

Is the Bahá'í Faith a World Religion?¹

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Abstract

This article will explore some of the issues involved in the sociological analysis of the status of the Bahá'í Faith. It will endeavor to present criteria for the labels “world religion” and “new religious movement,” as well as explore to what extent the Bahá'í Faith fulfils these criteria. It will attempt to demonstrate that the Bahá'í Faith is best categorized as a “world religion.”

In a statement to the United Nations Commission on Palestine in 1947, Shoghi Effendi stated that the Bahá'í Faith “can be regarded in no other light than a world religion” (“Faith of Bahá'u'lláh” 219). However, today, despite the increasing expansion and influence of the Bahá'í Faith since Shoghi Effendi made that statement, its status outside the Bahá'í community remains controversial. In academic circles, it has shed the label of a sect of Islam,² but there is no consensus about its present standing. A 1992 textbook on the world's religions describes the problem:

The question of how to “place” Bahaism is a little problematic. Although it originated as a sectarian movement within Shi'ite Islam, there is now no sense in which Bahá'ís would regard themselves as Muslims, nor would they be recognized as such by any branch of Islam. Bahá'ís themselves have for some time now proclaimed their faith to be a “world religion” on a par with Islam, Christianity, and other established creeds. This however, presents obvious problems in the case of a movement at most 150 years old, without a distinct culture, and lacking a major presence in any one country. (“Bahaís” in *Contemporary Religions* 95–96)

Many examples exist of varying opinions on the status of the Bahá'í Faith among academics who have studied the Bahá'í community. Jacques Chouleur, a specialist in the history of North American religions at the University of Avignon, asserted in 1977 that “the credibility of the Bahá'í Faith as a major world religion remains doubtful” (“Bahá'í Faith” 17). Denis MacEoin has long argued that the classification of the Bahá'í Faith as a world religion is how Bahá'ís themselves regard their movement: “The notion of Baha'ism [as] a ‘world religion’ is an ontological assumption for adherents rather than a statement of observable or meaningful fact” (“Permanent” 88)—a classification which MacEoin sees as “historically, sociologically, and conceptually misleading,” preferring instead the term “new religious movement” (“Review” 453). In contrast, the late Mircea Eliade, professor of the history of religions at the University of Chicago, editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, and one of the most influential individuals in the academic study of religion this century, wrote in a 1991 survey of the religions of the world that the Bahá'í Faith is a “World Religion founded by the Persian aristocrat Bahá'u'lláh” (*Eliade Guide* 264).³

The problem of how to classify the Bahá'í Faith has also been addressed by the wider community. In defending the persecution of Bahá'í in Turkey in 1961, the Bahá'í community endeavored “to prove and establish the status of the Faith as an independent world religion” in contrast to the prosecuting authorities who were trying to demonstrate that it was “a forbidden sect of Islam” (*Ministry* 307). More recently, the Interreligious Council of Southern California admitted membership of the Bahá'í community in 1976 while simultaneously rejecting the application of the Church of Scientology “because it does not meet the requirement of being an ‘historic world religion’” (Vadakin, “Southern California” 511), and the Bahá'í Faith was formally accepted in 1987 into the Conservation and Religion Network of the World Wide Fund for Nature. In contrast, the St. Mungo Museum of Religion and Art in Glasgow, which opened in 1993 and is reputed to be the only museum in the world dedicated to comparative religion, does not include the Bahá'í Faith in its major displays.⁴ Bahá'ís were not invited to participate

¹ I would particularly like to thank Arash Abizadeh and Stephen Lambden for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² For a discussion of this question, see Schaefer, “Bahá'í Faith.”

³ Reflecting the academic relevance of this debate, one of the set essays in the 1994 undergraduate religious studies course at the University of Edinburgh (“Religion 2”) is entitled “Are the Bahá'ís a NRM or a major religious tradition?”

⁴ The Interreligious Council of Southern California does not specify the reasons for this decision. However, the St. Mungo Museum does. In a letter to the Secretary of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Glasgow, the senior curator of the museum explained that the criteria used to select the religious in the central section of the museum were: “1. Those with the largest numbers of believers in Strathclyde. 2. Those with the largest numbers of believers in the world. 3. Those which were possible to

in a 1986 interreligious prayer meeting for world peace organized by Pope John Paul II in Assisi but were among the religions represented at the 1993 World Parliament of Religions along with Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Native Americans, Sikhs, Unitarians, Zoroastrians, and indigenous religions. This article will explore some of the issues involved in the sociological analysis of the status of the Bahá'í Faith.

World Religion?

There is no clear definition of the term “world religion.”⁵ On a simplistic level, the term refers to independent religious traditions practiced throughout the world. World religion books tend to include a core of five—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The addition of others, such as Sikhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and the Bahá'í Faith, is variable. In contrast, there is the category “traditional/indigenous/primal religion,” which refers to the Australian Aboriginal, African, Melanesian, Maori, and North American, Mesoamerican, and South American Indian religions. The label “traditional” “is not meant to suggest that these religions are static and unchanging, but is simply one way of distinguishing them from the major world religions which have spread themselves more widely across many different cultures and which tend to be, therefore, less confined to and by any one specific socio-cultural matrix” (Clarke, “Traditional Religions” 63). Geographical distribution would then appear to be the primary criterion by which to judge world religion status.

Does the Bahá'í Faith meet this criterion? Sociological evidence that it does is provided in a study of the contemporary developments of the Bahá'í Faith by Peter Smith and Moojan Momen in their article in *Religion*. In a survey of the growth, expansion, and development of the Bahá'í Faith from 1955 to 1987, they conclude that it appears to have earned the label of a world religion:

massive expansion of the religion has occurred [in the last thirty years], so that Baha'i claims to the status of a world religion now begin to appear credible. This expansion has also completely transformed the religion's social basis: what was formerly a predominantly Iranian religion with a small but significant Western following has become a world-wide religious movement, with its major membership in the Third World and with an enormous diversity of followers in terms of religious and ethnic backgrounds. (Smith and Momen, “Survey” 83)

In support, Smith and Momen compare the numbers of Bahá'ís in eight different “cultural areas” of the world in 1954, 1968, and 1988. The striking change occurs from 1954 to 1968. In 1954, Bahá'ís in Iran composed 94% of the total worldwide Bahá'í population: In 1968 this figure had dropped to 22%, and to 6% in 1988. In contrast, the numerical dominance of the Third World is now clear, with 91% of Bahá'ís living in these areas in 1988 (“Survey” 72–73). The same impression is given by comparing the distribution of local Spiritual Assemblies (LSAs) and localities throughout the world. Smith compares the percentage of LSAs in the three “cultural worlds”—the Islamic heartland, the West, and the Third World—in 1928, 1945, 1968, and 1983. Again the significant difference is the period 1945 to 1968. In 1945, only 9.9% of the LSAs were in the Third World compared to 79.9% in 1968 (Smith, *Babi and Baha'i* 165). Smith suggests that the breakthrough into the third “cultural world”—the Third World—only started to occur in the late 1950s. “In 1950, for example, there were not more than a dozen Bahá'ís in the whole of [sub-Saharan] Africa,” while in 1968, the proportion of LSAs that were formed in sub-Saharan Africa was 29.8% of the whole Bahá'í world (Smith, *Babi and Baha'i* 190, 168–69). This geographical change was accompanied by an increase in the diversity of the sociocultural background of the Bahá'í community. Large numbers of tribal minorities and rural illiterates became Bahá'ís. Smith argues that the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith into the Third World is one of the most important aspects of the religion's development, “vastly changing the social composition of its adherents and realistically establishing its claims to be a world religion” (Smith, *Babi and Baha'i* 190).

By comparing the geographical distribution of the world's religions, Barrett's statistical analysis complements the above work. This analysis demonstrates that in mid-1992, the Bahá'í Faith had “a significant following” in 220 countries with a worldwide membership of 5.5 million. This geographical distribution is second

represent with interesting objects.... Clearly the Bahá'í Faith does not meet these somewhat crude and simplistic criteria” (from a letter dated 6 May 1993 from Mark O'Neill to Allan Forsyth). The museum includes sections on Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism in its major displays.

⁵ Some academics have questioned the usefulness of the term altogether Fitzgerald has argued that the idea of a “world religion” was created by liberal Christian theology in order to study and dialogue with other major religious traditions with universalist claims (“Hinduism” 104). Whatever the merits of this case, there are important practical implications of the term “world religion” in areas such as university religious studies, religious education, and interreligious dialogue and cooperation. I am grateful to Robert Parry for drawing this reference to my attention.

only to Christianity, which has a following in 252 countries, and is greater than Islam (184 countries), Judaism (134 countries), Hinduism (94 countries), and Buddhism (92 countries). In contrast, “New-Religionists,” which include followers of “20th century Asian religions and new religious movements,” have only spread to twenty-seven countries (Barrett, “World Religious Statistics” 270).

A number of writers have concluded that the Bahá’í Faith is a world religion because of its widespread geographical distribution. Elvin Johnson, whose Baylor University doctoral thesis studied the development of the Bahá’í Faith, states that “since its birth in 1844 the Faith has spread to all parts of the world and may be called quite appropriately a world religion” (Johnson, “Challenge” 39). *The Chambers Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions* notes that “since World War II, and especially in recent years, it [the Bahá’í Faith] has expanded significantly into the Third World, where it now has its main strength, and for this reason it is fair to call Baháism a world religion in its own right” (55). Even the Reverend William Miller, an author of anti-Bahá’í polemical literature, has admitted that “whoever peruses the thousands of pages of the thirteen volumes of *The Bahá’í World* will be impressed by the fact that the Baha’i Faith is indeed a world faith” (*Baha’i* 349).

There are, however, two major criticisms of the criterion of geographical distribution. MacEoin, in arguing that the Bahá’í Faith is not a world religion, has contested Bahá’í statistics on geographical distribution as misleading on the grounds that the spread of the Bahá’í Faith has been “the result of conscious, somewhat forced planning ... rather than natural or sustained growth” (“Permanent” 88). It would appear then that MacEoin is suggesting that growth by “unconscious planning” is a necessary condition for a world religion. Notwithstanding the fact the notion of “unconscious planning” is oxymoronic, the connection between the consciousness of a religion’s planning and its status as a world religion is hard to fathom. Why exclude, by definition, proselytizing religions (Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism) from the category of world religion? Which religions have expanded unconsciously? What MacEoin may have intended is that the growth of the Bahá’í Faith has been by *centralized* planning. But the same question applies: If Christianity has grown by centralized planning, why should it diminish its claim to be a world religion?⁶ Nevertheless, MacEoin has identified a number of legitimate problems with these statistics, including the “lack of accurate figures for disaffiliated and inactive believers,” difficulty in estimating “how successful post-registration consolidation has been in mass-conversion areas in the Third World,” and “the problems of multiple affiliation” in some areas (“Baha’ism” 493). Presumably these difficulties are not confined to statistics on the Bahá’í Faith alone.

The second problem inherent in focusing solely on geographic distribution is that such focus would imply that religions which are predominantly confined to a single people or ethnic group (the “ethnic religions”) but have dispersed, such as Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Sikhism, are world religions. These religions are still limited largely by one specific sociocultural matrix, suggesting that they are not truly world religions. This point was made over a century ago by Kuenen, a professor of theology at Leiden, in the 1882 Hibbert Lectures, in which he argued that there must be a “genuine universalism” for the world religions: “[T]hat which is to combine with every nationality, satisfying the special needs of each, must not be inseparably bound to any one nation” (Kuenen, *National* 8). This line of thought would suggest that geographical distribution is a necessary rather than a sufficient condition in defining world religion. The other necessary condition is thus sociocultural diversity.⁷ The Bahá’í Faith meets both these conditions. Not only has it spread to at least 232 countries and dependent territories, the Bahá’í world community is also represented by over 2,100 tribes, races, and ethnic groups (*The Bahá’ís* 7), possibly second only to Christianity in its ethnic diversity.

Relevant to this discussion are the qualities of a religion that enable it to emancipate itself from the boundaries of one particular social and cultural unit. Timothy Fitzgerald notes that there is “one crucial qualification” for a religion to become a world religion: “It must develop a universal message, a doctrine of salvation that is sufficiently transparent to be potentially available to adherents in a variety of cultural contexts” (“Hinduism” 104). This is the theological sense in which a particular religion is a world religion. The example of Christianity, world religion’s “ideal type,” is instructive. Christianity started off as a religious movement of Palestinian Jews but soon spread beyond this. The universalist claim of Christianity led to the development of some degree of theological abstraction and institutional flexibility so that its message of salvation could be exported and transplanted into different social groups who then could interpret and act upon it according to the context of their

⁶ One could argue that Christian missionary efforts over the last few centuries in order to spread the Gospel over the entire surface of the globe have been undertaken in a more “forced manner.” The very nature of traditional missionary work differs sharply from Bahá’í pioneers who are generally expected! to be self-supporting and to undertake employment in their new community. In addition, systematic planning was a characteristic of early Christianity. To take one notable example, the New Testament documents the strategies of St. Paul to bring Christianity to the Gentiles (see Acts 16:1, Thess. 2:2, Titus 1:5).

⁷ For a delineation of the necessary conditions for a religion, see Wilson’s twenty standard criteria (*Social Dimensions* 279–81).

own cultural life (Fitzgerald, “Hinduism” 109). The role of theologians, such as St. Paul and Origen, was central to its transformation to a world religion:

It [Christianity] was, from the beginning, universalist in scope and aim. St Paul, by giving it an internationalist thought-structure, made it a religion of all races; Origen expanded its metaphysics into a philosophy of life which won the respect of the intellectuals while retaining the enthusiasm of the masses, and so made Christianity classless as well as ubiquitous. (Johnson, *History of Christianity* 515)

Related to the theological qualifications above are practical measures that enable a religion to leave its sociocultural background. Fitzgerald describes these other necessary conditions: it needs to be literate; to have scriptures that can be translated into different languages; to have a special class of interpreters who can act as missionaries; to appeal to large numbers of people; and to appear to transcend cultural boundaries (“Hinduism” 104).⁸

Therefore the study of world religions needs to start with the theology of the religions—Do they offer salvation to all peoples? Can they appeal to people of different cultures and social backgrounds?⁹ Do they have the flexibility to allow for diverse expressions of spirituality? In this sense, the Bahá’í Faith has clear theological qualifications for world religion status. There are the explicit and many universalist claims in Bahá’í scripture,¹⁰ the adaptation of Bahá’í teachings by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the concerns of Christians and Westerners, and later, Shoghi Effendi’s coordination of the diverse activities, from translating the Bahá’í writings to setting missionary goals, that progressively led to the establishment of the Bahá’í Faith throughout the world.

In summary, I have argued that the necessary conditions for a world religion include theological confirmation of universalist aims and possibilities in addition to the empirical evidence demonstrating widespread geographical distribution and sociocultural diversity. With the expansion of the Bahá’í Faith into the Third World in the late 1950s, its potential as a world religion was fulfilled. Three sets of statistics demonstrate this conclusion—the changes in the worldwide distribution of Bahá’ís, their local Spiritual Assemblies, and the number of countries in which the Bahá’í Faith has a significant following.

Counterarguments

However convincing the case for the Bahá’í Faith as a world religion, most textbooks of religion and academic writing on comparative religion do not treat it as one. Introductory surveys of the world religions rarely discuss the Bahá’í Faith in depth, some not at all. For instance in 1946, there was no mention of the Bahá’í Faith in Jurgi’s *The Great Religions of the Modern World*, and only one passing reference in Ferns’s 1957 *Encyclopedia of Religion*. More recently there was no mention in the U.K.’s Open University’s 1978 resource volume *Man’s Religious Quest*, the 1974 *Historical Atlas of the Religions of the World*, Neilsen’s 1988 *Religions of the World*, Raush and Voss’s 1989 *World Religions*, Smith’s 1994 *Illustrated World Religions*, and Langley’s 1994 *World Religions*. Thematic books such as Bowker’s *Problems of Suffering in the Religions of the World*, Parrinder’s *Mysticism in the World’s Religions*, Thompson’s *World Religions in War and Peace*, Coward’s *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions*, Cooley’s *After Patriarchy, Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, Sharma’s *Women in World Religions*, Cohn-Sherbok’s *World Religions and Human Liberation*, Rouner’s *Human Rights and the World’s Religions*, and Slater’s *World Religions and World Community* have included no discussion whatsoever on Bahá’í teachings on these issues.

While this lack of inclusion seems to imply that the Bahá’í Faith is not a world religion, one is hard pressed to find explicit arguments justifying the exclusion of the Bahá’í Faith. Among writers who provide some arguments, there are two types—on quantitative and qualitative grounds—against its classification as a world religion. An example of the first argument is mentioned in a textbook, which states that the Bahá’í Faith lacks “a major presence

⁸ Manichaeism, Christianity’s main rival in the fourth and fifth centuries, possibly failed to sustain its early promise because it was not classless enough. While it spread from China to Spain during Mani’s lifetime (216-276 cc.), and by the sixth century had followers from the Pacific to the Atlantic; by the eighth century it had virtually disappeared. Conner explains its failure due a combination of its teachings (antisocial, extreme asceticism, too esoteric for the average believer) and its corrupted Church, which complicated doctrine beyond intelligibility (*Mani and Manichaeism*).

⁹ Momen’s “wider” definition of the term extends this to include all psychological and spiritual types: “We may now define world religion as one which satisfies the need and fulfills the expectations of all types of humanity, i.e. it must be true to the various viewpoints of the different types of human soul-psyche complex” (“World Religion?” 57).

¹⁰ See Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 222, *Gleanings* 243. Even the Qayyúmu’l-Asmá, the first revealed work of the Báb, challenged the rulers of the earth to deliver the Báb’s message to “lands in both the East and West” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 7).

in any one country” (“Bahais” in *Contemporary Religions* 95–96). This criterion appears peculiar—what does a major presence in *one* country have to do with being a *world* religion? Would this mean that Chondogyo (14% of North Koreans) and Shintoism (40% of the Japanese) have claim to world religion status (*Chambers Dictionary* 584, 587)? Even if we adopt this criterion as a necessary condition (which I am not proposing), this same textbook lists Tokelau as having 10% of its population Bahá’í (*Contemporary Religions* 449). Iran and India also have major presences of Bahá’ís, with approximately 300,000 and 1,000,000 respectively.

Chouleur “remains doubtful” because he is not convinced that “a scattering of believers, a handful of ‘Pioneers of the Cause’ [will] ever secure a majority on this planet” (“Bahá’í Faith” 17). This condition appears strange in light of the fact that none of the world religions has ever secured “a majority on this planet.”

Other quantitative counterarguments are made by MacEoin who contends that the realities of “Bahá’í membership” and “chronological span” make world religion “a problematic category” (“Review” 453). He argues that in terms of numerical size, the Bahá’í community is not comparable to the other world religions. It is relatively uncontroversial to suggest that numerical size is a characteristic of world religions,¹¹ but it is clearly not a sufficient condition. If it were, it would present the bizarre hypothesis that Chinese traditional religion with a membership of 187 million was more of a world religion than Judaism with seventeen million followers (Barrett, “World Religious Statistics” 270). If MacEoin is proposing that it is a necessary condition, then it is unclear what numerical size would be the threshold for a world religion and what the relationship is between numerical size in one country compared to worldwide numbers. The same argument can be used against the criterion of “chronological span.” It is not used by sociologists of religion.

Qualitative counterarguments have been put forth by Chouleur who is not certain that “a scattering of believers . . . [will] even develop into a strong enough minority to play a decisive part in the creation of a higher civilization” (“Bahá’í Faith” 17). The problem with his argument is that it is not clear what “higher civilization” means, and Chouleur himself does not provide a definition. It is inappropriate to use a vague concept in a definition when trying to clarify the latter. Even if we construct a definition for Chouleur the Bahá’í community would appear to fulfil it in terms of its contribution to socioeconomic development. Since Chouleur’s article was written in 1977, the international Bahá’í community has focused more of its energies on the “creation of a higher civilization” attested by the 1300 educational, environmental, social, and economic development projects launched by Bahá’í communities worldwide.

MacEoin also notes that lack of Bahá’í “cultural influence” makes world religion “a problematic category” (“Review” 453). Even though cultural influence forms only part of the “material dimension” of Smart’s seven dimensions of the world’s religions, Smart mentions the distinctive architecture of Bahá’í temples as a significant cultural expression (*World Religions* 479). The interest generated in the architectural community by the construction and design of the House of Worship in New Delhi supports this observation.¹² Besides the Persian and Arabic sacred writings in the field of literature, the contribution of the poetry of Táhirih and Robert Hayden, the calligraphy of Mishkín-Qalam, the art of Mark Tobey, and the pottery of Bernard Leach are other examples of Bahá’í artistic influence across different cultures. Significantly there are Bahá’í hymns, used by the American Bahá’ís earlier this century, Bahá’í Bhajans, traditional devotional songs used by Indian Bahá’ís in mass teaching campaigns, and Bahá’í Haiku, short mystical Japanese poems.¹³ Diverse cultural expressions of a particular religion would be a natural consequence of a religion’s spreading around the world and not being bound by one culture, and it would seem reasonable to suggest that it is a necessary condition for a world religion. Indeed, the necessary condition of sociocultural diversity discussed above should embrace this aspect of a religion’s influence.

In summary, there are two types of counterarguments to the Bahá’í Faith’s claim to be a world religion. The first type involves quantitative measures such as a major presence in one country, overall numerical size, and length of history. The second type relates to qualitative aspects such as cultural influence. In each case, the appropriateness of the criteria for the definition of world religion is discussed. Of these, the diversity of a religion’s cultural expression is the only condition to correlate with its status as a world religion.

Contemporary Judgments

Encyclopedic references on the Bahá’í Faith in the seminal *Encyclopedia of Religion*, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, and *New Twentieth-Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* describe it as a “world

¹¹ The Bahá’í Faith is the world’s eighth largest religion after Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese folk religion, Sikhism, and Judaism (Barrett, *World Religions* 270). However, the annual growth rate of the Bahá’í Faith from 1970 to 1985 is the fastest at 3.63% (Parks, *Sacred Worlds* 131).

¹² See, for example, Sabikki, “India Baha’i temple”; Sahba, “Baha’i House of Worship”; and Fisher, “A Second Sydney.”

¹³ See Armstrong-Ingram, *Music, Devotions* 38–118; Garlington, “Bahá’í Bhajans”; and Ishihara, “Bahá’í Haiku.”

religion.” *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam* calls it a “universal religion.” The entry in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* argues that because the Bahá’í Faith appeals to all humankind and has established itself in most countries, it can already be considered among the world religions.

Other individuals who refer to the Bahá’í Faith as a world religion include the Protestant theologian Friedrich Heiler. In looking at the life and claims of Bahá’u’lláh, he judged that “as an historical phenomenon, the Bahá’í religion therefore stands in equal status with the other universal religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity” (quoted in Schaefer, *Bahá’í* 17). The historian Arnold Toynbee noted that “Baháism is an independent religion on a par with Islam, Christianity, and the other recognized world religions” (letter to Dr. N. Kunter, Istanbul, Turkey, 12 August 1959, quoted in *The Bahá’í* 10). Peter Meinhold, professor of Protestant theology at the University of Kiel, has argued that a particular religion can be called a world religion if it can demonstrate its contemporary relevance¹⁴ and concluded that the Bahá’í Faith meets this condition (*Die Religionen* 317–18). Roger Schmidt, who teaches comparative religion at a college in California, makes a distinction between the world religions and two “nascent world religions”—the Bahá’í Faith and Mormonism (*Exploring* 57). Warren Matthews of Old Dominion University also describes the Bahá’í Faith as one of the “more recent world religions” along with the Mormons, Theosophists, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (*World Religions* xv). Carsten Colpe, professor of Church history and dogma at the University of Kiel; Geoffrey Parrinder, professor of comparative religion at the University of London; Alan Dowty, professor of international studies at Notre Dame University; and Paul Allen, a human rights specialist, are other individuals who have referred to the Bahá’í Faith as a world religion in their publications.¹⁵ Various educational materials for high school religious studies teachers and students also list the Bahá’í Faith among the world religions.¹⁶

New Religious Movement?

As an alternative to world religion, the term “new religious movement” (NRM) has found widespread usage in the academic literature in the sociology of religion. Classifying the Bahá’í Faith as an NRM has been advocated by some writers. For example, MacEoin states that it is “almost certainly the largest and fastest-growing of the NRMs” (*Emerging* 1), and Ebaugh and Vaughn, sociologists at the University of Houston, present the Bahá’í Faith as “one of the ‘new religious movements’ in the sense that the Baha’i movement in the United States has gained momentum in the last twenty years” [written in 1984] (Ebaugh, *Ideology* 148). It would appear that the Protestant theologian John Hick is thinking similarly when he lists Bahá’u’lláh with the founders of other NRMs: “There are also lesser founders of new traditions or sub-traditions, such as Guru Nanak, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Baha’ullah [*sic*], Annie Besant, Kimbangu, Mokichi Okada, and many others, whose movements presuppose and arise out of one or other of the existing traditions” (*Problems* 75). Hutchison of Claremont Graduate School treats the Bahá’í Faith as an NRM springing from Islam like Subud and Nation of Islam (*Paths* 516), as does the university textbook *Man’s Religions*, which places it among “various movements prophetic innovation and syncretism” along with Ahmadiya and the Black Muslims (Noss, *Man’s Religions* 543–44). However, the 1993 *State of Religion Atlas* explains that “Baha’is do not consider themselves to be a sub-group of Islam” but still lists the Bahá’í Faith among NRMs (O’Brien and Palmer, *State* 105, 135).

NRM serves as an umbrella term for an enormous diversity of phenomena ranging from doctrinal deviation within world religions to fleeting fashions and spiritual enthusiasms of a questionably religious kind. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* provides a useful definition of this term. In his overview article, Bickford, a sociologist of religion at the University of Durham, states, “The term new religious movement connotes the more or less simultaneous appearance in the 1960s of a number of separate innovations which together seem to amount to a new force in the field of religion.” He adds that the term was first applied by social scientists to “the bewildering variety of spiritual enthusiasms that emerged in the West in the 1960s, gathered momentum in the 1970s, and that began to slacken in the 1980s” (“New Religions” 391). The term NRM is applied to a set of newly observed groups, and Barker, along with some other sociologists, uses the Second World War as a starting point (Barker, *New Religious*

¹⁴ “The religion in question must itself lay the claim of representing a world-encompassing mission; the modern experience of world unity must be part of its self-concept; it must pose itself the question as to what part it can play in the solution of the world’s problems; and finally the religion must come to terms with the plurality of religions and resolve this question in a manner which does justice to today’s world view” (quoted in Schaefer, “Bahá’í Faith” 18). Schaefer has demonstrated that all these criteria are fulfilled by the Bahá’í Faith (“Bahá’í Faith” 9–20).

¹⁵ See Schaefer, *Bahá’í* 18; Parrinder, *World Religions* 108; Dowty, “Iran’s Unholy War”; Allen, “Baha’is of Iran.” Joachim Wach in his 1947 classic *Sociology of Religion* included “Babism” as a world religion “[i]n spite of the smaller numbers of adherents” (134). Presumably he meant the Bahá’í Faith.

¹⁶ See Balta et al., *World Religions: Fast and Present*; *World Religions in Education: Religion and Story*; *The Shap Handbook on World Religions in Education*; and *World Religions in Education: Humankind and the Environment* 9–11.

Movements 145). This would appear to be the first necessary condition for an NRM. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that disagreements over definitions are common, and, as Barker explains, it is difficult to make any generalizations about NRMs due to the empirical diversity of these phenomena (“New Religions” 405). Wilson, a sociologist of religion at the University of Oxford, for instance, argues that NRMs “have in common only their newness at a given point in time” (*Social* 216), and Clarke, who heads the Centre for New Religious Movements at King’s College, University of London, contends that 1945 is this starting date:

The term *new* is employed chronologically to refer to all those religions that have established themselves in Western Europe, North America and Japan since 1945, and in Africa over a somewhat longer time-span. (*New Religious Movements* 149)

Other necessary conditions have been proposed by Eileen Barker, a sociologist of religion at the London School of Economics, in her standard introduction to the subject. Simply put, NRMs share three common characteristics: a predominance of first-generation believers; a charismatic leader; a narrow distribution of members with respect to socioeconomic status (middle-class and upper middle-class) and age (young adults) (*New Religious Movements* 11). As a worldwide historical phenomenon, the Bahá’í community fails to meet these conditions because:

1. There are large numbers of post-first generation believers in the Bahá’í community;
2. There is currently no centralized and clear-cut charismatic leadership in the Bahá’í community—arguably there has not been any since the death of Shoghi Effendi in 1957;
3. The socioeconomic status of Bahá’í communities is quite varied. Although many communities are predominantly middle class, the largest Bahá’í community in the West—America—has a majority of rural African-Americans living in the southern states with lower than average socioeconomic status. And worldwide, the community is numerically largest in rural villages in developing countries. If we add the fact that the Bahá’í Faith does not fulfil the first necessary condition because it had established itself in the West before the Second World War, then it does not meet *any* of the necessary conditions for an NRM.

It is noteworthy that none of the prominent sociologists of religion in the field of NRMs, such as Barker, Beckford, Wilson, Clarke, and Wallis,¹⁷ have included the Bahá’í Faith as an NRM in their published work. Indeed, a recent publication that lists the hundred significant NRMs in the United Kingdom does not include the Bahá’í Faith (Barker, *New Religious Movements* 165ff.), nor does Barker include it in a list of the main NRMs in Western and African societies in *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions* (460). It is worth noting that this lack of mention is not due to ignorance of the Bahá’í Faith, which Barker cites in another context in *New Religious Movements* (43–44). Furthermore, Turner, a sociologist from the University of Birmingham, explicitly omits the Bahá’í Faith from his survey of NRMs in Africa. He argues that NRMs “should be distinguished from the missions, churches or communities associated with these two faiths [Christianity and Islam], from other religious bodies that have more recently taken root in parts of Africa, such as Baha’i, the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as from the original primal religions of the African peoples” (Turner, “Africa” 187).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that there is no consensus as to the status of the Bahá’í Faith among specialists in the fields of religions studies and the sociology of religion. It has demonstrated that the criteria of geographical distribution with sociocultural diversity are the most appropriate ones for world religion and that the Bahá’í Faith meets these criteria. The case against the classification of the Bahá’í Faith as a world religion is presented and shown to rely on criteria that are not integral to the classification of world religions. The related question of whether the Bahá’í Faith is an NRM is also discussed. It is argued that as a worldwide historical phenomenon, it cannot be classified as an NRM because it started a century before the Second World War and does not share the common sociological characteristics of NRMs. While acknowledging the difficulties in determining criteria for the classification of a particular religion as a world religion and an NRM, this article has presented the case that the Bahá’í Faith is best categorized as a world religion.

¹⁷ See, for example, Wallis’s survey of the North American NRMs (“North America” 154–64). The Bahá’í Faith is also not listed in J. Gordon Melton’s *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*.

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