the initial lack of growth) of transplanted religions, conventional studies are more likely to consider the “why,” rather than the “how.”<sup>5</sup> We learn that the reasons why non-Western religious groups can or cannot establish themselves in such new Western settings as Canada are varied. For Wallis, new religions offer an alternative to the “anonymity, impersonality, achievement-orientation, individualism, and segmentation of modern life,” or are a response to the “pervasive features of advanced capitalist societies” (“The New Religions as Social Indicators” 228). In a similar vein, Anthony and Robbins (“Contemporary Religious Ferment and Moral Ambiguity” 243) see the emergence of contemporary new religious movements as a response to moral ambiguity and as an attempt to rediscover clearly fixed moral meanings for daily living. On a broader scale, but still looking at answers from the same perspective, scholars will query the new religions’ functional relevance in a changing society.<sup>6</sup>

My purpose in giving an overview of the various approaches to the study of new religions in Western society is not to expound on the high and low points of my research. Rather, my goal is to designate what I believe to be a distinctive contribution of this study to the sociology of religion. First, it does so by offering a long-term account of how a non-Western religious community has become established in its host setting. The study involves a time span of fifty years, a much longer time period than is the case for many other studies. This over-the-long-haul approach allows us to move away from an a historical conception of movements that is characteristic of contemporary studies.

Aside from scholarly work on indigenous religious life (e.g., Crysdale and Wheatcroft, *Religion in Canadian Society* 69–99ff.), scholarly observations about religion in Canada usually pertain to dominant or

conventional religious groups, such as Roman Catholics (e.g., Westhues, “Stars and Stripes, the Maple Leaf, and the Papal Coat of Arms”), Protestants, and Jews (Kallen, “Synagogues in Transition”). We also seem to be reasonably well equipped with knowledge about specific movements, such as sects and cults in Alberta (Mann, *Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta*) and in Montreal (Bird and Reimer, “New Religious and Para-Religious Movements in Montreal”), Hutterites (e.g., Bennett, “The Hutterites: A Communal Sect”), Mennonites (Driedger and Peters, “Ethnic Identity among Mennonite and Other Students of German Heritage”), Mormons (White, “Mormonism in America and Canada: Accommodation to the Nation-State”; Card et al., *Mormon Presence in Canada*), and Christian Scientists (Hiller, “Continentalism and the Third Force in Religion”), all of whom Canadian sociologists refer to as the third force (Hiller). Except for studies on Canadian Jews (e.g., Schoenfeld, “Jewish Religion in North America”; Brym and Shaffir, *Jews in Canada*), what is lacking is detailed research on non-Christian or non-Western styles of religious communities. Finally, this study also allows an account of the origins of the Bahá’í community in Canada, for there are simply no studies of Bahá’ís in Canada.<sup>7</sup>

## **Religion in Canada**

During the first half of the twentieth century, religion in Canada played a formidable role in crystallizing the cultural, social, and economic forces of the country. Religious life in Canada, which has *less* religious diversity than the United States, was dominated by four large denominations. It was, in effect, a religious oligopoly (Westhues, “Religious Organization in Canada and the United States” 212–13, 220), which involved a “significantly higher concentration [of religious affiliation] in a few denominations and therefore a greater power of old traditions” (Stark and Bainbridge, *Future of Religion* 461).<sup>8</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Bahá’ís made their first appearance in Canada, 46.6% of the Canadian population were either Methodists, Presbyterians, or Anglicans, while Roman Catholics represented 41.6% (Walsh, “A Canadian Christian Tradition” 156); only slightly over 10% of the population did not belong to these four mainstream religious traditions. Between 1901 and 1951, the changes in the religious affiliation of Canadians were only slight.

The first half of the twentieth century produced some changes among the major denominations in Canada, with a decline in the proportion of Catholics, but this proportion reversed itself during the 1930s. Protestantism gave birth to the social gospel movement—a Christian reform movement that arose in response to the social ills of the Industrial Age (Fallding, “Mainline Protestantism in Canada and the United States” 150). Nevertheless, the proportion of Protestants began to decline, so that by 1951, 40.9% adhered to mainline Protestantism. After 1921, Canada also saw an increase of the population adhering to other religious groups; the “non-religious” increased from 0.1% in 1901, to 0.4% in 1951. Canada thus preserved its religiously homogeneous image during this period.

Sociologists have characterized Canadian society in terms of its “religious conservatism, congregational ecumenism, and cooperation,” which make the religious topography less suitable for sectarianism and third-force religious activity (Hiller, “Continentalism and the Third Force” 205). According to Stark and Bainbridge, the “tendency for homogeneity to limit variety will be especially marked when people live in relatively stable, small communities” (*Future of Religion* 504). In contrast, areas with larger and denser concentrations of population are more able to sustain deviant subcultures because ties to the normative culture are weak and anonymity prevails in such places.

The religious solidity of Canadian life was also predicated on formal and informal relations between the State and its main churches, notably the Catholic and Anglican Churches. The “union churches” (Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists) also played a leading role in setting the religious temperament of Canada. The only way, it seems, that religious minorities can exist in religious monocultures is in small pockets—as a sort of religious singleness. I shall address this religious singleness next in discussing the source of recruits, recruitment strategies, and membership and commitment. I shall also consider the culture and ideology that pertain to the early facets of the Bahá’í community in Canada.

## **Recruitment and Membership**

### ***Sources of Recruitment***

My study, *The Origins of the Bahá’í Community of Canada, 1898–1948*, has attempted to record the contributions of women to the Bahá’í community of Canada, especially, as Janet L. Jacobs indicates (“Gender and Power in New Religious Movements” 352), because there is a propensity of researchers to reinforce the group’s perspective on women by not being concerned with or acknowledging the role of women in various facets of new religious movements. Women were a critical factor in the dynamics of propagation of the new faith between 1898 and 1948. The Bahá’í community consistently attracted a large proportion of women, who constituted 70% of its membership

(it is not unusual to have as much as a 75% female membership in new religious movements).<sup>9</sup> This fact had several implications for the Bahá'í community.

In the earlier periods, the Bahá'í community was a magnet for maternal suffragists and social reformers. They saw the Bahá'í Faith as a confirmation of *their* personal ideals about anticipated social change. Their main allegiance was to their own ideals, rather than to Bahá'í ideals. The recruitment of these women to the Bahá'í community was primarily the result of the personal magnetism and capacities of individual Bahá'ís, such as May Maxwell. While the incipient Bahá'í appeal largely involved people of well-established means, the Bahá'í Faith increasingly began to attract single, urban, lower-middle-class women. This feature, given the social context of the time, meant that Bahá'ís were primarily reaching other single women and that the strategy of holding public meetings in hotels, rather than having living-room firesides,<sup>10</sup> provided the most appropriate, and usually the only, means for propagating the new religion. Without ties of marriage and sometimes trained in a technical occupation that gave them geographical mobility, women also became the primary means by which the Bahá'í Faith spread across Canada.

What accounts for the attraction of women to new religious movements in general, and the Bahá'í Faith in particular? McGuire sees some new religions movements as a “vehicle for the assertion of alternative religious roles for women” (*Religion: The Social Context* 126–29). Significantly, she suggests that in their formative years, religious movements “of non-privileged classes have typically allotted equality to women” (McGuire, *Religion* 126). Their relatively low position in the traditional religions and the opportunity to become leaders in new movements are the main reasons (Stark and Bainbridge, *Future of Religion* 413–14) that women join these movements. Unlike the findings on the evolution of new religious movements, which seem to signal a return to “traditional, hierarchical, or bureaucratic forms of authority,” (McGuire, *Religion* 128), the Bahá'í community has explicitly affirmed in its own sacred literature its teachings on the equality of women and men as evidenced in the active participation of women as Bahá'í teachers and administrators. There were, at times, practices in the Bahá'í community that seem to undermine that participation (such as the traditional assignment of women and men to particular committees<sup>11</sup>), but these practices never overshadowed the overall place and recognition of women as speakers, Bahá'í teachers, pioneers, and the like. The participation of many single women in Bahá'í communities highlights another facet of religious singleness: the general absence of children.

Sociologists have recorded the difficult transition from first to later generations in a social movement's membership (Ellwood, “Introduction” 15), underscoring the need to socialize children. The early (pre-1927)<sup>12</sup> Canadian Bahá'í community was clearly a community of adults. The “ideal” household of parents and children—who were all Bahá'ís—existed only in a few circumstances. The pattern of childlessness persisted after 1927, although children became more in evidence in the mid-1930s. I estimate that only 25-40% of the children remained Bahá'ís after reaching the age of fifteen. This number was not sufficient to supply the next generation of adherents, especially when one considered that the range of other Bahá'ís for these children later to marry was either non-existent or negligible.<sup>13</sup>

The Bahá'í community was thus a virtually childless one, both in fact (with a few exceptions) and in orientation. Events were organized around adults, and married couples with children tended to isolate the children from the Bahá'í community. The presence of a disproportionate number of single women heightened the sense of childlessness. As it was also not uncommon to find within couples only one Bahá'í partner, we have a sense of religious “singleness.” It was a subculture of public meetings and living-room firesides all oriented towards adults.

The geographical distribution of Canadian Bahá'ís between 1898 and 1948 also contributed to their religious singleness. Especially after 1937, when Shoghi Effendi urged the small band of Canadian Bahá'ís to move to major cities of the provinces which, as yet, had no Bahá'ís, many individual believers found themselves alone and remote from their originating home community. True, she or he had already become acquainted with religious singleness even in the home, urban community—there were too few Bahá'ís to permit otherwise. However, moving into a different part of the country, more usually alone than with someone else, underscored the feeling of religious singleness.

Even those who did not find themselves setting off alone to distant places in Canada reinforced their religious singleness by pursuing a lifestyle that seemed to deviate from the norm. There was already a penchant of some, either before they joined the Bahá'í community or after enrolling, to be activists in the field of technology,<sup>14</sup> or in social reform.<sup>15</sup> A number of other Bahá'ís were actively in the forefront of racial amity work, such as those in Montreal and Halifax, while others made a deliberate decision to protect the assets of Japanese Canadians during war-time internment. Other adherents were forerunners of “health fads” and the fight against fluoridation and were thus known to take up causes that were controversial or far ahead of their time, or that at least provoked thought in the general population. Consider also, for example, the decision to join a religion with an esoteric-sounding name or to pull up stakes and move to a remote part of the country to advance “the Cause.” Bahá'í

membership thus increased or reinforced, not lessened, certain unpopular or deviant lifestyles; these lifestyles provided a modicum sense of community something that later Bahá'ís would remember or retell with obvious affection.

While initially the Bahá'í community attracted members of the upper class, the religion successively moved to attract people of the managerial class and, eventually, those with lower-middle-class occupations. While in 1921 some 46% of the Bahá'ís were either upper or managerial class, in 1947 the proportion dropped to 18%. In the case of the lower-middle-class and lower-class origins, in 1921, 48% of Bahá'ís came from this background, increasing to 75% in 1947 (van den Hoonard, *Origins of the Bahá'í Community* 242–45). It is important to remember that throughout this shift in class membership the dominant Protestant flavor of Bahá'í communities still prevailed. There were few cultural differences in the changing class composition of Bahá'í membership, for what dominated the Bahá'í community was the Protestant temperament and tone of the orientation of the community: individualistic, organizationally focused, and with an emphasis on teaching the so-called twelve principles of the Bahá'í Faith<sup>16</sup> (rather than, let us say, the station of Bahá'u'lláh as the Revelator).

The Protestant composition of Bahá'í membership was deeply intertwined with other factors of religious outlook and class. Under these circumstances, the Bahá'í community had a “Protestant accent” that not only reinforced religious singleness but also made it more difficult for members of other ethnic groups to join. In 1921, 89% of the Bahá'ís came from a Protestant background, while in 1947, it was 75%—only a slight reduction. While in 1921, only 4% of the Bahá'ís came from a Catholic background, they had increased to 12% in 1947 (van den Hoonard, *Origins* 232).

Before 1948, Catholic or francophone adherents must have found the lack of ritual and congregational prayer, the large number of single people and couples without children, and the absence of family and social ties an odd landscape. Such a social panorama lacked the familiar landmarks that could guide the behavior and thought of Bahá'ís who did not come from a liberal Protestant background.<sup>17</sup> The Bahá'í community also seemed to have, in particular, attracted the “creative” class, consisting of artists and the like—another factor that fostered a religious singleness that might not have occurred if recruitment involved a wider spectrum of people.

### **Recruitment Strategies**

A new religion, in its early phase, tends to draw recruits from very narrow strata or from small, homogeneous categories of citizens. This is largely because “recruitment takes place primarily through development of new social bonds linking members with prospective recruits or through activation of existing interpersonal bonds ...” (Stark and Bainbridge, *Future of Religion* 398). With its emphasis on individuality and personal responsibility, and its proclivity towards organized modern life, Protestantism provided the organizational basis for Bahá'í expansion. Notably, the use of fireside meetings in the living-room and public meetings in hotels allowed the Bahá'í community to attract both those who favored home life and those who preferred a neutral setting to teach and hear about the new religion. As a religion of the living-room and hotels, the Bahá'í community must have also offered a new and challenging experience for members of various ethnic backgrounds. For the early Bahá'ís (pre-1927), the new religion did not, as yet, wrap itself completely around the social self. The Bahá'ís had limited social knowledge of each other: along with Bahá'í membership they maintained extensive ties to other circles, often keeping these circles deliberately separate from the Bahá'í community. Moreover, the Bahá'í community did not as yet pervade all aspects of private and social life.

It was only when the Bahá'í community began attracting Jewish members in Montreal in 1921 that the manner of propagation underwent change. Bahá'ís of Jewish heritage were among the first to respond with clarity and understanding to Shoghi Effendi's vision of the Bahá'í Faith as one that encompasses a world order. The Jewish contribution transformed a community that was inner directed to one that became open to the world. The vigor and erudition of those of Jewish descent resulted in new orientation of the Bahá'í teaching work and in literary contributions to the Bahá'í community.<sup>18</sup>

There were other important shifts in Bahá'í propagation as the work to spread the new religion shifted in the 1930s from the use of specialized individuals to do this work, to the use of local communities and of believers in general. Special mention should be made of the contribution of Bahá'ís who, as businesspeople, were in a position to undertake extensive travels and lecture tours. Moreover, while new believers had previously been strongly oriented towards the personality of their specialized teachers, the new conditions (i.e., when more Bahá'ís were involved with the teaching work) produced believers who were encouraged to become oriented towards the Bahá'í writings, rather than towards their teachers.

### ***Membership and Commitment***

One of the most intriguing questions associated with transplanting non-Western new religious movements to Western settings revolves around the genuineness of new Western converts. “Can those,” asks Gelberg, “in the new location who embrace the transplanted tradition truly embrace it?” (“Call of the Lotus-Eyes Lord” 150). One of the empirical indicators is commitment—a commitment expressed in duration of membership in the new movement.

Research on new religious movements shows that the average participant associates intensely for a while and then drops out (Bird and Reimer, “Participation Rates in New Religious and Para-Religious Movements”; Wallis, *Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life* 42). Some, like Mickler, claim that the main problem of a new religious movement is not the high turnover rate, but rather, members who opt out of active participation, while remaining nominal members (Mickler, “When the Prophet is Yet Living” 191).

The Bahá’í community offers a different picture from other movements with a high turnover rate (*Judah, Hare Krishna and the Counterculture* 81, quoted by Wallis, *Elementary Forms* 42). Between 1898 and 1948, the Bahá’í Faith, as a missionizing religion, managed to attract over 550 people—all Canadians, three-quarters of whom remained Bahá’ís for the rest of their lives. Moreover, the proportion of those who stayed Bahá’ís for the rest of their lives increased between 1911 and 1948. In 1911, only 31% of Bahá’ís would always remain committed members for the rest of their lives, while in 1948, the figure had risen to 74% (van den Hoonaard, *Origins* 285). The stress placed on developing local governing councils and a community structure that involved more aspects of the individual may partly account for such membership commitment. Moreover, the Bahá’í community in Canada until 1948 did not have a high attrition rate among those who had been in the movement for a short period of time. Margit Warburg of the University of Copenhagen reports similar findings for the Danish Bahá’í community (personal communication, 2 June 1993).

But how long did “non-lifers” remain in the Bahá’í community? Although the proportion of “non-lifers” decreased to just over a quarter of all Bahá’ís, so did the average length of their membership. In 1921, a “non-lifer” would typically remain in the Bahá’í Faith for 14.2 years; while by 1948, the average number of years had decreased by almost half to 7.7 years. There is no ready explanation for this observation. Perhaps stricter membership criteria and more emphasis on maintaining a “Bahá’í life” (implying a more rigorous individual and collective code of conduct) made it less likely for less committed members to stay on as long as was previously the case. There is some evidence that the intensification of the religious element in new movements (such as is the case with Transcendental Meditation) can cause a decline in the number of new members (Stark and Bainbridge, *Future of Religion* 302).

The lifelong membership commitments meant that the Bahá’í community did not have to devise ways to deal with problems arising out of a high membership turnover. Some sociologists (e.g., McCarthy and Zald, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements”) recognize the fact that it is very important for movements to secure resources to continue their work. The Bahá’í approach to such matters, as we have demonstrated, is rather different, because the Bahá’í community retained its committed members, and funds could be received only from Bahá’ís on a voluntary basis.

Given the religious singleness of the early Bahá’ís in Canada, the length of Bahá’í membership, as an expression of commitment, was remarkable. Such commitment was particularly unusual because the Bahá’í subculture had boundaries that were soft and not clearly defined.

## **Culture and Ideology**

### ***Cultural Adaptation***

While Theosophy, Methodism, and Rosicrucianism constituted the source religious outlook of many of the Bahá’ís before the 1920s, it is clear that liberal Protestantism was the principal anvil upon which the Bahá’í community was initially forged. With the rise of the social gospel movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century, a number of early Bahá’í members worked with different personal agendas within the Bahá’í movement.

For early Bahá’ís, it was a matter of highlighting those Baha’i teachings that would speak to the larger cultural frame. Since the attraction to a new faith is “greater among the unchurched and among members of the most secularized and ‘liberal’ denominations” (Stark and Bainbridge, *Future of Religion* 399), the particular emphasis of Bahá’í teachings (and methods) had to speak to the secular heart and mind. As a consequence, the early Bahá’ís mixed the attraction of liberal Biblical interpretations, the principle of the equality of men and women, the emphasis on universal peace, and the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth with their own crusading spirit, which may have been derived from the prevailing conditions of society at large.

A particularly noteworthy facet of what the early Bahá’ís emphasized relates to the importance Western culture attaches to the idea of the “individual.” They selected the following Bahá’í teachings as a set of principles that emphasized individuality: the need for individuals to seek truth *independently* of others, to assume *individual* responsibility for their own spiritual development, and to spread the Bahá’í teachings on a personal basis.<sup>19</sup> Indeed,

Wyman (“Becoming a Bahá’í” 103) offers a contemporary illustration of the meaning of conversion to the Bahá’í Faith. She found that conversion is about individual and personal growth—not dissimilar to the larger American discourse about religious conversion.<sup>20</sup>

Wyman’s cultural analysis of the Bahá’í Faith shows how religious discourse can be appropriated for other purposes. In the American context, Bahá’í discourse is used as a tool for defining the self and is about individualized psychology, not about religious “truth” (Wyman, “Becoming a Bahá’í” 103). Other researchers have noted similar processes of cultural framing of the Bahá’í message (e.g., Smith, *Babi and Baha’i Religions* 145). In a more general context (van den Hoonaard, “World Views and the Shape of Communities”), the orientation of Bahá’ís towards the larger society can take one of several forms, involving an “embryonic,” “integrative,” “oasis,” or a “composite” view. Bahá’ís see the world, respectively, as a place where the Baha’i community is an embryo of the future society, where the Bahá’í community and the world are converging, where the Bahá’í community is a refuge from a declining civilization, or where the needs of the Bahá’í community and those of the wider society are intertwined.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Bahá’í Subculture***

The structure of community and organization bears directly upon a new religious group’s ability to draw and retain new members. Some scholars, like Beckford (“Two Contrasting Types of Sectarian Organization” 83), have found that if a movement fosters an “intensive form of community,” rather than mass movement strategies, it is more likely to attract potential recruits, especially when a new religion is seen as a haven or refuge. The dilemma of Bahá’í communities consisted of the difficulty of developing a Bahá’í subculture with permeable and relatively “soft” boundaries in the wider society. Slow growth may have been a concomitant consequence of this difficulty.

Archer, in her study of a contemporary southern United States Bahá’í community (“Global Community” 239), offers the thoughtful observation that the Bahá’í community’s inability to attract many members reflects “the group’s inability to create rewards that compete with the secular world’s.” According to Archer, the Bahá’í dilemma is to make its “intellectual and sacred rewards ... attractive to people who want instrumental rewards” (239). Such “competitive awareness” exposes a Bahá’í to the “attractions” of both worlds, in contrast to Christian sects that maintain their identity in relative isolation from the larger society. Their (i.e., Christian sects’) moral rejection of society disallows competitive awareness but permits the rapid emergence of a distinctive subculture. How did the Bahá’í community in the period surveyed allow competitive awareness, and what was its impact on Bahá’í identity and culture?

Ralph Turner’s work on norm emergence or cultural construction in the early age of a social movement is particularly relevant here (Turner and Killian, *Collective Behavior* 35–51). The Bahá’í community subculture appeared to be both fragile and variable. At last, during the 1930s and 1940s, when the Bahá’í community took a more definite form and a blueprint of Bahá’í life began to emerge, we found changes in the fragile subculture. Oriented initially towards individualism, this subculture did not emphasize knowledge of fellow Bahá’ís outside their role as participating believers—Bahá’ís knew little about each other. As well, there were few, if any, study classes held about Bahá’í community, administration, and organization that would provide them with the necessary knowledge to develop and maintain a subculture.

While the Bahá’í sacred writings prescribed a religious moral code, this prescription depended mainly on the ability of Bahá’ís to form a community with an administrative framework to set the boundaries of the community. The earliest adherents were sometimes unaware of what Bahá’í scriptures said about the need to maintain such a code—too few scriptures had been translated into English—and the believers generally followed the societal standards. Without a definite Bahá’í community to which they could attach themselves, the earliest Bahá’ís saw themselves as “morally normative” (Kent, “New Religious Movements” 95). It was much later, in the 1930s, after Shoghi Effendi had translated additional Bahá’í writings, that a distinct moral code came into being. As a rule, then, as the Bahá’í community grew, the application of moral codes of behavior became stricter. Before 1927 there were differences between the old and new Bahá’ís. Such differences were particularly apparent in the mid-1920s when Bahá’ís were being transformed into an organized community, rather than being a mere collection of individuals who were likely to cast the Bahá’í teachings in Christianized terms. Newer Bahá’ís tended to be more worldly and were administratively zealous. Some Christianized elements did, however, persist even among this latter group, who continued to hold weekly Sunday meetings, rather than attaching more importance to the Nineteen-Day Feast, a distinct Bahá’í social invention and institution. When members began to realize that the Bahá’í Faith also included an administrative system, differences between old and new believers became even more heightened.

In the Bahá’í case, there were several factors that counteracted the potential for the abovementioned difficulties. First, the relatively small size of communities made it virtually impossible not to elect new members, whether youthful or not. However small the Bahá’í community, there was still an elected, local governing council

(in the case of nine or more adherents), or a locally elected group (in the case of eight or fewer members), which during the first half of the century precluded limiting membership on these bodies to old timers: there were simply not enough adherents in any given Bahá'í community who could have *not* been elected. Second, the permanently vested authority of their founder, Bahá'u'lláh, as a Prophet, precluded any consideration of a Bahá'í claiming to possess a new revelation. Even the head of the new faith, Shoghi Effendi, did not and could not make such a claim. Third, numerous references in the Bahá'í sacred writings clearly specify that one cannot dissociate the Bahá'í organizational structure from the Bahá'í Faith itself (see, for example, Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 143–57).

Nevertheless, the question of open boundaries, the slow development of a Bahá'í culture, and the attendant slow membership growth might well have created a “crisis of confidence,” which awaits most new religious movements as members of the founding generation reach the end of their lives. Without major successes in its early days, there was the danger that the early Bahá'ís might “lose hope and turn the movement inward—adopt a new rhetoric that deemphasizes growth and conversion” (Stark, cited by Mickler, “When the Prophet is Yet Living” 188). The satisfaction of membership might have constituted a major problem in no-growth groups, which seemed largely to have been sustained “by participation in a small exclusivist closed circle, turned away from the world, and engaged in unpublicized meetings designated for those attached to that closed circle” (O'Toole, “Sectarianism in Politics” 170).<sup>22</sup> Such a crisis seemed inevitable as Bahá'ís were more likely to remain longer in their religion than is the case for other new religious movements.

However, a number of countervailing forces prevailed in the fledgling Bahá'í community. First, Shoghi Effendi gave the Bahá'ís in Canada a teaching plan that included the establishment of at least one governing council (spiritual assembly) in each of the provinces in Canada. It was a systematic approach that pulled Bahá'ís beyond the familiar confines of their own local community, whether secular or religious. Second, Shoghi Effendi's own prolific store of letters, circa 22,500 of them (Universal House of Justice, *The Seven-Year Plan: 1979–1986 Statistical Report* 28), repeatedly focused the vision of the Bahá'ís on the needs of the wider society. Third, as the Bahá'í message unequivocally focused on the redemption of *society*, rather than on individual salvation, the Bahá'í outlook was already, from its earliest conception, directed towards the larger society (see, for example, Heller and Mahmoudi, “Altruism and Extensivity in the Bahá'í Religion”). Fourth, the idea of service to society is a strong current in the Bahá'í message, both implicit and explicit (see, for example, Buck, “Baha'u'llah as ‘World Reformer’”). The spirit of service is seen as the source of both personal and collective development.

### ***Permeable Boundaries and Ideology***

In discussing the “deep-rooted sources of popular sentiment” concerning new religious groups in another country [Britain], Beckford found that wider cultural values and social arrangements decide where the boundary should be set between the new group and the society (“Beyond the Pale” 286). He also found that such decisions are about the cultural view that the individual is basically rational and free. In other words, as long as new religious groups do not involve “brainwashing,” “self-harm,” “external control,” “infantilization,” “drift,” “fanaticism,” “instability,” or “family indifference,” society's tolerance of those groups is high (Beckford, “Beyond the Pale” 288–98).

As Archer noted, contemporary Bahá'ís are committed to an approach that “involves internalized values and development of mechanisms that will maintain those values without the support of a closed social environment” (“Global Community” 221). There were specific organizational mechanisms, however, that supported a lifestyle appropriate to a group ideology, which Bahá'ís could follow without leaving the larger cultural environment (e.g., Archer, “Organizational Dynamics of Commitment in Ideological Groups”). Other present-day observers have, in fact, commented on the “invisibility” of the Bahá'í community in that regard (Ruff, “Bahá'í—The Invisible Community”). Their observations underscore a persistent theme in the maintenance of the Bahá'í subculture in Western society, namely, the existence of soft and permeable boundaries, while following a distinctive value system.

How did the Bahá'í subculture reflect soft boundaries and what shape did the Bahá'í value system take? Bahá'ís saw the wider society neither as a place to turn away from nor as a place to be spiritually feared. Their community did not morally reject society, but, rather, promoted the active engagement of its followers in that society, more so than, for example, the Vedantists who demonstrated a “quietist, non-interventionist and generally accommodative” attitude towards the wider society (Whitworth and Shiels, “From across the Black Water” 167).

The Bahá'í community in the Western world also discouraged breaks with society (as in the example of the discouraging of plans to create, near Montreal, a separate Bahá'í village and economy [van den Hoonaard, *Origins* 171–73]). Many Bahá'ís, until the mid-1930s, continued church membership, and individual Bahá'ís were inspired to implement Bahá'í teachings outside the Bahá'í community, rather than forging these teachings exclusively within the community. This ideological position differs considerably from what O'Toole found in his 1975 study of a non-Western political sect, which expected its members to place themselves completely at the disposal of the group. As a



consequence, the group attempted to isolate the member from familial and other personal ties outside the political cult. The use of a distinctive, esoteric, and “sacred” language reinforced their exalted, exclusive position as a moral elite (O’Toole, “Sectarianism in Politics” 166–68).

Moreover, lacking a clergy, there were no people assigned to mark boundaries in the Bahá’í community. Lacking a system of “elders,” membership on local governing councils (spiritual assemblies) was fluid—voting was democratic and secret, and no special privileges or powers derived from such membership on an assembly. Moreover, spiritual assembly agendas were generally outward looking, devoted to internal administration, Bahá’í community, and concerns with the wider society. Nevertheless, the presence of administratively zealous Bahá’ís reinforced the process of marking social boundaries.

Finally, as members of a young, missionizing religion, there was no inclination among the Bahá’ís to gather in one place; rather, the inclination was to spread out over many places in Canada, with however few people. Even though contemporary Bahá’í communities have become more fully developed, Bahá’ís “do not separate themselves geographically nor do they reject participation within selective patterns of the surrounding culture” (Archer, “Global Community” 216). Still, within these soft boundaries the Bahá’í community began to develop a distinctive system of values. As already noted, the Bahá’ís began increasingly to emphasize the strict moral code that was increasingly being perceived as the core of the Bahá’í sacred writings and “Bahá’í life” that would mark them as different people in their daily lives.

The culture of the Bahá’í community increasingly began using other cultural markers derived from the greater availability of Bahá’í sacred writings. As noted by Archer, Bahá’ís depended on language and a distinct Bahá’í calendar (“Global Community” 223). Donating to the Bahá’í Fund was another way of marking a boundary and creating a Bahá’í identity, as only Bahá’ís were (and still are) allowed to contribute to the Bahá’í Fund (Warburg, “Economic Rituals” 29).<sup>23</sup> Finally, the Nineteen-Day Feast represented another boundary between the Bahá’í community and the wider society because only Bahá’ís were (and still are) permitted to attend these monthly Bahá’í gatherings.

The slow and gradual emergence of a distinctive Bahá’í subculture was the consequence of not having a closed social environment. Thus, we may infer that slow growth was the price of permeable boundaries between the Bahá’í community and the wider society.

### ***Societal Reaction***

To what extent was mainstream society prepared to reject or accept the Bahá’í movement? Any missionizing community is confronted by the problems of anonymity and of social legitimacy. New religious movements in North America are more likely to pursue ways to make them less invisible, while movements in Europe see the attainment of social legitimacy as their goal. As Mickler shows (“When the Prophet is Yet Living” 192–93), new religious movements must attain public visibility; to survive, they must escape anonymity.

The Bahá’ís in Canada did not, during 1898–1948, exist in a state of high tension with the wider society.<sup>24</sup> Still, variables such as size of the movement and the influence of such events as war, and political and social conditions, can shape reactions to a movement beyond its control. For example, the years of World War II created a hostile environment in Canada for new ideas and unfamiliar messages and people. The existence of such a hostile environment coincided with Bahá’í plans to expand their religion to major centers across Canada. For Bahá’ís, it meant that the opportunities for expansion were constrained, and it was often difficult to keep Bahá’í communities viable.

Nevertheless, there seemed to have been other aspects of the war years that played a critical part in the development of the Canadian Bahá’í community. World War II forced the Canadian Bahá’í community, through Canadian currency laws, to assume control over its own development and education. The issue of noncombatant status also rose to the fore during this period, creating a deeper understanding of where Bahá’ís stood with reference to war and politics.

In retrospect, the Bahá’í community of Canada before 1948 seems to have had no direct impact on Canada’s religious, social, or political structures. Between 1898 and 1948, some 555 Bahá’ís lived in 84 locales across Canada. In 59 of these (70%), there were no immediate and visible consequences of the Bahá’í teaching activity. In another 15 locales (18%), teaching efforts resulted in the establishment of a Bahá’í community, however weak, and in ten others (12%) Bahá’ís formed enduring and relatively strong communities. Our study replicates the findings of other transplanted religious movements in the Bahá’í community’s reliance on women to spread the Bahá’í Faith, in its mainly childless orientation, and in its urban character. In contrast, a lowering class membership and the Bahá’í community’s reinforcement of an unpopular lifestyle does not echo the findings about other new religions.

What is new, however, is the degree to which the early Bahá'í subculture and propagation accentuate the Protestant mainspring of its early adherents. Along with its ethos as a generally childless community and its spread-out nature, the primarily Protestant accent of the Bahá'í community reinforced religious singleness. Lacking a clergy and formal buildings of worship, this religion of the living-room and hotel meeting room embodied a community with "soft" boundaries. Such permeable boundaries did not prevent its developing a system of distinctive values consisting of a Bahá'í administrative structure and a stricter moral code. It is this openness that allowed members to maintain lifelong commitments to the new religion.

No findings about the social and cultural adaptation of new religious movements in host societies are complete without recognizing the international dimensions that provide the larger context of such movements. The theme of religious singleness should not prevent us from recognizing the important role that the international scope of new religious movements play in their adaptation to Western (and non-Western) settings.

### **The International Context of Contemporary Non-Western Religions**

A study of the Canadian Bahá'í community reinforces the vital importance of considering minority religions as an expression of their international scope. Such an approach implies an extensive reconsideration of the study of unconventional religions or cults,<sup>25</sup> which can occur by importation from another society. As some scholars have already indicated, a religious group can be a "cult in one society while being a conventional faith in another—Hinduism is a cult in the United States and Christianity is a cult in India" (Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990* 295). While focusing only on the character of an unconventional religion in a local setting, we may fail to see that what counts are its international ramifications: we would be mistaken to believe that the relevance of the presence of a local "chapter" of such a religion in, let us say, Flin Flon, Manitoba, is determined by its small size, rather than its importance as an outpost of a vast, expanding international religious organization.

Most important, however, the contemporary study of new religious movements requires us to extend our boundaries to include non-Christian movements and to do so in an international context. Robbins and Robertson, in discussing the ideological context of the "scientific study of religion," suggest that such an approach was articulated in an era of relative religious non-controversiality, whereby non-Christian religions were "assumed to be connected with a marginal bohemian intelligentsia" ("Studying Religion Today" 320). In their view, such an approach continues to pervade the scientific study of religion. A further hindrance, according to Melton, is the fact that studies of new religious movements inadvertently created the impression that the "new religions were nothing more than a more or less interesting product of the social upheavals of the 1960s" ("When Prophets Die" 5). The slow growth of new religions, moreover, reinforced that impression.

The current spread of new religious movements into small communities across the globe, as frontiers of internationally coordinated plans and programs, should alert us to the importance of studying the process by which new religious movements become grafted to their host societies. The need to look at them from an international perspective makes it imperative to "delocalize" our understanding of new religious movements. It is the advent of instant travel and international communication, not the perception that the viability of movements should be measured by their local strength, that provides us with the bona fide context for the study of these new religious movements.

### **Notes**

1. The Bahá'í writings prohibit Bahá'ís from taking part in partisan politics but encourage them individually to exercise their full civic lights and duties, such as voting.

2. *Eastern Spirituality in America* (Ellwood, 235–36) gives a list of a dozen general works on Eastern religions in North America, of which fewer than six are case studies of specific religions.

3. Bellah speaks of civil religion and new religions movements as survivors of the crisis of meaning that characterized the sixties (*Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*, ch. 9). To get an overview of a number of these new faiths, the reader will find some satisfaction in E. Allen Richardson's work *East Comes West* with historical synopses of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Muslims.

4. Raymond Brady Williams's *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan* is a good example of similar research on immigrant religions in the United States.

5. See, for example, Glock and Stark, "On the Origin and Evolution of Religious Groups," and Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver."

6. Namely, either as a consequence of rationalization or secularization (e.g., Beckford, "Beyond the Pale" 288–98; Coser et al., *Introduction to Sociology* 458; Johnson, "Sociological Theory and Religious Truth"; Robbins

and Anthony, "New Religious Movements and the Social System"; Wallis, *Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life* 41; Bryan Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* 99, 104–8).

7. The general dissatisfaction with some of the abovementioned approaches does not diminish when we turn our gaze to scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith in North America, which has been coming to the fore only since the mid-1980s. Two of the more thorough accounts of Bahá'í history in North America (Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America*, vols. 1 and 2) omitted, due to lack of materials on the subject when they were written, substantive references to early Canadian Bahá'í history. In recent years, however, a number of studies on Bahá'í communities elsewhere in the world have added to the growing field of Bahá'í Studies. The Bahá'í movement has been examined in India (Garlington, "The Bahá'í Faith in Malwa: A Study of a Contemporary Religious Movement"; Garrigues, "The Bahá'í Faith in Malwa: Identity and Change among the Urban Bahá'ís of Central India"), the United States

(Berger, "From Sect to Church"; Bramson-Lerche, "The Bahá'í Faith and Its Evolution in the United States and Canada from 1922–1936"; Smith, "The American Bahá'í Community, 1894-1917"; Archer, "Global Community"), New Zealand (Ross, "Some Aspects of the Bahá'í Faith in New Zealand"), and Denmark (Warburg, "Denmark"; "Economic Rituals"). For that matter, it is encouraging now to see two major doctoral studies underway by Lynn Echevarria Howe ("Working through the Vision") at University of Essex and Paula Drewek ("Cross-Cultural Testing of Fowler's Method of Faith Development") at the University of Ottawa. The former uses detailed life-narrative analysis of twenty Canadian Bahá'ís, while the latter explores faith development in Canada and India.

As for the Canadian Bahá'í community, memoirs have either not yet been written by Canadian Bahá'ís, or are just now being put on paper. There are only several unpublished regional and national histories, relying often on secondary sources (e.g., Paula Williams, "Candles of Guidance"; O'Neil, "A Short History of the Bahá'í Faith in Canada, 1898-1975"; Pemberton..Pigott, "The Formation of the First Bahá'í Local Spiritual Assembly in Edmonton, April, 1943"). Gerald Filson, ("A Case Study of the Role of Media in an Educational Campaign in the Canadian Bahá'í Community") wrote a master's thesis on the role of media in a specific information campaign in the Canadian Bahá'í community. There are infrequent references to Canadian Bahá'í history in Canadian Bahá'í journals. One finds very few articles delving into the past, except for a one-page article, notable for its lack of detail

(Anon., "1893: The First Canadian Bahá'í"), and one on Prince Edward Island (Rolfe, "They Built Better Than They Knew"). A brief article on early British Columbia Bahá'í history (McGee and McGee, "The Bahá'í Faith and its Development in British Columbia") also exists. This dearth is reinforced by the scattered and unorganized nature of the National Bahá'í Archives in Canada.

8. Even in the 1970s, four religious bodies encompassed almost nine out of ten Canadian religious adherents (Westhues, "Religious Organization in Canada and the United States" 213).

9. Successful movements, however, appear not to over-recruit females (Stark and Bainbridge, *Future of Religion* 416). The under-recruitment of males, Stark and Bainbridge found (416), leads to a situation where much conversion will be necessary just for replacement let alone growth. As well, as long as women have less status than men, the movement will also "suffer lower status, and fail to penetrate into the social mainstream" (417). Stark and Bainbridge's infelicitous choice of words when they speak of women who "enjoy less status than men" (417; emphasis added) partially underscores the difficulty of removing unconscious biases and figures of speech, despite good intentions.

10. The term "fireside" was coined in the early 1930s to refer to informal discussions, usually held in one's home, with the purpose of acquainting inquirers with the Bahá'í Faith.

11. For example, local committees dealing with children's classes had a higher proportion of women than did finance committees.

12. "Early" in this chapter refers to the pre-1927 period in the Canadian Bahá'í community when Bahá'í membership criteria were not yet well defined.

13. The loss of Bahá'í documents and vital papers through this process of attention is of primary consequence for researchers.

14. Such as Paul Dealy, whose turn-of-the-century invention disposed of ashes from train steam engines.

15. I cite the examples of Honoré Jaxon (the former secretary of Louis Riel) and Dr. Rose Henderson (a prominent educator and social worker in the first third of the twentieth century). May Maxwell should also be cited, although, unlike these other two, she remained a Bahá'í for the full length of her life and was active on the front of removing racism and the promotion of social measures in the fields of education, poverty, and health.

16. 'Abdu'l-Bahá lists eleven principles which include: the search after truth; the unity of humanity; that religion should be the cause of love and affection; the unity of religion and science; the abolition of prejudices; equalization of means of existence; equality of all before the Law; universal peace; noninterference of religion and politics; the equality of the sexes; and the power of the Holy Spirit ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 127–72).

17. Wyman offers us the view, based on her anthropological study of an American Bahá'í community, that contemporary Bahá'ís regard their religion in the same manner as the dominant mainstream culture: religion is the property of individuals; it does not exist outside them (Wyman, "Becoming a Bahá'í" 167). Some religionists would disagree with Wyman's assessment (see, for example, Quinn, "The Subject Replies").

18. Deborah K. van den Hoonaard is currently collecting materials for a study on the Jewish experience in the Bahá'í community.

19. Such an emphasis on individualism, however, differs in the Bahá'í religion from Wallis's conception of "epistemological individualism," which "leaves the determination of what constitutes acceptable doctrine in the hands of the member" (Wallis, "The Cult and its Transformation" 41). Moreover, the idea of the *Covenant* for Bahá'ís is a pervasive one that leaves the determination of doctrinal matters vested in the hands of 'Abdu'l-Bahá or his designated successor, Shoghi Effendi. The idea of members' determining doctrine is quite foreign to Bahá'ís.

20. Similarly, in a study of Swedish new religious movements (such as ISKCON), Nordquist ("New Religious Movements in Sweden" 178) found that the "inner state of being" of an adherent's lifestyle, not abstract reasoning or material success, was the critical touchstone.

21. It is interesting to note that Wyman's study ("Becoming a Bahá'í") seems to ignore the various worldviews of the Bahá'ís.

22. O'Toole's comments are insightful: "Members would gain satisfaction from disguising failure: small, in-house meetings which resulted in a handful of attendees (mostly members); emphasis on the 'energy and diligence' of those spreading the word (rather than the results); a stress on the 'potential' effect of a particular action. Even activities were destined to fail: the targeting of anonymous audiences in parking lots with traditionalistic, uneconomical, and unpromising leaflets, and the calculated avoidance of strategic targets. Political sects seem primarily concerned with keeping the *status quo*, despite their claims to strive for growth" ("Sectarianism in Politics" 170).

23. The fact that only Bahá'ís were permitted to contribute to the Bahá'í Fund is valid for the period later than the early 1920s.

24. For a discussion on this aspect of wider societal relationships, see Stark and Bainbridge (*Future of Religion*) and also Benton Johnson ("Sociological Theory and Religious Truth").

25. Finke and Stark (*Churching of America, 1776–1990* 295) use the term "cult" in a technical rather than pejorative sense. While a sect represents conventional faith, a cult is an "unconventional religion." See also Stark and Bainbridge (*Future of Religion* 489).

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