

The Potential of the Bahá'í Faith to Grow in Scope and Influence

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Abstract

This study focuses on the Bahá'í Faith from a sociological perspective in an examination of several factors that would enable a religious movement to grow and develop to such an extent that it could become a significant influence on modern societies. The study concludes that this relatively new religious movement has necessary ideological and structural elements that foster its effective, continued growth, maintain its cohesion as a collective unit, and enable it to orient and mobilize its members toward bringing about social change. Having these necessary elements may not be sufficient to guarantee that the Bahá'í Faith will become a major force for social change. However, this religion definitely has the potential to grow and develop to the point at which it could have a significant effect on future society and may do so if its believers follow the guidance provided in their scriptures.

Résumé

Cette étude se concentre sur l'aspect sociologique de la foi bahá'íe à travers l'examen de plusieurs facteurs qui permettraient à un mouvement religieux de croître et de se développer à acquérir une certaine influence sur les sociétés modernes. Cette étude arrive à la conclusion que ce mouvement religieux relativement nouveau détient évidemment des éléments structurels et idéologiques qui favorisent sa croissance continue et efficace, maintiennent sa cohésion en tant qu'unité collective et lui permettent d'orienter et de mobiliser ses membres afin qu'ils provoquent un changement social. Cependant, cette religion détient certainement le potentiel nécessaire de croissance et de développement pour établir un impact sur les sociétés futures et peut arriver si les croyants respectent les conseils élaborés dans les écrits saints.

Resumen

Este estudio enfoca sobre la Fe Bahá'í desde una perspectiva sociológica examinando, los varios factores que permitirían a un movimiento religioso crecer y desarrollarse, hasta tal punto de llegar a ser una influencia importante sobre la sociedad moderna. El estudio llega a la conclusión que este movimiento religioso, relativamente nuevo, tiene los elementos estructurales e ideológicos necesarios para promover su crecimiento efectivo y continuado, mantener su cohesión como unidad colectiva, y capacitarlo para orientar y movilizar sus adherentes para emprender el cambio social. El poseer estos elementos necesarios quizá no sea lo suficiente para garantizar que la Fe Bahá'í llegar, a ser una fuerza mayor para efectuar el cambio social. No obstante, esta religión tiene el potencial de crecer y desarrollar a tal punto que podría tener un efecto de consideración sobre la sociedad del futuro, cosa que será muy posible si sus creyentes se atienen a asesoramiento contenido en sus escritos sagrados.

As noted by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, two social scientists long dedicated to the study of religious movements, it is possible that a major religion of tomorrow is among the "obscure cult movements" of today (*Future 2*). One of these religions, if it were to expand to such proportion that its ideology was accepted by a population in general, might have an impact on

societies of the future, albeit in different ways than traditional religions have influenced societies in the past. Social scientists generally agree (see Barker “Kingdoms of Heaven” 35–36; Hargrove “Religion” 35), however, that the numerical and collective strength of any of the new religions is currently so limited that their ability to have a significant effect on society in general is virtually impossible.

Several factors enable a new religious movement to continue to grow and develop to the point where it could be numerically and collectively strong enough to become ideologically integrated into a culture and thus become a viable agent for social change. This article will explore such factors, including having an ideological orientation toward expansion, maintaining an optimal level of tension with the surrounding society, providing religious and cultural continuity, gaining committed followers, maintaining a cohesive collective unit, having an ideological orientation toward social influence, interacting with the greater society in an influential manner, addressing relevant needs of society, and being able to mobilize the members of a religious movement toward effecting social change.

As the elements that could enable a religion to grow in scope and influence are discussed, the potential of a relatively new religion, the Bahá’í Faith, to develop to greater capacity will be evaluated. Through such an evaluation, based on an examination of Bahá’í writings, historical studies, and the writer’s observations as a member of this religious movement, it will be shown the Bahá’í Faith has ideological and structural features that foster its continued growth, maintain its integrity, and may facilitate its becoming a major societal influence.

Having an Ideological Orientation toward Expansion

The basic requirement for the expansion of a religion is that its teachings call for it to grow. Some religious groups, because of their ideological orientation, are not interested in gaining new members, let alone encompassing an entire society with their beliefs and values. Some wish to include only a chosen few. Bryan Wilson, who classified religious movements according to their orientation toward growth and development, referred to these movements as “introversionist” sects (“Factors” 6). This kind of religious group most often does not experience significant expansion, and many die out after a few generations.

The Bahá’í Faith is not one of these religions. According to Wilson’s classifications, the Bahá’í Faith resembles an adventist sect in that it heralds the advent of a new age, yet it lacks the extreme pessimism that many Christian adventist sects have. Bahá’ís see themselves as the builders of a new world order and wish to spread their Faith among all the peoples of the world to “so imbue them with its spirit that they will dedicate themselves to its service, and this world will become another world and its people another people” (Universal House of Justice, cited in *Effective Teaching* 6). They are, therefore, engaged in intensive efforts to expand their religion in order to have a firm and extensive ideological foundation on which this unified, new world order may be built.

Maintaining an Optimal Level of Tension with the Surrounding Society

The desire to increase membership is not the only ideological factor that facilitates expansion. Through a comparison of several relatively successful and unsuccessful new religious movements, Rodney Stark found that the state of tension in which a religion finds itself with the greater society can affect its acceptance by potential converts and therefore affect its ability to grow (“How New

Religions” 15–16). If the religious ideology is such that the state of tension between the religion and its host society is low, it is often an indication the religion is so well integrated into society that there is little to distinguish it from the established religious order, and, therefore, little about it to attract new members. If, however, its beliefs and practices are so different that the tension between the religion and society is very high, it is usually an indication that the religion is considered quite deviant or bizarre, and, therefore, unattractive to most people.

Stark acknowledged that some religions have expanded despite high tension and intense oppression. This was also the case of the early Bahá’í Faith in its Persian culture of origin. In the mid-1800s, the earliest clays of this religion’s history, thousands of its members were tortured and killed because their beliefs were perceived as a threat to the established religious order (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 371–72, 402–4), yet the Faith continued to spread throughout Persia and beyond.

In most present-day societies, however, the Bahá’í Faith is balanced between high and low states of tension with the surrounding culture. Perhaps one of the reasons for its lack of high tension is that its founder, Bahá’u’lláh, enjoined his followers to show loyalty and to abide by the laws of the government in whichever country they reside, even if it means forgoing their religious activities (*Tablets* 22–23). However, some teachings, like the encouragement of interracial marriage, the abolition of professional clergy, the prohibition of intoxicating drinks or substances, and the assertion of the equality of men and women, cause this religion to be considered sufficiently different from conventional religions that its level of tension is not too low.

Providing Religious and Cultural Continuity

Another ideological factor that influences the success of a new religious movement is whether the religious ideology adds to, rather than replaces, present cultural ideology. Stark noted that when a religion is introduced as a continuation of a culture’s prominent religious tradition (as, for example, both Islam and Mormonism were presented as the latest phase of the Judeo-Christian tradition), it will be more likely to be accepted (“How New Religions” 13–15). It is also important, Stark found, that the new religion allows cultural continuity in other ways as well, permitting converts to retain such elements of their heritage as traditional dress. This continuity, apparently, is a bridge to smooth conversion.

Like Islam, the Bahá’í Faith is considered by its followers to be a new phase of the Judeo-Christian revelation. Yet its followers further assert that it is a progressive continuation of Islamic, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and other major world religions as well. Bahá’u’lláh taught that all the world’s major religions are based on revelations from one God and that all of their scriptures are sacred. The differences in the original teachings are due to the differing circumstances and needs of the time and place in which the founders appeared. Bahá’u’lláh claimed to be the latest in a line of messengers from God with the mission, now that the peoples of the world have sufficiently progressed, of uniting the world (Bahá’u’lláh, *Proclamation* 111–22).

In addition to asserting this religious continuity, the Bahá’í writings not only allow cultural variation but also stress the importance of retaining it. Unity in diversity is a goal of this faith:

Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency,

the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest.
(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, cited in *Divine Art of Living* 125)

This religion’s success among various religious and ethnic cultures is evident in the fact that, after Christianity, the Bahá’í Faith is the most widespread religion in the world in terms of the countries in which it is established (Barrett, “Religion” 269), and is represented in 2,112 tribes and ethnic groups (“Statistics” 3).

Gaining Committed Followers

Members can be generated from within a new religious movement through the propagation of children, but generations of believers take a long time to mature and reproduce. A more readily available source of potential members is found outside of a religious community and is tapped through conversion. Yet various studies have noted that there is a high defection or turnover rate among converts to modern religious movements (e.g., Barker, “New Religious Movements” 39–40; Richardson, “Studies of Conversion” 108). To grow, a religion must not only gain new adherents but also keep them. Beyond that, a movement must be able to maintain the commitment of its members so that it has human resources available to carry out the aims of the movement, including the continued recruitment of new members (Stark, “How New Religions” 22–23).

As a result of the proliferation of new religious movements in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, the conversion process has been studied extensively by sociologists. An early model of conversion was presented by John Lofland and Rodney Stark, who focused on the early development of the Unification Church. They found that for a person to become a “total convert” (i.e., one who “exhibited commitment through deeds as well as words” [“Becoming” 864]) he or she must:

1. Experience enduring, acutely felt tensions
2. Within a religious problem-solving perspective,
3. Which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker;
4. Encountering the D[eviant] P[erspective] at a turning point in his life,
5. Wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts;
6. Where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized;
7. And, where, if he is to become a deployable agent. he is exposed to intensive interaction. (“Becoming” 874)

Lofland and Stark acknowledged that their findings may not be generalizable because their study was conducted on only one cult, and the sample of only fifteen adherents was very small. When David Snow and Cynthia Phillips considered this model in their study of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement, they found that only affective bonds and intensive interaction were necessary for effective conversion to occur (“Lofland-Stark” 444). They speculated that the necessity of the other conditions may vary from movement to movement, depending on such factors as the public definition of the group (e.g., whether or not the group is considered “respectable”) or the organizational structure of the group (e.g., whether or not the group demands renunciation of outside social affiliations). Stark, through his study of the relatively successful Mormons, has since identified “the superiority of recruitment strategies based on gaining access to social networks” (“The Rise” 26). Several other sociologists have reached similar conclusions

(Greil and Rudy “What Have We Learned” 318; Neitz *Charisma* 68–71). It is now generally agreed that the most important elements for conversion and continued commitment to a religious movement are affective bonds and intensive interaction with existing committed members, and that those groups who concentrate on spreading their religion through preexisting networks of family and friends will be more successful in gaining committed converts than those who do not.

Bahá’ís are told in their scriptures that many methods of telling others about their Faith are acceptable, as long as the Bahá’í teachings are presented with wisdom, dignity, integrity, and sincerity, and are not presented to unwilling listeners (*Developing* 7.26–29). They are advised, however, that the most effective way to spread the Faith is through one’s friends, and they are thus urged to widen their network of friendships:

The friends of God should weave bonds of fellowship with others and show absolute love and affection towards them. These links have a deep influence on people and they will listen. . . . This is the best method. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, cited in *Individual* 12)

The scriptures of the Bahá’í Faith show that there is an understanding of the qualitative difference between “verbal” and “total” conversion. Becoming a Bahá’í is seen as a process wherein “a declaration of faith is merely a milestone along the way” (Universal House of Justice, cited in *Effective Teaching* 6). Those who have taught a new convert about this religion are urged to continue to interact with and “nurture him until he becomes a firm and active supporter of the Faith” (written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Effective Teaching* 6).

In addition, new believers are encouraged to teach their existing friends and their families: “If the believer is the only one in his family who has embraced the Faith, it is his duty to endeavor to lead as many other family members as possible to the light of divine guidance” (Universal House of Justice, cited in *Developing* 7.12). As with Mormonism, whose followers concentrate on teaching through networks of families and friends and whose methods are recognized as being successful, this line of action appears to be effective. While the Mormon population is currently about six million (Mauss and Bradford, “Mormon Assimilation” 40) throughout the world, the Bahá’í population is over five million (“Statistics” 3).

Another advantage of bringing families into a new religion is that it brings in a balanced mixture of all ages and both sexes. Through his research on successful and unsuccessful new religions, Stark found that a disproportionate mix of ages and a predominance of one sex could lead to the lack of growth of a religious movement and prevent it from becoming a major religion (“How New Religions” 18). For example, the Christian Science movement grew rapidly in its first generation, but its growth later subsided because the vast majority of new believers had been older women who either did not have children or whose children had grown. While age and gender variation is important, Wilson convincingly argued that it is also necessary to gain converts from various strata and ethnic groups so that a religious movement is not limited by typecasting, either on the part of insiders or outsiders, as to who its adherents should be (“Factors” 39–40).

The writings of the Bahá’í Faith encourage members to try to reach people of all socioeconomic strata, ethnic groups, and ages:

No effort must be spared to ensure that the healing Word of God reaches the rich and the poor, the learned and the illiterate, the old and the young, the devout and the atheist, the dweller in the remote hills and islands, the inhabitant of the teeming cities, the suburban businessman, the laborer in the slums, the nomadic tribesman, the farmer,

the university student; all must be brought consciously within the teaching plans of the Bahá'í community. (Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring* 124).

Further, the Bahá'í writings assign responsibility for spreading the religion to all individuals of all ages. An inspirational message to Bahá'ís throughout the world from the Universal House of Justice states: “Every individual believer—man, woman, youth, and child—is summoned to this field of action; for it is on the initiative, the resolute will of the individual to teach and to serve, that the success of the entire community depends” (*Six Year Plan* 39). That every individual has a responsibility to teach others about this religion increases the likelihood it will spread through a variety of social networks.

Giving children and youth the responsibility of spreading the religion is important not only for ensuring a span of all age groups in the movement but for another reason as well. In her study of religious-based, nineteenth-century utopian communities, Rosabeth Kanter found that subsequent generations are often less committed than the first, and they sometimes leave a community (*Commitment* 146). Observing similar tendencies in his studies, Stark noted that adequate socialization is necessary to ensure that children do not allow a religion to become secularized, become inactive members, or withdraw from a religion (“How New Religions” 24–25). He suggested, based on his observation of successful socialization among the Mormons, that giving young believers important responsibilities through which they can display and increase their commitment will insure against their disaffection. Lawrence Iannaccone, in his study of economic concepts applied to religious participation, also found that a “strong religious upbringing is a ‘leading indicator’ of adult religious participation” (“Religious Practice” 309).

In addition to being given equal responsibility with adults for teaching others about their Faith, Bahá'í children are often given tasks such as helping with community activities or teaching younger children. The importance of providing religious education is also given great emphasis in the Bahá'í Faith. Such passages as the following are found throughout the Bahá'í writings:

Teach your children what hath been revealed through the Pen of Glory. Instruct them in what hath descended from the heaven of greatness and power. Let them memorize the Tablets of the Merciful and chant them with the most melodious voices in the halls of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. (Bahá'u'lláh, cited in Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* 153).

Maintaining a Cohesive Collective Unit

If religion is to act as a collective social force in influencing social change, it must have a strong internal cohesion that keeps its ideology clearly distinguished and keeps its body of believers from falling apart and becoming simply a number of individuals acting according to their own beliefs. As Stark explained, “Individual acts can be interpreted as those of an organization only to the extent that they are coordinated and controlled” (“How New Religions” 16). According to Stark, effective organization and governance are required to achieve this kind of coordination and control. Wilson, speaking of those same requirements, used only slightly different terms to describe them: “communication” and “leadership” (“Factors” 33).

The Bahá'í Faith is based on an extensive body of writings in which a line of authority and organization is clearly defined. Unlike the sacred scriptures of world religions established in the past, the sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith were either written by Bahá'u'lláh, or dictated and

then stamped by Bahá'u'lláh with a personal seal. These writings are in great abundance, containing more than one-hundred volumes on a wide variety of subjects (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 220; *Promised Day* vi). Providing for a succession after his death, Bahá'u'lláh indicated in his will that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to whom all Bahá'ís should turn, was to be the authorized interpreter and exemplar of his teachings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá left clear instructions that his successor was to be Shoghi Effendi, his grandson. Shoghi Effendi laid the foundation for and left in his place an administrative structure that had already been designed by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, consisting of local administrative councils called local spiritual assemblies, whose nine members are elected by adult believers in each Bahá'í community; national administrative councils called national spiritual assemblies, whose nine members are elected by delegates in each nation where the Bahá'í Faith is established; and an international administrative council called the Universal House of Justice, whose nine members are elected every five years by delegates from around the world. The Universal House of Justice is now the supreme governing body of the Bahá'í Faith and is considered the final authority on any matter not already addressed in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi (Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* 128–30). Thus, the organizational and governmental structure of the Bahá'í Faith is well defined and secure, and allows for effective coordination and control.

The growth, unity, and effectiveness of religious movements can also be hindered by internal conflict and schism. Conflicts may occur in the interpretation of the holy scriptures; in a struggle for leadership, power, or resources; or in cases where the original teachings have been compromised by secularization (Stark and Bainbridge, *Future* 102–5, 429–30). Islam, for example, was split and almost fatally weakened immediately after Muḥammad's death because the line of succession was not clear. He had not specified a successor in a will or other document (Balyuzi, *Muḥammad* 165–89).

The administrative structure of the Bahá'í Faith, however, protects it from schism. Over the years attempts have occasionally been made to undermine the authority of one of the central figures or institutions of the Bahá'í Faith by someone within the religion. Sometimes these individuals have gained a following and formed a splinter group, but the groups have always been insignificant, including only a few people (e.g., see Balch et al., “When the Bombs Drop” 142, 148–50) and have rarely lasted more than a generation. Because the administrative structure of the Bahá'í Faith is strong and the line of legitimate authority so clear, the main body of members has not been swayed by their claims. Thus, the Bahá'í Faith has never suffered a significant schism.

It is also necessary for the members of a religious community to be able to withstand opposition that originates externally. Hostility and nonacceptance can dampen the spirits of the followers of a religion to such an extent that their faith and confidence are tested to the point where the group may fall apart. This problem was noted by John Lofland, who studied the way in which early members of the Unification Church maintained their faith and hope in the face of the disapproval and apathy they experienced while trying to promote their beliefs. He found the leaders of the Unification Church often explained to the followers that external opposition was sent either by the devil in an attempt to destroy their mission or by Goel in an attempt to test their faith and warned them that such opposition would occur. The leaders also reminded the members that in Korea, where the Unification Church was first established, the members had experienced initial opposition but were now quite successful, implying that this model might apply in the United States as well. Through such explanations, the members were encouraged and came to expect opposition (*Doomsday Cult* 244–45).

The first Bahá'ís also suffered severe oppression. No less than twenty thousand followers of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were killed, and countless others, including Bahá'u'lláh, were imprisoned and tortured (Shoghi Effendi, *Messages* 147). Here again, opposition was expected. Bahá'u'lláh in his messages had reminded his followers that every time a new prophet had appeared with a revelation from God the people of that day rose against the prophet and tried to hinder his followers. He also promised that, like the earlier revelations, the Bahá'í Faith would survive. This assurance has apparently helped Bahá'ís to endure the opposition as they have gone on to spread Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and establish his religion around the world.

Having an Ideological Orientation toward Social Influence

Just as not all religions desire to embrace society, not all religions wish to change it. The ideological difference between those religions that wish to influence society and those that do not has been addressed by several sociologists. Benton Johnson, drawing on the work of Max Weber, has discussed this difference in terms of prophecy, wherein *emissary* prophecy “constrains man to concern himself very seriously with questions of social policy i.e., with the arrangements by which men live in society” and *exemplary* prophecy “tends to foster a relative lack of concern with ordinary mundane matters because its guiding idea is that individuals . . . can obtain . . . benefits which may be used for a variety of purely private ends” (“On Church and Sect” 542). The emissary type of ideology clearly gives its followers a role and a responsibility in influencing society (whereas the exemplary type does not) and may, therefore, be more likely to effect social change.

A similar typology has been presented by Roy Wallis, who identified three kinds of religious movements: world-accommodating types, in which “religion is not construed as a primarily social matter; rather, it provides solace or stimulation to personal, interior life” (*Elementary* 34); world-affirming types, which “offer beliefs and practices for succeeding in society as it is”; and world-rejecting types, which “postulate a complete transformation of society for some divinely ordained alternative” (“Hostages” 80). The world-rejecting types have the strongest orientation toward change, but as Eileen Barker pointed out, there can even be a lesser or greater orientation within this category, depending on whether it is believed that this transformation will occur as a result of the believers' spiritual activities, such as prayer and meditation, or their practical activities, such as influencing the views of people in positions of power (“Kingdoms” 25).

As evident in the following quotation, Bahá'u'lláh was an emissary prophet who founded a religious movement that is largely, according to Wallis's definition, world-rejecting in nature: “O people of God! Be not occupied with yourselves. Be intent on the betterment of the world and the training of nations” (quoted in Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* 133). Bahá'ís are thus ideologically oriented toward influencing society in practical ways.

Interacting with Society in an Influential Manner

To be able to influence society requires more than a general orientation toward social change. It also requires a persistent reach outward and involvement in the social world. While in-group interaction is important in solidifying the conversion process and sustaining levels of commitment, many movements that wish to influence the world “suffer from internal networks that are too all-embracing and impede the ability of members to form or maintain attachments with outsiders. As with tension, here too a delicate balance must be maintained between internal and external

attachments” (Stark, “How New Religions” 23). If, as Kanter found in the nineteenth-century utopian groups she studied (*Commitment* 150–53, 224–25), the demands for commitment to a group are too confining, members will not have enough contact with people outside the movement or involvement in relevant affairs of society to be of any significant social influence.

Bahá’ís, however, are enjoined to extend their sphere of contact constantly and to promote the social principles of their Faith even when the religion itself is not being promoted. In his writings, Bahá’u’lláh urged: “Consort with all men, O people of Bahá, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship” (*Gleanings* 289). Reflecting Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, the Universal House of Justice has made it an objective of its most recent plan for the Bahá’ís of the world to “foster association with organizations, prominent persons and those in authority concerning the promotion of peace, world order and allied objectives, with a view to offering the Baha’i teachings and insights regarding current problems and thought” (Universal House of Justice, *Six Year Plan* 14).

In one of the very few sociological studies that have included data on members of the Bahá’í Faith, Helen Rose Ebaugh and Sharron Lee Vaughn explored the associational network in nonreligious activities of Catholic Charismatics, Christian Scientists, and Bahá’ís. They found that while 32% of Catholic Charismatics and 58% of Christian Scientists said that most of the people with whom they associate in nonreligious activities are not group members, 78% of the Bahá’ís said that most of the people with whom they associate are not group members (“Ideology and Recruitment” 154–55). This may seem to indicate favorably for the effect of the teachings of this religion; however, this study was based on one small sample of members (50) residing in one locality (Houston, TX) and is not substantial enough to be conclusive.

Yet it can be generally stated that many Bahá’ís are actively involved with those who are not Bahá’í in the affairs of society. Many work in collaboration with, and often become members of, organizations that share social principles with the Bahá’í Faith, such as the NAACP or Beyond War. Local spiritual assemblies often collaborate with such organizations in sponsoring activities or invite these organizations to activities Bahá’ís have organized; and national institutions sometimes collaborate on national events as well. As a nongovernmental organization, the Bahá’í International Community has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) and with the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and regularly participates in consultations with United Nations agencies regarding such issues as human rights, the status of women, crime prevention, the environment, and disarmament (*The Bahá’í Faith*).

It must be pointed out that, as important as it is to have such open social networks, there is a danger for religious movements in having social networks that are too open and interacting too freely with the “outside” world. Stark cautioned that these movements may become secularized. They may compromise their original teachings and may become so similar to the conventional religions that they lose the edge that could make them an agency for social change (“How New Religions” 22–24). Wilson also highlighted this concern, stating that those who seek unlimited, unconditional growth or influence “may pay for it at the cost of abandoning pristine teachings and organization” (“Factors” 30–31).

Stark referred to the Mormons to show how a religion could make adjustments in its social teachings to accommodate society, so that its level of tension would not be too high, without compromising its deeper spiritual teachings (“How New Religions” 24). The Mormons, for example, alleviated tension when they abandoned polygamy. Bahá’u’lláh introduced a different, perhaps more ingenious way of maintaining a balance in tension. He revealed many new social laws for his followers but deliberately did not make these laws all immediately binding (*Synopsis*

4–6). Some of the laws that are more foreign to Western society, for example, will not go into effect for Bahá'ís of the West until the Universal House of Justice decides that the time is appropriate. Thus, the Bahá'í Faith is starting out with a religion that has more in common with present modern societies and that will become progressively different—perhaps more in line with future societies—over time. This ideological arrangement allows a religion with radical social changes in mind to remain at an optimal level of tension with society and to participate in the affairs of that society without compromising its teachings.

Addressing Relevant Needs of Society

A final ideological factor for potential social influence is social relevance. In a study of the new religious movements in their social context, Robert Wuthrow observed that “even though they may espouse extremely profound insights, if they cannot appeal to a somewhat broad audience, their impact on American society is likely to be relatively inconsequential,” yet, at the same time, they must reinforce “values that augur change” if change is to occur (“New Religions” 267). For people concerned about social issues, a religion directly addressing these issues may be appealing.

The Bahá'í Faith, in its teachings and practices, speaks to virtually all of the social issues that are relevant to modern society. Some of the issues it addresses, both at the level of its international, national, and local organizations as well as at the level of its individual followers, are the eradication of prejudice of race, class, nationality, and sex; the establishment of universal peace; the recognition and promotion of equality of men and women; the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty; and the establishment of universal compulsory education. As it addresses these relevant social issues, the Bahá'í Faith is likely to appeal to a broad segment of society. In addition, because it has values that augur social change, it may have an impact on society.

In a vein similar to Wuthrow's, Stark and Bainbridge pointed out that older religions can often be rendered ineffective by the fact that they came into being centuries ago and were addressing different social needs and more limited scientific understandings than those of today. According to Stark and Bainbridge, “faiths that arise to meet the circumstances of *this* culture” and “are fully compatible with scientific knowledge” of the present time may seem more attractive than the older religions (*Future* 436).

The continued compatibility of religion with science is assured as a basic principle of the Baha'i Faith. As explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Religion must stand the analysis of reason. It must agree with scientific fact and proof so that science will sanction religion and religion fortify science. Both are indissolubly welded and joined in reality. If statements and teachings of religion are found to be unreasonable and contrary to science, they are outcomes of superstition and imagination. (*Promulgation* 175)

Being Able to Mobilize Members toward Social Change

All the factors discussed thus far—the ability to grow effectively in membership and sustain commitment, the ability to maintain organizational unity, the ideological and practical orientation toward growth and relevant social change—may not ultimately lead to social change if the new religious movement cannot effectively mobilize its members to be of social influence. As Stark

pointed out, one of the strengths of the Mormon Church in mobilizing members is that it pulls heavily on voluntary service to its cause—even its missionaries pay their own expenses (“How New Religions” 16–17). Like the Mormon bishops and “stake presidents,” members of Bahá’í national and local spiritual assemblies and members of national and local committees and task forces are all, with few exceptions, unpaid volunteers who have jobs in the secular world. Like Mannon missionaries, Bahá’ís who travel to other countries to help local believers establish their Faith are usually self-supporting.

The Bahá’í community can be mobilized with relative effectiveness through its broad administrative system, from the international to the local level. An example of how this system can be utilized in the United States is the “Action Alert System,” in which approximately 100 calls from the national headquarters to district committees (who in turn call local spiritual assemblies) result in the transmission of urgent information and guidance to approximately 50,000 individuals within a few days, with the cost of such an effort spread throughout the entire Baha’i community.

Stark identified “strong governance and a high level of individual commitment” as important factors in the ability of a religion to mobilize its members (“How New Religions” 13). The subjects of governance and commitment have been addressed and will not be discussed at length here. It is important to point out, however, that for “strong governance” to direct and utilize the “high level of individual commitment” effectively, all those involved, both those who are directing efforts and those who are to be mobilized, must have a clear and unified vision of where they are going and a systematic plan for how to get there.

The need for a vision and a plan is evident in a study conducted by Eileen Barker, who observed new religious movements, primarily the Unification Church, that expected the “Kingdom of Heaven on Earth” to be established. She found that the members of the Unification Church had various visions of what the kingdom was to look like and various ideas of what they needed to do to establish it. Many versions were actually incompatible with one another. This lack of clarity and guidance not only thwarted the ability of the movement to move forward in a collective manner but also caused many members to become disillusioned and inactive, while others left the movement altogether (“Kingdoms” 22–35).

The Bahá’í scriptures, however, provide the followers of this religion with a clear and unified vision of a new world order. Various books are devoted to this subject (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret*; Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*) and various aspects of this vision are elaborated upon in other writings (e.g., Universal House of Justice, “To the Peoples”). Also, systematic plans (e.g., Universal House of Justice, *Six Year Plan*) for sustained growth and development toward that vision are periodically designed by the Universal House of Justice, adapted by national spiritual assemblies, and passed on to local spiritual assemblies for local development and implementation.

To mobilize a religious movement, strong organizational governance and a high level of commitment on the part of individuals is needed. The system of government, however, must have and must provide those individuals with an idea of where they are going and how they will get there so that they will be effectively mobilized toward social change. The Bahá’í Faith has both a sound organizational structure through which the movement is governed and the elements that would elicit strong commitment. The Bahá’í writings provide the necessary vision and guidance. The members can, therefore, be mobilized effectively.

Conclusion

Two tendencies of the process of modernization in Western cultures—secularization and increasing religious plurality—leave most sociologists of religion skeptical that any new religious movement will rise to have an immense impact on modern society. As stated by Stark and Bainbridge:

We do not expect any single new religious movement to rise to the dominant position so long enjoyed by Christianity. . . . Unless a massive cultural shift enables a new religion to gain an exclusive franchise, no one religion will ever again even appear to be universal. (*Future* 455)

The likelihood that such a cultural shift may occur is beyond the scope of this article, which deals only with the potential of the Bahá'í Faith to become eligible to meet such a challenge.

The elements necessary for a new religious movement to grow and develop to such an extent that it might become a catalyst for social change are many and overwhelm most of the new religious movements of modern society. Among the most basic factors are the desire to increase membership significantly, the maintenance of a moderate state of tension with society, the ability to gain new converts of all ages and backgrounds and of both sexes effectively, the ability to sustain commitment of both new members and children who are growing up in the religion through an intimate social network, the desire to influence social change in ways that are relevant to modern society, the capacity to interact intensely with the greater society without being absorbed into it, and the ability to mobilize members toward social change effectively.

It would seem that, based on the scriptural guidance provided to the followers of the Bahá'í Faith, this religious movement has the capacity to fulfil all these requirements. It is difficult to assess, however, how well the believers are following this guidance. Unfortunately, a conclusive sociological study has not been completed on this aspect of the Bahá'í Faith. Few sociological studies on any aspect have yet been done. However, the fact that the Bahá'í population has risen to over five million in less than 150 years, in spite of the intense opposition it faced in the land of its birth, and has spread to such an extent that it is already the second most widespread religion among the countries of the world and is represented in 2,112 tribes and ethnic groups, supports the assessment that this faith has significant potential.

Yet, whether or not it will actually accomplish further growth and development depends, to a large degree, on the continued response of its adherents and its institutions to the guidance regarding the teachings contained in the Bahá'í writings. To be eligible for success, the believers must become intimately familiar with these sacred writings, carefully consider them, and apply them to their teaching efforts. Without close attention to these sacred texts, the vision of a new world order would become dim and the path toward reaching this ultimate goal uncertain. Without the guidance provided by scriptures, institutions of the Bahá'í Faith would not be able to lead effectively nor would effective plans of action be implemented. Without the clear distinction of the Bahá'í teachings, members would be absorbed into the surrounding culture, and the Bahá'í Faith would become ordinary and unattractive. Bahá'ís would not be able to teach their Faith effectively. Like so many other new religions that rise briefly and then fall, the Bahá'í Faith would probably fade away.

From a sociological standpoint, the success of the Bahá'í Faith in continuing to grow in scope and influence does not depend on whether Bahá'u'lláh is who he said he is, but the degree to which Bahá'ís have faith that Bahá'u'lláh is a divine Manifestation and respond accordingly. They have been given the mission of transforming society and have been given sound instructions on how to do it, starting with the basic injunction to read from their sacred texts every day. Studies

of other new religious movements suggest that if Bahá'ís follow these instructions, their efforts will be successful. As so aptly stated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to early Bahá'ís, "As ye have faith so shall your powers and blessings be" (cited in Maxwell, *An Early Pilgrimage* 40).

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