

The Bahá'í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity

by Michael McMullen. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2000, xvi + 246 pages, including appendices, bibliography, and index.

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This work joins the relatively few published full-length sociological treatments of the Bahá'í Faith, most notably Peter Smith's *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* (1987), Will van den Hoonaard's *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community in Canada* (1996), and David Piff's *Bahá'í Lore* (2000). Michael McMullen is an assistant professor at the University of Houston, Clear Lake. The present work is essentially his doctoral dissertation completed in 1995 at Emory University in Atlanta. McMullen surveyed Atlanta Bahá'ís about various aspects of their life and religious practice, interviewed many individuals, and incorporated his professional observations of community activities.

McMullen deals frankly with the Bahá'í Faith as it is lived. The main argument of his work is that Bahá'ís are "situated universalists." They partake of a collective consciousness, express a global message and an international identity, and link local organization to a uniform international structure guided by an international council. Bahá'ís are a group for whom international structure fosters global thinking with local action. A great strength of the book is McMullen's demonstration of how Bahá'í beliefs coupled with a well-integrated administrative structure foster this situated universalism. He also demonstrates that typical social factors (gender, race, education, and so on) are unrelated to whether Bahá'ís engage in personal and community spiritual obligations or adhere to Bahá'í principles. This finding appears to be unique among religious groups. His explanation of why this occurs is that the international structure of Bahá'í institutions, and Bahá'ís recognition of the spiritual authority of those institutions, override particularisms. The explicit grounding for these institutions in the Bahá'í Scriptures makes loyalty to them a spiritual principle. From all of these perspectives, this work makes a solid contribution and will help create a sociological approach to the Bahá'í Faith that is more clearly focused on what makes its position different from that of the typical Christian denominations that are Americans' primary contacts with religion.

A number of weaknesses, unfortunately, detract from the book's admitted value. The weak places are related to conclusions drawn from statistical findings in the survey, the treatment of controversies, and issues of usage and historical accuracy. If improvements can be made in future studies of this type, our understanding of the social processes among Bahá'ís will be further strengthened, and concrete results will emerge in the wider Bahá'í community.

Statistics The way that McMullen interprets his statistics is influenced by certain assumptions he makes. McMullen's survey had a 49.5 percent response rate. He

explicitly states that the respondents are representative of the entire body of Atlanta Bahá'ís. There are standing questions about how religious commitment is reflected in survey participation. One can see the contradictions and difficulties here. McMullen holds, from the survey results, that 70 percent of Bahá'ís voted in Bahá'í elections (47–48), while later he quotes a reliable source claiming that only 50 percent of American Bahá'ís are “active” (133). Given the size of this discrepancy, the survey response may not be representative of all Atlanta Bahá'ís, but only of those who were interested enough to respond. In my thirty-two years' experience as a Bahá'í, metropolitan areas have a district convention participation rate of about 30-35 percent. Elections for the Local Spiritual Assembly have a participation rate around 40-50 percent. These figures would have to be checked against actual participation rate data, but they are probably very close to the actual levels. In the case of response rates in this instance, it is virtually certain that there was a significant bias in favor of “active” Bahá'ís responding to the survey. This probably needed some additional discussion in the book, since McMullen seems to have dismissed the possible statistical problem too quickly. Another statistical problem appears on page 51. McMullen mentions that about equal percentages of men and women responded that they had served on a Spiritual Assembly, and therefore neither gender was more likely to be elected. However, there does not appear to be a table in which he provides the numbers of men and women who responded to his survey. This is important because if two hundred men responded and one hundred women responded, then the actual likelihood of men being elected is higher, even if the percentage is nearly identical for both genders.

On page 54 McMullen states that three-fourths of Atlanta Bahá'ís have served on the Spiritual Assembly. This could be a fallacious statistic. In larger communities only about one-fourth at most have ever served on the Assembly. A few more may have served on Assemblies elsewhere. But Assembly membership tends to be highly stable in urban areas. In this instance McMullen probably had either (1) survey respondents who were active Bahá'ís and therefore more likely to have been on an Assembly; (2) respondents from the wider Atlanta urban area (in which case several Local Spiritual Assembly jurisdictions are involved) and therefore a higher likelihood of having had Assembly service; or (3) respondents who failed to understand that the Assembly is the elected body and not the community as a whole (this remains a confusion of terms in the minds of some active but administratively inexperienced believers).

This said, there are some interesting results in the responses. Almost 40 percent of converts learned about the Bahá'í Faith through a friend, and nearly as many through a spouse or family member. These statistics confirm other recent studies by the U. S. National Teaching Committee that show personal contact to be the primary factor in most conversions to the Bahá'í Faith. These and similar findings may actually prove useful to the community in finding the most effective means of reaching potential declarants. Another finding is that approximately two-thirds of the respondents are college educated, which may partially account for why the Bahá'í Faith in the United States is often characterized as a religion of the educated. Much similar interesting information can be found in the work.

Controversial Issues and Apparent Contradictions Another weakness of the work is the treatment of controversies and contradictions. While McMullen portrays individuals' lived contradictions with openness, the social scientist should feel some obligation to explain very clearly the official position or understanding of the religion under study and then analyze the lived problems. McMullen mentions and summarizes the "contradictions" on pages 177–78:

Bahá'í Scripture contains solutions to intractable social problems / Bahá'ís are unable to articulate policy implications - Bahá'ís avow the equality of women and men / membership on the Universal House of Justice is limited to men - progressive revelation resolves apparent contradictions among religions systems / Bahá'ís are unfamiliar with the substance of religious conflicts - Bahá'í principles and institutions are to be the foundation of the future world order/ Bahá'ís are prohibited from involvement in politics.

McMullen indicates that Bahá'ís resolve these through faith, but he then states that they represent "apparent contradictions and hypocrisy" (178). The impression this gives is that the Bahá'í Faith itself may be hypocritical. This would be an unwarranted generalization from individuals' incomplete understandings of Bahá'í beliefs, and it was no doubt not the author's intended message. Following are some examples of the problems of understanding concerning those and other issues that militate against clarity in this volume.

Repeatedly throughout the book, it appears that McMullen and his informants confuse the Bahá'í administration with the Bahá'í expectation of world federation, which are distinct entities, and the ongoing relationship between which is as yet unclear. The institutions of the international federation are not Bahá'í institutions, although Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi have outlined what those world federal institutions ought to be. No doubt, the Bahá'í community and institutions will be advocating that such international structures of governance be created, but the institutions of that governance are not Bahá'í institutions. His book uses the hot-button phrase "world government" and the threat of a theocratic state. Nowhere does the author balance this with clear statements from the Bahá'í writings that (1) it will be far in the future that significant Bahá'í populations will raise any consideration of the responsibilities of Bahá'í institutions for the governance of society, (2) any Bahá'í institutional responsibility for governance can only occur by constitutional means, and (3) the Bahá'í institutions are required to guarantee human rights and individual freedoms. It is true that some individual Bahá'ís are confused by how the world federation and the Bahá'í institutions will interact, but a social scientist's role is to report both the misunderstanding and the official understanding of the group and not to overgeneralize individual misunderstandings to the population of Bahá'ís as a whole. Otherwise, what the book communicates is that Bahá'í globalism arises not from freely chosen membership in an international community but from the tightly-knit structure of an authoritarian system. This is why McMullen's statement that "erection of the foundation of world order is, for Bahá'ís, a privilege in which only they can participate" (115) is incorrect. The institutions of the international federation will be built by the

nations of the world. How the Bahá'í institutions—in which only Bahá'ís participate—will interact and possibly consolidate with or replace other institutions is not clear.

Likewise, the statement about “merging church and state in a world government” (141) is inaccurate in the context of those terms familiar to non Bahá'í readers, potentially inflammatory, and of itself reflects a failure by his informants to understand that international federation will exist long before there is ever any question of such things as a Bahá'í State. World federation comes first. The Bahá'í Commonwealth is centuries later. If anything, it will be more a question of the growing convergence of a preexisting world state and an increasingly influential Bahá'í community, whose principles will have reached and been accepted by a majority of the human race. If, as McMullen notes, “talking about Bahá'í World Order and world government tended to scare people off,” and the Bahá'í informants had themselves misunderstood the topic, what implication might this have for communicating with those outside the Bahá'í community? The contradiction experienced by McMullen's Bahá'í informants has not been clarified sufficiently in the book, and this ensures the likelihood of Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í readers coining away with a sense of misplaced concern about what the Bahá'í community intends.

McMullen's observation that Bahá'ís believe their religion can solve the world's problems, yet are unable to articulate its policy implications, may simply indicate that most people cannot articulate such implications for their own beliefs—and indeed, most people are not political scientists. It was unclear from the book that he actually asked his informants to articulate such policy implications, in which case this particular observation does not advance the reader's understanding. If anything, it indicates why the informants' statements about world order and other issues should be treated with caution.

McMullen's treatment of the issue of equality of women and men, and membership on the Universal House of Justice, seems overstated and seriously misleading. Membership on the Universal House of Justice is confined to men. This is articulated in principle by Bahá'u'lláh in His reference to the “men of the House of Justice.” ‘Abdu'l-Bahá is clear in His later letter to Corinne True that women and men are equal in everything except the membership of the Universal House of Justice, which is confined to men. This is for a “wisdom” that will become manifest. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá does not say that the “reason” will become manifest, but that its “wisdom” will. The Universal House of Justice has clarified that this membership restriction has nothing to do with any reason of inherent superiority of one gender over the other, and therefore should not be seen as contradicting or undermining the wider gender equality principle. The Universal House of Justice is required to uphold, defend, promulgate, and enforce this principle.

The constitutional provisions for membership of the Universal House of Justice are not some invention by reactionaries but arise from explicit statements of the Central Figures and from the Guardian's authoritative interpretations. These official statements should have been made explicit in the book. The Bahá'í Faith does not have absolute equality of the sexes in everything, and even favors women over men in several instances; for

example, if money is available to educate only some of one's children, then preference should go to the girl; a wife is entitled to the support of her husband. This is not absolute equality either. The book emphasizes this supposed contradiction and makes it appear that the Bahá'í institutions and teachings are themselves hypocritical. The flaw, rather, is the understanding of individual believers who have not grasped the constitution of the Bahá'í administration and do not yet see that gender equality is not an absolute intended to trump every other principle.

It is always problematical to provide a list, as McMullen does (59), of Bahá'ís' speculations on reasons why no women serve on the Universal House of Justice. The explanation given, once again, completely confuses the world federal institutions and the Bahá'í institutions. The Universal House of Justice is not the International Parliament and is not a part of the international federal government described in Shoghi Effendi's writings. Women can be in the International Parliament, the International Court, and the International Executive. These are not Bahá'í institutions, although they are described in the Bahá'í writings. This simply shows again that some of the Bahá'ís themselves have not studied and thought through the Faith's statements on these subjects. The Bahá'í institutions are the "nucleus and pattern" of Bahá'u'lláh's future world order, but they are not identical with the institutions of the world "Super-State" (as Shoghi Effendi calls it).

It is true that the broad Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation "resolves apparent contradictions in the world's religious systems," but it is not clear that Bahá'ís' lack of understanding of "theological discrepancies around which so many religious conflicts revolve" is an unusual contradiction. There are many Mormons, for instance, who make a typical statement about how their Church is the restoration of true Christianity. What they do not see is that this argument is wasted on people not already within a Christian denomination—a failure to grasp the larger religious issues. It seems, likewise, that some Bahá'ís are not taking advantage of such works as the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* to understand that Bahá'u'lláh resolves the historical theological conflicts at the level of mystical principle. Once Bahá'ís delve more deeply into what is already there, they can actually learn about the perennial theological problems that plagued earlier religions. Bahá'u'lláh resolves the old Catholic/Protestant faith and works argument in the first paragraph of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. He resolves the unitarian/trinitarian problem in the image of the sun, mirror, and rays of light. In other words, is McMullen revealing a real problem in the community beyond his informants needing to learn more deeply the content of their own Scriptures?

Reasonable people can disagree with McMullen's conclusion that there is a contradiction in Bahá'í plans to build the Kingdom of God while being forbidden to engage in political activism. His conclusion is based upon an older paradigm that has been changing under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, energized by the need to maintain external affairs; it also seems to reflect a failure to distinguish the different senses of the term political. This issue is a lived contradiction for some Bahá'ís that, in the interests of scholarship, required a bit of clarification. Bahá'ís are and will remain forbidden to engage in *partisan* political activity (party membership, pressure

tactics, electioneering and campaigning, and the like). Bahá'ís are politically active, at the level of principle, and under the guidance of the institutions. Surely it is a political act—in the best sense of having concern for the body politic—to foster racial unity, advocate with Congress for the passage of the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the payment of U.S. dues to the United Nations. So, rather than finding a contradiction, McMullen has again discovered what is, instead, a lack of understanding of external affairs work. “Political” action by Bahá'ís and their institutions is under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. This could have been stated, and used to argue that the globalism is even stronger, with the international council guiding Bahá'í political actions carefully and safeguarding the community from unwise involvements and the misuse of its will.

McMullen refers in a number of places to informants who have a problem with an institutional push for “numbers.” This is an interesting issue reflecting contradictions in the self-understanding of Bahá'ís. In a number of passages, McMullen and his informants appear to think that “entry by troops” and “mass teaching/mass conversion” are the same thing (see, for example, 64, 130, 139). The term entry by troops originated in the Qur'án, and in Bahá'í usage refers to conditions under which people enter the Bahá'í community in groups. Mass conversion is something that is much farther away, involving the simultaneous conversion of whole populations. It is surprising that this long-term vision and strategy is viewed as an emphasis on numbers per se. In fact, for some years, now, international teaching plans have shown an emphasis on quality of community life as a source of attraction for others to become Bahá'ís, and not on numbers per se. This was the focus even in the 1980s, let alone the 1990s when McMullen was completing his dissertation. What sociological conclusions can McMullen reach regarding this apparent contradiction—a community convinced that Bahá'í teachings will ultimately solve the world's problems, yet uncomfortable with advocating its truth in ways that embrace large numbers of people?

There is a bigger sociological and psychological issue that McMullen does not address, but which the Universal House of Justice has raised in its encouragement of individuals, the community, and Bahá'í institutions to accept the possibility of entry by troops. It might have proved fruitful for the author to clarify this. He does, to some degree, examine the historical reasons for the Atlanta Bahá'ís' problem with teaching methods, by looking at the large-scale enrollments in the South in 1970-71. A relatively objective study of that phenomenon is still waiting to be written, and is probably not helped by rehearsing the speculations and rumors that have circulated throughout the Bahá'í community for the past three decades—speculation often formulated to further the personal preferences of the speakers. But part of the problem was that individual believers were not ready for what was happening and did not give each other sufficient freedom to respond as each individual felt appropriate. Clearly, there has existed in the U.S. Bahá'í community a disagreement over teaching methods, with small but rather vocal minorities holding to immoderate positions. Some advocate direct teaching in the street, at parks and public establishments. Others believe that only through the slow making of friendships and carefully nurturing them can people be brought into the community with a firm commitment. The issue among the survey respondents,

therefore, may not in fact have been a problem with institutions, even though some of the respondents said it was. It may have been a problem with Bahá'ís who tended to advocate one and only one teaching method to the exclusion of others.

Historical Facts and Usage Regarding some usages, McMullen several times refers to Shoghi Effendi simply as “Effendi.” And he lists the works in the bibliography under “Effendi, Shoghi.” “Effendi” is a Turkish honorific implying respect, such as “Sir” would in English. From a perspective of protocol and accurate usage, “Shoghi Effendi” would have been better in all instances. Bibliographers, librarians, and indexers would normally list Shoghi Effendi’s works under S. On page 50 McMullen mentions that “only 3 percent [of survey respondents] indicate they read Shoghi Effendi’s writings daily as part of personal devotions.” This seemed in need of clarification as it could easily be misleading to readers who do not know that Shoghi Effendi’s writings are never read as part of personal devotions—Shoghi Effendi forbade the use of his writings as part of devotions at Feast and at the Houses of Worship. The only ones who might answer in the affirmative would be Persians who have the prayers of Shoghi Effendi in the original language. I would also note a usage that is problematical in the book: the abbreviation of Universal House of Justice as UHJ. Since Bahá'ís have been cautioned to avoid this linguistic diminution of the stature of the institution, there might be food for thought for authors of future articles and books.

McMullen’s doctoral dissertation was correctly titled “The Bahá'í Faith in Atlanta: On the Construction of a Global Identity.” It is a surprise that the published book is titled *The Bahá'í*. The word Bahá'í should be used either as an adjective or as a singular noun. It is never a plural. I have been told that the choice of title was made by the publisher, but it should have been protested as incorrect.

McMullen makes references to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas being called the “Bahá'í Bible” (63), and to deepenings as “Bahá'í Bible study” (99). If this is this common usage in Atlanta, it is not representative, and some treatment of local Bahá'í jargon would have been helpful. He also refers to “the UHJ’s requirement of chastity outside marriage” (65). As phrased, it appears that this is an invention of the Universal House of Justice although that is not the case. McMullen mentions the Bahá'ís greeting each other with “Alláh-u-abhá,” (88) but there is no explanation for the uninitiated reader. The author mentions that the Bahá'ís have been admonished by Bahá'u'lláh to hold to the Lesser Peace (114), but the Tablet from which he is quoting was addressed not to the Bahá'ís but to the kings and rulers of the world.

When he deals with Covenant-breakers, McMullen is on the mark to explain that there have been schismatic movements in the Faith but that the schismatic attempts have been unsuccessful in any meaningful sense. His statement that Bahá'ís are not to read covenant-breaker literature (117) needs to be qualified. Bahá'ís are cautioned that it is better not to read these, but they are not forbidden to do so.

Regarding the historical overview, there are additional errors: the Báb revealed Himself as the return of the Twelfth Imam—not as the actual Imam himself (193)—a subtle but

important distinction. The Báb had indicated the possibility that the Promised One would return between nine and nineteen years after His revelation, so it is not completely accurate to say that the Báb had not revealed when the “One Whom God shall make manifest” would come, although some of His followers may have been confused by the various references in the Bayán. Bahá'u'lláh received His title at the conference of Badasht in 1848, rather than in Baghdad. Regarding the succession of Guardians (194), an important point to indicate is that Shoghi Effendi's appointment of a successor was to be confirmed by a body of nine Hands of the Cause elected from among all the Hands.

One of my professors at Syracuse, Stephen S. Webb, was a particularly difficult taskmaster in his review of student papers. He insisted that what went into the paper had to have relevance to the thesis at hand. He would frequently write “So what?” in the margins. I have to admit that I did this from time to time while reading this study. For instance, McMullen quotes some Bahá'ís who felt ill-treated by other Bahá'ís when they were unable to attend the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh (96). These statements appeared to have no connection or relevance to his other findings.

This study, despite the noted limitations, is a work with some fresh insights and useful findings about a new form of universal religious approach to globalization. The Bahá'ís have a common universal ideology that is spiritually inclusive, a covenantal relationship to the Faith's authorities, a uniform administrative structure that is global in scope and reaches to all levels, practices that enact and reinforce global perspectives (firesides, Nineteen Day Feasts), and training venues such as deepenings that reinforce a universal identity. The author does bring into the open a number of areas of disagreement, misunderstandings, or at least certain lacunae in Bahá'í educational approaches to the issues concerned: the relationship of the Bahá'í constitution to specific spiritual and social principles; how Bahá'í teaching efforts should proceed; the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to politics social policy—particularly with regard to interrelationships between institutions of international governance and the Bahá'í order; and how the Bahá'í Faith addresses past religious controversies. These appear, from this reviewer's perspective, to call out for some strategy on the part of communities and institutions to engender a deeper understanding of these issues and how they can be resolved in the real world. Social scientists can have an important role in analyzing the issues and concerns that they represent, and may be able to offer recommendations to Bahá'í institutions and communities.

McMullen has performed the difficult balancing act of being a Bahá'í and a sociologist. Readers can almost certainly be assured that future studies of the Bahá'í community will spring from a maturation of these initial findings and their development into a more complete portrayal of both the religion's official views and the lived understanding of its adherents. As long as readers bear in mind the above caveats, this book is a partially useful initial study of a Bahá'í community using social scientific methodology.