

BOOK REVIEWS

The Ocean of His Words: A reader's guide to the art of Bahá'u'lláh

Author: John S. Hatcher

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Reviewer: Sen McGlinn

The aim of this book is “to demonstrate how applying the tools of literary criticism can help readers become more creative and confident in studying the art of Bahá'u'lláh” (xiii). It explains the use of the principal tools of literary criticism in a way accessible to those without a formal education in literature. In this approach, “criticism” does not mean detecting faults and influences in a literary work, or ranking works by quality from classic to pulp, or of classifying them by genres. Literary criticism is art-appreciation as applied to literature. It enables the reader to get more out of a text by systematically applying specific questions. Each question corresponds to a particular branch of literary criticism and is dealt with in one chapter, providing a clear structure for the book as a whole. The book's virtues in explaining literary methods must be set against considerable shortcomings in methodology, the author's lack of knowledge in relevant fields, and the imposition of a strong ideological agenda at some points.

Narrative perspective

Chapter 2 deals with narrative perspective, which is to say, how it can illuminate our reading if we ask, “who is speaking to me?” Bahá'u'lláh says, “At one time We spoke in the language of the lawgiver; at another in that of the truth-seeker and the mystic” (35). Hatcher adds a number of other voices: God speaking in the first person, in the *Hidden Words*; the Maid of Heaven speaking about the prophets in the 77th Persian Hidden Word; Bahá'u'lláh as a prophet reflecting on his mission in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*; and the formal third person of theological argumentation in the *Book of Certitude*. Hatcher has difficulties in dealing with the prayers of Bahá'u'lláh, since in Hatcher's prophetology the Manifestation represents God's will to us, but does not manifest a human response to God. This forces him to read even Bahá'u'lláh's most heartfelt cries as “works ... narrated from the perspective of the believer ... the supplicant, not from the perspective of the Manifestation” (53). This is often a plausible reading, but not where Bahá'u'lláh says “Every man of insight who considereth what hath been revealed by me, will be persuaded that Thy Cause is not in my hands, but in Thy hands, and will recognize that the reins of power are held not in my grasp but in Thy grasp ...” (*Prayers and Meditations* CXXIX, cited page 58). The persona in this case cannot plausibly be God or the follower. It must be the Manifestation of God, as a suppliant, confessing his powerlessness before God. Any other reading is forced.

Historical criticism

Chapter 3 deals with historical criticism, that is, with the question “In what context

are these words spoken?" Since the revelation comes to us from a particular historical setting, it is often essential to study the circumstances to arrive at a valid interpretation. The primary context is the Islamic background. More specific information, such as the person to whom a work is addressed, may also be important. The chapter provides some examples, such as the importance of Bábí messianic expectations when reading the *Book of Certitude*, but does not tell the reader how to find relevant and reliable knowledge about the Islamic background. Given that the book is aimed at a readership without any training in the field, it would have been useful to provide descriptions of the most basic sources such as encyclopaedias, concordances, and introductory works on Islam and the history of the Middle East in that period. The chapter seems lopsided: it begins with a quotation in which Shoghi Effendi urges Bahá'ís to obtain a sound knowledge of the Islamic background (66), but the author has not done so himself. All the examples in the chapter draw on information from the works of Adib Taherzadeh concerning the *internal* history of the Bahá'í community. Hatcher supposes that the reader will not be able to find background information independently, but will obtain it from Bahá'í scholars (96). I think this is a pity: Shoghi Effendi clearly supposes that any Bahá'í can learn about Islam, and an opportunity has been missed here to encourage and help readers to make this study for themselves.

Genre and style

Despite its title, chapter four does not in fact deal with style, which would require reference to the original languages. Genre criticism addresses the question "In what literary form is this work written?" and (what Hatcher does not add) "what does this tell us about how to read it?" As he says, there has been little research on Bahá'u'lláh's use of Persian and Arabic literary models, and the author does not himself have the necessary knowledge of Persian and Arabic literature. This chapter is therefore confined to outlining nine broad categories: mystical treatise, lyrical works, doctrinal essays, gnomic verse, epistolary, allegory, prayers and meditations, homiletics and "documents of the covenant", of which the last is defined by subject rather than form or style. It was odd to find the *Hidden Words* classified as a collection of lyric poems; that most of the works classified as "gnomic verse" are neither gnomic nor verse; and that actual letters are not distinguished from the epistolary genre proper, in which a narrative framework is constructed from fictional letters.

Any use of literary critical methods without specific knowledge of previous literatures will inevitably lead to some false starts, since literary criticism consists largely of finding correlations, and then of selecting those that are relevant. Without a store of factual information to draw on, the methods may amount to no more than building castles in the air. There are large areas of Bahá'í scholarship in which Persian and Arabic scholarship are not a prerequisite, but literary criticism cannot be performed from translations, however accurate. Any word in the original may contain an allusion to a text or a concept that will be missed in translation. This problem runs throughout the book, but one example from this chapter will be sufficient by way of illustration.

As noted, Hatcher identifies nine broad categories of genre in relation to a passage in Haddad's translation of the *Surat 'ul Hykl* which says "We have caused the signs [*áyat*, verses] to descend [be revealed] after nine conditions [*'alá tis 'a shu 'ún*, in nine grades]." The Arabic phrase transliterated here reveals something

concealed in the English “nine conditions”. The word *shu’ún* points to the Báb’s *Kitáb-i Panj Shu’ún (Book of Five Grades)*,¹ a work which identifies five types of writing in the Báb’s corpus. One of the arguments Bahá’u’lláh is making here is in refutation of the Bábí criticism, mentioned a few lines earlier in the *Surat ‘ul Hykl*, that his writing is deliberately literary rather than flowing without premeditation as the revelation “is sent down.”² With one word (*shu’ún*) he reminds the reader that the Báb, in writing the *Kitáb-i Panj Shu’ún*, set out to compose one passage in each of the five “grades” each day: that is, he points out that revelation is not incompatible with planned literary artistry. Moreover, the Báb’s five “grades” in the *Kitáb-i Panj Shu’ún* do not in fact correspond to what we would call styles or genres in English literature. The fifth is simply Farsi works, and the others might be better called “modes of transforming semantic roots”. So it is a considerable assumption to suppose that “genre” as a concept of literary criticism corresponds to what Bahá’u’lláh had in mind when he spoke of “nine grades”.

Figurative language

The first section of chapter five explains how figurative language works. Later sections deal with metaphors, symbols, allusion and allegories, defining the terms, describing how they work, and illustrating their use. The chapter is a long one and the many illustrations it contains are one of the strong points of the book. Those based on New Testament texts show a good understanding of the literary criticism of the Bible.

It is unfortunate that the first example Hatcher chooses (181) to illustrate his approach to interpreting figurative language is the 72nd Persian Hidden Word, in Shoghi Effendi’s 1929 translation. This contains the ambiguous phrase “Thou art even as a finely tempered sword its value hidden from the artificer’s knowledge.” Hatcher supposes that “the artificer” is God, who made the “sword”, which would mean that the Creator does not know his own creation. Reference to Shoghi Effendi’s clearer if less poetic 1925 translation (“is unknown to the expert eye”) or to the Persian text (literally, “remains concealed from jewellers”), would have shown that “the artificer” here is not the maker of the sword, but buyers or valuers in general: it is a metaphor for the people of the world.

The section on tree imagery could have been much richer if Hatcher had known that the *Sadratu’l-Muntahá* is the same as the *Sidrat al-Muntahá* of Surah 53:14, a tree standing beside God’s throne at the highest point of paradise, representing the closest point to the Divine Presence that either humans or angels can hope to attain,

¹ See John Walbridge, “The Bab’s Panj Sha’n (Five Modes),” *Research Notes in Shaykhi, Bábí and Bahá’í Studies* 2.3 (April 1998). There may also be a reference to his *Kitáb-i Chahár Shu’ún* (Book of Four Grades, an alternative title for the *Kitáb al-asmá’*), that is, to Bahá’u’lláh’s writings as the sum of these two works of the Báb.

² The objection is stated specifically in the *Súrat ul-Haykal*: “*Má nazzalat álá al-fitra*”. *Fitra* or *fitrat* has a range of meanings in different kinds of Islamic literature and there does not appear to be any adequate treatment of *fitra* in the literature in European languages, so the reading here, as referring to spontaneity in revelation, is necessarily a personal interpretation from the context. It is clear that in relation to personal hygiene and adornment *fitra* refers to the natural appearance of the body as created in the image of God, and the extent to which it is permissible to alter this appearance; in the literature relating to the legal position of minors it refers to a sort of primal religion which children are considered to belong to at birth; and in rationalist Islamic apologetics it is the natural religion accessible by untainted reason.

and described in imaginative detail in the hadith³ and in Sufi literature. It is said to be a symbol of faith and virtue, its fruit representing the mystical experience. From its foot flow four rivers, which some say represent the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Gospel and the Qur'án. The entire community of the faithful can gather under the shade of a single leaf. It is hardly surprising that this is a repeated image in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. The same tree, in another guise, stands in the midst of the garden in Canto XXXII of Dante's *Purgatorio*.

Subject and structure

Chapter 6 deals with the patterns of ideas that tie together the various parts of a single work, using the examples of the Lawh-i Hikmat and the *Book of Certitude*. The Lawh-i Hikmat, and the Tablet of Ahmad in the following chapter, are referred to using paragraph numbers rather than page numbers, a welcome innovation that should be carried out systematically throughout publications of the Bahá'í writings in translation and in the original languages, so that we no longer need to refer to the same edition of a work in order to locate a reference.

Structural analysis of the argument of a single work is one aspect of literary criticism that can in principle be carried out from translations. However the Lawh-i Hikmat contains many terse allusions to issues in Islamic philosophy, the contest between the philosophers and the theologians of the early classical period, and the difficult reappraisals forced on the 19th century Islamic world by Western political and technological superiority. For this tablet, considerable background knowledge is required simply to discern the structure of the argument. Hatcher has not even picked up a point that apparently lies on the surface of the translation: that the Word of God is above and behind, and therefore not identical to, the words of a particular revelation (para 10, pages 140-141 in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*). He could have used this distinction to answer his own unresolved question in chapter 1: "If the Manifestations are perfect mirrors of Divine attributes and if Their speech is naught but the Word of God, in what sense is Their revealed utterance Their own art? And if this is not Their art but the words of God, then are we correct in studying Their words with the same tools we might use with the work of a human artist?" (9).

It would have been useful to say that each reader should do his or her own structural criticism, and not rely on a structure provided by someone else, since this method can both obscure and clarify the meanings in the text. In Hatcher's summary of contents of the Lawh-i Hikmat, the content summarised under points III.A, VI.A and VII.A (238, 241 and 242) is not even present in the original, and the "tablet" Bahá'u'lláh refers to in paragraph 35 is incorrectly identified (242) as the Lawh-i Hikmat rather than that heavenly "Tablet" which is the source of revelation as a whole. Hatcher's readings of paragraphs 34 and 35 are against the grain of the text, imposing a theory of literal verbal revelation which Bahá'u'lláh, in this tablet, denies.

Something similar happens in the heading to section IV (239). Bahá'u'lláh says "Make thou mention of this Day and magnify that which hath appeared therein. It will in truth suffice all mankind". Hatcher reads this as "*the knowledge of this Revelation will in truth suffice all mankind.*"⁴ That is, "what has ... appeared in this Day" is being equated with "*this Revelation.*" There is a parallel interpretation further

³ Bukhari, *Sahíh*, 1.345, 5.227, 7.514, 9.608.

⁴ Hatcher's interpretive interpolations are in italics.

on, where Bahá'u'lláh warns his “loved ones” not to “despise the merits of My learned servants whom God hath graciously chosen to be the exponents of His Name ‘the Fashioner’ ... Exert your utmost endeavour that ye may develop such crafts and undertakings ...” (para 41). This is addressed to Muslim leaders who rejected the technologies of the west because they were produced by a materialistic, non-Islamic science. Hatcher summarises this sentence as “*Don’t judge the ‘learned’ of Bahá by common standards*” (242). But is Bahá'u'lláh talking about his own revelation here? Let us return to “what has ... appeared in this Day” and consider its place in the development of Bahá'u'lláh’s argument. This is what structural criticism is about.

We can see that the previous paragraph (para 14) begins “Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator.” and continues “Nature is God’s Will and is its expression [*zuhúr*, manifestation].” If Nature is God’s Will, the natural sciences and the empirical scientific method of the west are a path to knowledge. Then those who manifest the name of God “The Fashioner” are the scientists, technologists, industrialists and designers of the modern world, who should be honoured. What “has appeared in this day,” by way of scientific knowledge and its application, is indeed wonderful. Bahá'u'lláh is saying that there is one “Word” or Primal Will which is the cause of existence, manifest both in nature (in the aspect “The Fashioner”) and in another aspect through revealed religion, and that the faithful should therefore respect the servants of science. But in Hatcher’s interpretation this becomes a claim that Revelation is sufficient, that science is in any case dependent on the inspiration of the prophets (119); that there is a religious class, the “learned” of Bahá’ who are exempted from judgement by “common standards”; and that “secular humanist scholars” produce unreliable “esoteric knowledge” (*sic*, 245).

These are readings that have lost all contact with the original text. The political agenda is clear, and should be put in the context of the continuing strength of the politics of conservative religion in the United States. Hatcher is writing in and for a society and a Bahá’í community that is, in this respect, quite different from those of Europe. There is a legitimate need to present the Bahá’í teachings in a form that will speak to one’s own society, and it is treacherously easy to slide from this to imposing interpretations that will align the Bahá’í Faith with particular social and political agendas, as has happened here.

The second part of chapter 6 deals with the structure of the *Book of Certitude*. Hatcher begins by saying that the *Book of Certitude* is structured around the theme set out in the first two pages of the work: “if we wish to acquire certitude that a Prophet is Who He says He is (i.e., God’s Viceregent), we must become detached ...” (247). But the opening pages of the *Book of Certitude* do not contain any claim that the prophets are God’s Viceregents, and reading the book as a whole will show not only that the term is not used there, but that the *Book of Certitude* is explicitly directed at showing that the sovereignty of the prophets does *not* imply that they must act as God’s governors in this world. “Were sovereignty to mean earthly sovereignty and worldly dominion, ... such [a] form of sovereignty would not be true of God Himself, the Source of all dominion” (125).⁵ Despite this inauspicious beginning, the 80-page detailed structural analysis is generally accurate, with some exceptions and a

⁵ References are to page numbers in the 1983 American edition of the *Íqán*. Readers using the 1946 British edition should multiply by about .64. In this case, the corresponding passage is on page 80. A uniform paragraph numbering system for the *Íqán* would be a considerable help.

notable omission that will be mentioned separately.

Putting it together

Chapter 7 shows how to combine the methods of literary criticism to achieve a “close reading”, using the Arabic Tablet of Ahmad as an example. Hatcher’s reading is an equal mixture of the devotional and scholarly, after the manner of Adib Taherzadeh or what were quaintly called “improvements” on Biblical texts in the 18th century. For example, one might doubt whether the coincidence of names in the two Tablets of Ahmad (Arabic and Persian) is really so significant, but the improving moral that Hatcher deduces from this coincidence is admirable.

Hatcher’s reading of “the reward of a hundred martyrs” as “the assistance of a hundred martyrs” cannot be sustained either by the translation or the original. The context one needs to interpret this promise is the distinction between an earned reward (*ajr*) and God’s power and freedom (*qadr*) to bestow grace, and the emphasis put on the latter in Islamic theology as a result of the Qadarite controversies. But this is a detail. The chapter is a good example of scholarship in service of the devotional life. At worst, more is being read *from* the tablet than is there, which is quite different to reading prior theological positions or political programmes *into* a text.

The six chapters (2-7) discussed above explain what literary criticism is and how it can be useful. Their virtue is in demystifying the critical method as such, rather than conveying new information about Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. Although the result is something of a curate’s egg, Hatcher clearly does have considerable skill in explaining how literature works and how literary criticism is done in practice. One can only regret that he did not work with someone with an equally deep knowledge of the Bahá’í writings and the Islamic background. Collaboration could have produced a much more useful book. Even as it stands, the sections of chapter 5 dealing with the New Testament, and chapter 7, can be recommended.

Methodology

I will now turn to chapter 1, left until last so that what must be quite fundamental criticisms should not obscure the book’s other virtues. This chapter begins with a less technical rewriting of Hatcher’s earlier paper on “The validity and value of an historical-critical approach to the revealed works of Bahá’u’lláh”,⁶ the title of which is self-explanatory. Part of the chapter proposes a methodology for the reading part of Bahá’í scholarship which is quite misguided, and which has a negative effect on readings throughout the book.

Hatcher himself seems to be struggling with his methodology. On the one hand, he asks “If the Manifestations are perfect mirrors of Divine attributes and if Their speech is naught but the Word of God, in what sense is Their revealed utterance Their own art? And if this is not Their art but the words of God, then are we correct in studying Their words with the same tools we might use with the work of a human artist?” (9). He argues that literary tools can be used, on the basis that the revelation is designed to speak to people within a particular historical, religious and linguistic context, and because much of literary criticism aims at analysing the reader’s response to a work without necessarily involving suppositions about its origin. On the other hand, he wishes to consider revelation as a special case for literary

⁶ In Moojan Momen (ed.), *Scripture and Revelation* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997).

criticism. As he says, "If we establish to our satisfaction that Bahá'u'lláh is a Prophet, then there is a distinct difference in the attitude we assume as we approach His art" (13).

The argument here is difficult to summarise with justice since it is partly expressed in what may be rhetorical questions, and is far from clear: it appears that Hatcher himself has not found a satisfactory way of expressing a position that involves accepting scientific methods while rejecting their underlying logic. He states that the prophets are entirely different to "human" artists, they "are preexistent, are perfect incarnations of all the attributes of God, and Their utterance is a precise expression of the Divine Will" (7). He concludes that this means, in their case, that there is no risk of over-reading the text, "... if His art is perfect, can we not rest assured that any effort we invest, however rigorous and imaginative, will never exhaust the potential meanings of the Prophet's craft?" (11-12). But, he says, we can make the same assumption about the masters of literature. "We have no qualms about trying to discover all manner of hidden meanings and elaborate structural patterns in a Shakespearean tragedy without ever worrying that ... we may be imposing something on the work that the artist did not intend and that the art does not uphold" (12).

This is odd in two respects. First, he is arguing that the Prophets are not human, are not just inspired men, *and* that they are like the literary masters. Second, the statement is not correct: it is quite possible to read meanings into Shakespeare's works or those of Bahá'u'lláh that were not intended: Hatcher himself does so. This is a question of the fairness of the reader, not the stature of the author. He argues that we should assume Bahá'u'lláh's writings have the status of a masterwork and approach them "with this kind of reverence," which is evidently the reverence of belief rather than of literary respect, since he continues "we can make this presumption only if we have proven to our satisfaction that Bahá'u'lláh's claim to Prophethood is correct." But why is the assumption even necessary, if it is not necessary before attempting a literary appreciation of Shakespeare? And what is achieved by it? He says (13) that "Over the course of time, Bahá'u'lláh's work will assume its proper place" (i.e., among literary masterpieces), so it might appear that this a question of giving them the high literary status now that we think they will have in centuries to come. But he concludes from this that "the standards by which we judge this art must often transcend criteria that are precisely quantifiable or empirically demonstrable according to the standards of contemporary scholarship," (13) so clearly he is not talking about literary status, or applying the standards of literary criticism according to their own logic.

My sense is that this approach has been adopted as a deliberate experiment, as an attempt to clarify through practice the implications of an approach whose imprecision and internal contradictions are felt by the author as much as the reader. Given the author's background, we can assume he understands "the standards of contemporary scholarship" and their rationale: how a critic or a reader brackets out *a priori* beliefs and any expectations about what a particular text will have to say, in order to read what is really being said. Or, as Bahá'u'lláh says, in a passage Hatcher cites, "he must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth." If it *is* experimental, the book can be read as a record of successes and failures in an attempt to define the much-discussed "new paradigm" of Bahá'í scholarship.

Subjectivism

Experimental or not, the overall results are clearly negative. Hatcher's method appeals to the inevitability of subjectivism to justify reading the text through an ideological framework consciously imposed on it by the reader. As he says himself, the approach could only be used or understood by a Bahá'í. Moreover, although he does not add this, it speaks only to a Bahá'í who both agrees with the approach in theory *and* shares Hatcher's theological position. Literature's capacity to speak across boundaries and share viewpoints and experiences between peoples of differing life worlds has been abandoned, and what is left can only be the murmuring of the like-minded among themselves.

The issues here have a significance that extends beyond the evaluation of this book, justifying a brief digression to mention three considerations which are often overlooked in discussion of the methodology of Bahá'í studies when performed by Bahá'ís. The first is that "bracketing out" one's theological *a priori* positions does not mean writing as if one has adopted the opposite viewpoint. It is not necessary to adopt hate to avoid being "blindly led into error by love." It is not a choice between reading "as if the Manifestation is an ordinary human being" *or* with the assumption that "the utterance of the Manifestation is perfect art precisely because He is inherently perfect" (23, 13-14). Rather we have to set aside what we think we have discovered as believers in order to listen carefully as readers.

The second is that this "setting aside" or bracketing out does not mean accepting the ideal of objectivism and all the philosophical baggage of modernism, abstracting somehow from our own existence as the reading subject. Objectivity, in the sense of a "fair" or "tactful" reading of the text, is the goal, but impersonality is not. Rather, we bring our literary subjectivities to the fore and press our believing selves into the background, because this is what the activity of reading for understanding demands. When we pray or read for devotional purposes the roles are reversed. It is a choice between our own multiple subjectivities, not between the subjective and an impossible objectivity. No absolute priority need be claimed for rationality over other aspects of the self. In fact reading is a literary act, and good reading is creative as well as analytic. But it is necessary to say that reading demands both the maximum use of our analytic and creative modes of being and the suspension of belief and disbelief.

Thirdly, if I decide to read Bahá'u'lláh's writings within the framework of belief that the author is a Manifestation of God, I also confine those writings within the limits of what I already understand "Manifestation of God" to mean. The way to avoid weighing "the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you" is not to put Bahá'u'lláh's writings in a special category exempt from "the standards of contemporary scholarship" (13), but to set aside whatever we think "a book of God" *ought* to be or say. We empty the category "revelation" of assumed meaning in order to let it be filled again from the particular passage we are reading. Or not to be filled, as the case may be (if we are honestly open in reading, there can be no guarantees about the results). This approach is functionally identical to the approach used in what is sometimes sneeringly referred to as "secular" scholarship, and it is the only appropriate method for the "reading" component of Bahá'í scholarship.

Having performed the reading, we may find that the text is open to two or more mutually exclusive readings, and may explicitly choose that which corresponds to the needs of the community as we conceive them and the world we would like to see in

the future, that is, to our political agenda in the broadest sense. This is known as *istihsán* or *istisláh* in the formal rules of Islamic exegesis. It is sometimes necessary, where the primary texts, with the best knowledge and rigour available to us, do not make one reading more probable. We may also wish to go “behind” the texts, to elaborate a theological rationale that seems to underlie what we read in the text itself. This may involve correlating it with other passages from the scripture, selecting those that suit our purposes, and building a theological system around the bare text. Again, this is legitimate, but in both cases the political agenda or doctrinal constructs should be explicit and distinct from the reading, *not* imposed on the reading itself.⁷

Another fundamental problem throughout the book, which may well flow from Hatcher’s methodological approach, is the very limited use of sources. Apart from citations from the Bible and Qur’án, and from Holam and Harmon’s *Handbook of Literature*, all of the sources used are written by Bahá’ís. None are written by those Bahá’í scholars employing literary and historical criticism who have adopted the method of “bracketing out” or “freeing oneself from love and hate” described above. That is, Hatcher is not only speaking to a like-minded audience, his selection of sources is so narrow that it resembles sectarianism. A scholarship worthy of being called “Bahá’í Studies” has to be prepared to seek knowledge “even from China”. Sources by non-Bahá’ís are indispensable in reconstructing the relevant historical contexts, textual allusions and genre conventions, and especially to understand the questions in Islamic theology and philosophy that Bahá’u’lláh answers. It would be ludicrous to try to construct Bahá’í scholarship as a closed shop. And surely, if the purpose of the book is to introduce Bahá’í readers unfamiliar with literature to the methods of literary criticism, it would have been useful to say that many scholars, from Browne onwards, have already been applying them to Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. Chapter 6 manages to deal with the Lawh-i Hikmat without mentioning Juan Cole’s “Problems of Chronology,” in *World Order* 13:3 (1979), and deals with the *Book of Certitude* without reference to Christopher Buck’s *Symbol and Secret*, the most extended application of genre criticism and other critical techniques to the art of Bahá’u’lláh published in English to date.⁸

Docetism

The decision to read within an ideological position – in this case a theological position – is clearly wrong in principle. The theological position adopted here is itself a problem. All theologies are necessarily partial, but Hatcher takes one aspect of Bahá’í prophetology and represents it as necessarily the whole (and as applying equally to Islam and Christianity). The aspect Hatcher emphasises can fairly be called docetism, the belief that the humanity and limitations of the prophet are only apparent, assumed for didactic purposes or for reasons beyond our ken.⁹

⁷ Examples of these two methods can be found in S. McGlinn, “Some considerations relating to the inheritance laws of the Aqdas,” *Bahá’í Studies Review* 5.1 (1995): 37-50, and *idem*, “A theology of the state from the Bahá’í writings,” *Journal of Church and State* 41 (1999): 714-729.

⁸ It will be noted that Hatcher explicitly took issue with Buck’s methodology in his review of *Symbol and Secret* in the *MESA Bulletin* 30 (1996): 70-1.

⁹ My use of the term is not meant to imply that the position is heretical in the Bahá’í context, although the corresponding position in Christian theology is usually labelled as a heresy. Individual doctrines are parts of belief systems, and their truth is to be determined in relation to the system. Susan

Hatcher's docetism is explicit in a passage on page 35, where he says that "the Prophet ... is a master of dramaturgy because he conceals His true identity in the guise of an ordinary human being. For example, he veils all the attributes, power and unspeakable glory of God in the persona of a lowly carpenter's son." On page 52 he says the Manifestation "appears in the guise of a human being ... he appears powerless ... [but] is fully capable at any point of extricating Himself ..." But in the *Book of Certitude* (73, 74), Bahá'u'lláh interprets "clouds" by referring to the fact that the prophets "have been subject to poverty and afflictions, to hunger, and to the ills and chances of this world." They are "subject to such needs and wants", "had to suffer whatsoever [their enemies] decreed" and "with respect to every human limitation" were the same as the people around them. When Hatcher summarises these pages in chapter six he tidies up the points contradicting his own theological position, by adding "seems" and "illusion of" at appropriate points (266). The humanity of the prophets is said to be an "image". On page 16 he says that "the experience in the Síyáh-Chál is presented *as if* it were something quite new and, so some extent, overwhelming ..." (emphasis added).

Again in the *Book of Certitude*, pages 184-5, Bahá'u'lláh says that he once "felt it necessary to refer to [Hájí Mírzá Karím Khán's] books, in order that We might answer Our questioners with knowledge and understanding. His works, in the Arabic tongue, were, however, not available, until one day a certain man informed Us that one of his compositions ... could be found in this city." This is inconvenient for a docetic theology, since Bahá'u'lláh's says that his knowledge and understanding was conditional upon the resources available to him, and that he did not have miraculous access to all published works. Moreover, Hatcher has already (241) given a literal reading of paragraph 34 in the "Tablet of Wisdom,"¹⁰ even adding a miraculous element not in the original ("We [*the Prophets*] receive Our knowledge direct from God, not from Our own devising."). In his otherwise detailed structural analysis of this part of the *Book of Certitude* (300), Hatcher has simply omitted the offending passage. This is evidence enough I think that what Bahá'u'lláh has to say is being accepted only in so far as it can be brought into accord with Hatcher's own agenda.

One implication of an emphasis on docetism is that there is no room for development in the Manifestation's ideas and art, or for chronology in literary criticism. So we have a book devoted to the literary appreciation of Bahá'u'lláh's works as a whole, without any mention of development over time, in terms of style, ideas, the types of works written and the audience addressed in the various periods. The Manifestations are supposed to be pre-existent as individuals and fully self-aware, presumably from birth. Hatcher cites Bahá'u'lláh's description of his experience in the Síyáh-Chál ("I was but a man like others ...") and refers to other similar statements cited by Shoghi Effendi that "imply that an essential change had ... taken place in the Prophet." He refers to, but does not cite, Shoghi Effendi's own characterization of this experience as "The first intimation which its Bearer received" of his calling (*God Passes By*, 101), but concludes that Bahá'u'lláh merely "received the summons to openly proclaim what he Himself had known all along..." (18).

Maneck also criticises Hatcher's docetism in her review of *The Law of Love Enshrined* in *Bahá'í Studies Review* 7 (1997): 114-16.

¹⁰ Page 149 in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, beginning "Thou knowest full well that We perused not the books which men possess."

A docetic approach is not illegitimate in itself, as one of several ways of thinking about the relationship of the Manifestation to God that are found in the Bahá'í scriptures and the Qur'án, ranging from "I am but a man like you." to "I am God," (*Gleanings*, 54). Corresponding to this, the Manifestation has a variety of roles, manifesting the will of God to us, and also manifesting for our benefit a perfect human response to God. Hatcher takes a slice out of this whole, starting with a very "high" theology of the Manifestation. Every reader will emphasise one or other of the many tongues in which the Bahá'í writings speak of the essential mysteries (the nature of God, of the Manifestation and of the human soul, life after death and the existence of evil). A reader without a wide knowledge of the Bahá'í scriptures may be unaware of the plurality of voices they contain. This is no difficulty, *providing* the reader ignores Hatcher's advice and is prepared to bracket out whatever conceptions he or she has already attached to the notion of "prophethood". Failure to do so creates a hermeneutic short-circuit: nothing may be learned from the text which does not conform to one's – inevitably partial – starting-point.

We can see how this works in the section on the dramaturgy of the Manifestation just mentioned (35). Having set out a docetic view, Hatcher goes on to quote a passage from *God Passes By* (1974 edn.) page 244, in which Shoghi Effendi says that the soul of the Manifestation, during his earthly life, was subject to "restrictions" and "circumscribed by ... physical limitations, its radiance ... beclouded by its human temple". Hatcher has simply not noticed that the quotation he uses does not support what he has just said. The theology Shoghi Effendi is using here is "kenotic", from the Greek *kenós*, "empty" or "without". A kenotic theology says that limitations such as suffering, mortality, powerlessness and ignorance to which a Manifestation is subject are real, and not merely a dramatic role adopted to preserve a secret or shield our eyes from too much glory. But kenotic theology accommodates a high prophetology by saying that these limitations, although real during the prophet's earthly life, were freely chosen by him in pre-existence when he "empties" himself of that aspect of the attributes which is proper to the Godhead.

Although this is clear in Shoghi Effendi's text, Hatcher has missed a meaning which would in fact have been useful to him. In the framework of a docetic theology he supposes that the art of the Manifestation is perfect (14) and not subject to "limitations imposed ... by His cultural perspective, by His intellectual background, by His academic training, or by His exposure to other writers" (11, 12), and then spends some time explaining why literary criticism may nevertheless be applicable. If we follow Shoghi Effendi at this point, and say that the soul of the Manifestation is indeed (temporarily) subject to "restriction ... imposed upon it", there is no need even to suggest such casuistic arguments. More to the point, if we can approach the text without supposing that we can already define the parameters within which it will speak, there is some possibility of learning something new from it. It is not that Hatcher personally is a bad reader, but that the methodology he has adopted makes bad readings inevitable.

Literary appreciation

The use of *a priori* readings not only makes it impossible to learn new truths from the text that might force the reader to modify previous ideas, it also interferes with a sensitive literary reading. In chapter 2 again (39-40, repeated at page 216), Hatcher cites the 19th Persian Hidden Word:

Have you forgotten that true and radiant morn, when ... ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise?

'Abdu'l-Bahá, according to Hatcher, says that the human soul begins at conception. As far as I know, 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not say this: the reference Hatcher is seeking is probably from a letter written by Shoghi Effendi's secretary to an individual believer, printed in *High Endeavours*.¹¹ What 'Abdu'l-Bahá says is that "the human soul has existed on the earth for prolonged times and ages" (*Some Answered Questions* 151). However the question of sources is incidental: for whatever reason, Hatcher works within a framework in which the soul cannot, *a priori*, remember "that true and radiant morn", because the concept of pre-existence is "contrary to explicit Bahá'í teachings" (216). Therefore he reads the Hidden Word as "reminding the human race as a collective organism of the guidance that has been given in the past through other Manifestations" (40). The negative effects of imposing a doctrinal position are evident here: the magic and mystery of a primordial dreamtime have been flattened to fit into historical time. The Hidden Word whispers in our ears, asking us to seek within ourselves and, in discovering our own transcendence, to realise that we were created from the beginning to respond to the Word of God. Hatcher reads it as conveying a universal and objectively verifiable truth to the race collectively – even though he has elsewhere said that the first person voice of the Hidden Words is used "to evoke a sense of intimacy and familiarity between the speaker and the reader" (37). Instead of invoking our own transcendent capacity, Hatcher reads the verse as asking us to study the history of religion: mysticism is reduced to prophetology, and

¹¹ (Anchorage: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976) 71.

the literary beauties are no more than potentially misleading statements that have to be explained away. The reading is distorted to the point of doing violence to the text.

If the text is allowed to say what it says, without being explained away, and is then placed alongside the references from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the letter published in *High Endeavors* that were just mentioned, it would be evident that the first speaks of individual pre-existence in a “time” before time (the “conference of Alast” described in the Qur’án, 7:172),¹² the second of the human species as coming into existence in time (evolution) and the third of individual pre-existence in this world (reincarnation). A sensitive contextual reading can reveal new insights, but only if the differences between the different texts are allowed to stand.

In summary, the book succeeds in showing that the tools of literary criticism can indeed be helpful, explains what they are in an accessible way, and demonstrates by its failure that the best literary training is of little help, unless one is also prepared to approach the text without presuppositions and to listen tactfully to what it is saying.

¹² “When thy Lord drew forth from the children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): “Am I not your Lord?” ‘Yes!’ they testified.”

A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith

Author: Peter Smith

Publisher: Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 2000, 396 pages

Reviewer: William P. Collins

Oneworld Publications in Oxford has published four in its series of one-volume concise paperbound encyclopaedias on world religions. Its volumes on Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity were published in 1998. Each of the earlier volumes contained a brief introduction and approximately 250 pages of very short articles. For these older religions, the concise encyclopaedias can barely do an adequate job of covering the main points of their long history. The new volume on the Bahá'í Faith is by far the best yet of the series. The Bahá'í volume is a substantial work of some 400 pages on a religion that is barely a century and a half old. It provides very good topical coverage in a single-volume overview of the Faith's key people, places, beliefs, and sacred texts. The encyclopaedia is the logical extension of *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary* by Wendi Momen (Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 1989), and it is an example of what Adamson and Hainsworth's *Historical Dictionary of the Bahá'í Faith* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998) might have been with more concision and tighter editing.¹³

Peter Smith, one of the best recognised names in Bahá'í studies, is widely respected for his careful scholarship, balanced assessments, and succinct presentation of complex ideas. Smith is social sciences coordinator at Mahidol University International College in Thailand and the author of the standard sociological study entitled *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Smith demonstrates in this encyclopaedia his stature as a researcher and his ability to organise a vast subject and capture the salient points in few words. The reviewer noted no serious errors of fact, and few statements of belief or practice that might be called into question by Bahá'ís.

The encyclopaedia has also clearly benefitted from relatively thorough and competent editing, which ensured a clear organisation and a reasonable freedom from grammatical and typographical errors. The volume includes a chronology covering 1844–1992, a list of abbreviations, an essay on further reading accompanying a good bibliography, and an extremely helpful thematic index in which related articles are compiled under several broad headings and subheadings. The articles treat significant people, places, events, beliefs, and scriptures. Black and white photographs, and a small number of maps and charts give the book some visual appeal. A few minor misspellings appear, such as the spelling Herrigal for Herrigel in the article WHITE, RUTH, a few incorrect transliterations of Persian words, occasional unexpected switches of tense, and two photos printed backwards that only the truly knowledgeable would notice.

Each article is well-organised, stating in the first sentences the gist of the definition or topic to be covered. References in the text to other encyclopaedia articles are clearly indicated by text in small capitals, e.g. PRAYER. Cross references are kept to a well-balanced minimum. The reviewer could find no dead-end references. In one instance, the encyclopaedia would have benefitted from a cross-

¹³ See my review in *Bahá'í Studies Review* 8 (1998): 73-79.

reference at SHRINE OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH to BAHJÍ, paralleling the article title at SHRINE OF THE BÁB. Many users of the encyclopædia will probably not know to find the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh under the article on Bahjí. Some additional references might have been included, e.g. in the article on GOD, a reference to METAPHYSICS would have helped the reader find the section of the latter article that deals with “God and the world.”

Inevitably in an encyclopaedia prepared by one individual, some expressions, concepts or infelicities recur. In an effort to be inclusive and non-sexist, the author several times introduces an ungrammatical structure such as: “Each individual should work to support themselves and their families” (128). This jarring form is easily avoided by rewriting the sentence as “Individuals should work to support themselves and their families.” In the article on SHOGHI EFFENDI RABBÁNÍ and elsewhere, the author writes of the Guardian simply as Shoghi. In deference to formal protocol in the Bahá'í Faith, as requested by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, it would be appropriate to append the title Effendi.

In writing of the GUARDIANSHIP some thought might be given to a more explicit differentiation between the institution of Guardianship and the presence or absence of a living Guardian. Given Shoghi Effendi's clear indication that the Bahá'í Faith cannot safely be divorced from either the Guardianship or the Universal House of Justice, this differentiation is essential. The Guardianship still exists as an institution. The Universal House of Justice, and national and local spiritual assemblies, all consult Shoghi Effendi's interpretations before making decision. His pronouncements as Guardian are normative for understanding what Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá meant. Therefore, while there was no way in which a living Guardian could be appointed by Shoghi Effendi, the institution itself still exerts influence to such an extent that the Universal House of Justice will make no decision without consulting his interpretations first.

We may well expect future editions of this encyclopaedia to be published. The publisher may wish to consider the following improvements: (1) Prepare a short introduction on the Bahá'í Faith, or one of Shoghi Effendi's introductory statements on the Faith's basic purpose, primarily to help the novice understand the basic context of the encyclopaedia. The other three volumes in the series benefitted from such introductions to the historical context of the religions covered, and it would be even more useful for a religion as relatively unknown as the Bahá'í Faith. (2) Include an index covering all names and subjects in the volume wherever mentioned. The thematic index should be retained. (3) Update the statistics on Bahá'í population in the chart on page 142, which contains information only up to 1988, although the encyclopaedia bears a publication date of 2000. (4) Include a few more maps, e.g. demonstrate the spread of the Bahá'í Faith using a two-page world map to accompany the article on EXPANSION. Admittedly, this might entail the use of colour, which would increase the book's cost, but it would provide a cartographic representation of aspects of the article. (5) Include several articles that seem to be lacking in the encyclopædia. Brief references in some of the articles suggest that more is needed:

- Holy Spirit: While this is touched upon in the article on METAPHYSICS, the importance of this concept to the Bahá'í and, in particular, the Christian, audience requires that it be given a separate entry. The article would deal with terms Holy Spirit and Primal Will, which Bahá'í scripture seems to treat as one

and the same.

- Joseph: Given the extent to which the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh compared themselves to the Biblical Joseph / Qur'anic Yusuf, this biblical figure probably requires an entry.
- Easton, Peter Z. / Miller, William McElwee / Richards, J. R. / Wilson, Samuel C.: The encyclopædia deals with Iranian opponents in individual articles. Certain individual Christian opponents are of significant importance and deserve separate entries also. The four listed here come to mind, not only because they wrote extensively against the Bahá'ís, but also because they inspired important apologetic literature, e.g. Easton inspired Mírzá Abu'l-Fal's writing of *The Brilliant Proof*.
- NICOLAS, A.-L.-M.: This article is far too short given the importance of the individual. He ranks in importance with E. G. Browne.
- Alchemy/Hermeticism: A brief reference in the article on HUMAN RACE indicates that one measure of humanity's maturity will be the transmutation of elements. There is nothing more said of this topic, which begs for additional clarification. An article on alchemical and hermetic science could prove useful background to a very difficult subject, particularly if some attention is given to "spiritual alchemy" and the process of human transformation.

The encyclopaedia is clearly a very handy reference for a wide audience: the novice who is studying the Bahá'í Faith, believers who are learning or teaching others about the religion's history and beliefs, veteran Bahá'ís who will use the encyclopaedia to check facts and verify basic concepts, and academics who need a quick and accurate resource. The references to other works included at the end of each article will send any users to the full background for their own investigation of the topic. The work is not comprehensive in terms of the possible universe of information about the Bahá'í religion, but its sound coverage of the most important topics makes *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith* a must-own for every English-speaking Bahá'í, and a model for organising future encyclopaedias on the growing community of Bahá'u'lláh's followers. It is also absolutely essential for the reference shelves of university, public, and theological libraries.

Revising the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology

Editor: J. A. McLean

Publisher: Kalimat Press, Los Angeles, 1997, xix + 231 pages

Reviewer: David Piff

Revising the Sacred is an anthology of essays by seven Bahá'í academics treating various approaches to and aspects of Bahá'í theology. Jack McLean introduces the book as the “first multi-authored volume dedicated to the understanding of Bahá'í theology per se as a free-standing discipline within Bahá'í studies.”¹⁴ It is, of course, impossible for an introductory volume, such as this one, to provide anything like a comprehensive coverage of Bahá'í theological issues, but the articles address a number of intriguing and germane topics. A common concern of the various authors appears to be an interest in broadening and deepening present Bahá'í understandings of the theological implications of the religion's sacred scriptures, and bringing some intellectual rigour to bear on prevalent understandings of Bahá'í teachings.

Dann May's essay, “The Bahá'í Principle of Religious Unity: A Dynamic Perspectivism”, is illustrated by a schematic chart (from the pamphlet *One Universal Faith*) showing the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation. Many readers will have seen the chart or something like it: God (in the upper left hand corner) communicates with man (in the lower right hand corner) via the holy spirit, mediated by a series of divine revelators, here presented in a table of two columns. The left column identifies the religion, the right the founder. The juxtaposition of this popular portrayal with May's essay is appropriate to the entire tenor of the volume, as, inevitably Bahá'í theological positions when examined systematically are a good deal more complicated and potentially problematic than their conventional representations. The “oneness of religions” is a fundamental Bahá'í teaching, but it is obvious that doctrines and practices vary widely among the world religious traditions. Further, which religions and prophets are actually mentioned in the Bahá'í corpus? May's essay helps clarify some of these issues, but its main purpose is to develop an appropriate characterization of the Bahá'í position regarding religious unity. May rejects the assertion that the Bahá'í Faith is simply “inclusivist”, a position which posits that all religions refer ultimately to the same truth (albeit in approximations) and may be represented within a “single world view” (17). The Bahá'í view is better characterized as perspectivist, in that it suggests that religious doctrines differ according to the historical and cultural contexts in which they were formulated. According to the Bahá'í model, perspectivism operates in two directions – from man to God and also from God to man, in that “ultimate reality also adapts or accommodates the understanding of Itself to the different historical periods and cultures of the world” (22). “Bahá'í doctrine,” writes May, “combines elements of perspectivism and transcendent unity, while situating the various religious traditions within an unfolding and progressive historical process” (26). May concludes his essay with a brief discussion of “radical pluralism” or post-modernism, the view that each religion contains irreducibly unique features and incommensurable insights –

¹⁴ This claim may not, strictly speaking, be accurate. *Soundings: Essays in Bahá'í theology*, a small, multi-authored collection of essays edited by Sen McGlinn, appeared in 1989 (Christchurch, NZ: Open Circle Publishing).

that they can never be reconciled as expressions of a single truth because the very nature of truth is pluralistic (17). May believes this position presents the greatest philosophical challenge to the Bahá'í principle of religious unity. In a few paragraphs he sketches some lines of response to this "threat". A lengthier, more pointed and detailed treatment of this important topic would be a significant contribution to Bahá'í discourse.

Stephen Lambden's "The Background and Centrality of Apophatic Theology in Bábí and Bahá'í Scripture" is an historical survey of the doctrine of the unknowability of God, a foundational Bahá'í teaching. In Bahá'í theological discourse, rather than being able to describe the Supreme Being, "one can only say what God is not or use negative theological (apophatic) language when referring to God" (38). The Bahá'í scriptures are replete with passages expanding on this theme. A key adjunct to this doctrine is that of the Manifestation of God, which in the Bahá'í view constitutes a source of indirect knowledge of God. Lambden writes, "The Bábí-Bahá'í doctrine of the unknowability of God is not a bloodless theological abstraction emphasizing cold remoteness, but rather one which points to and celebrates the truth of the fact that through the Messengers an intimate nearness to God can be realized. Through God's divine representatives, the Manifestations, God is closer to human beings than their 'jugular vein'" (38). An apophatic theology is thus not incompatible with the concept of a "personal God", a crucial point for Bahá'í devotional practices and the community's religious thought generally. Lambden's discussion provides an historical account summarising references to a transcendent, unknowable God in Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptures and in the writings of religious thinkers within these traditions, and cites specific examples of apophatic theological statements from Bábí and Bahá'í sacred writings and commentaries. The evidence Lambden marshals convincingly establishes the commonality of apophatic thought in the theological systems of Abrahamic religions, and underlines its importance in Bahá'í theology. Lambden concludes by suggesting that worshipping God for His transcendence can be a profoundly mystical experience.

Juan R. I. Cole's "Bahá'u'lláh and Liberation Theology" discusses scriptural sources for a Bahá'í theology of liberation – "a theology," in Cole's words, "that is grounded in a special commitment to the poor and the workers..., that includes their perspectives in the consideration of scriptural meaning, and that underpins reformist thought and social action by them and by others in solidarity with them" (81). Cole draws attention to passages from Bahá'u'lláh's writings that praise the spiritual station and virtues of the poor, insist on human equality and instruct the rich as to what they must do to reduce the suffering of those less fortunate, decry inequalities of wealth, exhort self-renunciation and charity, point to the need for governmental reform and link the issues of poverty and world peace; Cole further suggests that Bahá'u'lláh's special relationship with and sympathy for the poor may help explain the historical and contemporary predominance of the downtrodden among the world Bahá'í community. It is obvious that a major thrust of the Bahá'í scriptures is to encourage and bring about a just and equitable social and economic order, and Cole has eloquently and for the most part persuasively called attention to this important strand of Bahá'u'lláh's message. Unfortunately, Cole's readings are at times tendentious. For example, following citation of several of Bahá'u'lláh's *Hidden Words*, Cole suggests that "if being rich is a drawback on the path [of spiritual progress], being poor is an asset" (83). But Bahá'u'lláh's warnings against the

temptations of gold apply equally to rich and poor. Nor is it clear that Bahá'u'lláh really means us to understand from his writings that the poor are “spiritually superior to the rich” (84). It is also not entirely clear what Cole sees as an appropriate Bahá'í response to the present deeply flawed and iniquitous world order. He notes that “as a Bahá'í” he cannot advocate “any way of thinking that sanctions violence or class warfare, or indeed, entanglement in the petty squabbles of party politics” (81). He concludes his essay by a call to active engagement. “What is needed is not choirs singing to one side as corporate union busters intimidate on the shop floor or as the shock troops of an excessive industrialism murder Yanomamo Indians in order to despoil the Amazon rain forest” (95). Cole challenges readers to “listen to the poor... and join with them in radically critiquing the conditions of our collective existence” (95-96). One suspects that present-day Bahá'í activities in the realm of social and economic development, moral education and the promulgation of training institutes may not embody the radical critique that Cole has in mind.

Anjam Khursheed's “The Spiritual Foundations of Science” portrays science as an enterprise grounded in the intrinsic spiritual nature of human beings. Khursheed sketches a philosophical context for his position – an ongoing if unresolved critique (represented in the work of Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn and others) of the strictly empirical approach to science articulated by logical positivism. Despite this critique, in the mind of the educated public and of many scientists, scientific objectivity is still equated with the “application of formal methods and procedures, whether as observation, hypothesis or experiment.” Khursheed argues that “from a Bahá'í point of view, science is not founded on methodology, but is perceived to be founded on a spiritual faculty of human nature” (106). For Bahá'ís, science, as one of the creative activities of the human mind, is not separate from other areas of intellectual or artistic activity (108). Science, like religious reflection, is linked to consideration of profound cosmological mysteries. In a section devoted to “scientists and their experiences,” Khursheed briefly, and perhaps selectively, refers to the work of various noted scientists and mathematicians whose findings or writings point to the inadequacy of strictly empirical and logical scientific methods or in other ways lend support to the conception of scientific investigation as a spiritually based enterprise. By providing a critique of particular tenets of positivist science, exploring facets of a spiritual view of scientific investigation, and propounding connections between this view and the work and writings of major scientific innovators, Khursheed has helped elaborate and support the Bahá'í view of the harmony of science and religion. In my view he has not, however, fully engaged the philosophical foundations, tenets, perspective and methods of empiricist science, nor has he provided a clear picture of what an alternative to such science would be.

In “Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations” Seena Fazel presents a cogent, forthright, and economical introduction to the topic of discourse between religions. Bahá'u'lláh enjoined his followers to “consort with all religions with amity and concord” (quoted by Fazel, p. 130); ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, in his talks in North America, also often referred to this theme. Knowing one must undertake such discourse does not render the activity unproblematic – as Fazel notes, “declarations of commonality [among the world's religions] can be maintained only at a superficial level”; they “start to lose meaning as one goes deeper into the inner landscape, the experience, beliefs and practices of the different religious traditions” (130). Fazel describes the contributions such

discourse can make to Bahá'í self-understanding and to various fields of Bahá'í endeavour. Dialogue has transformative potential, for both Bahá'ís and for other religious traditions. Reciprocity, “the challenge to mutual transformation and change”, is integral to dialogue. “Bahá'ís,” writes Fazel, “naturally are not immune from the need for self-renewal” (136). One possible area of transformation is in the very concept of religion Bahá'ís present to the world. Dialogue between Bahá'ís and other religious communities can help further the Bahá'í peace program and reinforce the public perception of the status of the Bahá'í Faith as an independent world religion. At the same time such dialogue presents challenges – one being the relative lack of development of Bahá'í theology and secondary literature when compared to that of other religious communities. There is also the potential that dialogue could be manipulated into a “soft-sell” approach to proselytising. A further challenge is that interreligious dialogue can lead participants to alienation from their community of origin, as “dialogue brings about a growth in understanding and an extension of religious experience not shared by those who have not participated” (141). Fazel concludes by examining three bridges, the “ethical,” the “intellectual,” and the “mystical-spiritual,” that provide avenues along which interreligious dialogue can progress.

Keven Brown's “Hermes Trismegistus and Apollonius of Tyana in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh” is perhaps more a specialist's piece than other offerings in the volume. The two figures, about whom traditional accounts and historical sources differ, are associated in Bahá'u'lláh's Law-i-ikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), in which Hermes is named as the “first person who devoted himself to philosophy...who...set forth in every branch of philosophy thorough and convincing statements” (quoted by Brown, p. 154). Of Apollonius of Tyana (Balinus), Bahá'u'lláh states, “Balinus derived his knowledge and sciences from the Hermetic Tablets and most of the philosophers who followed him made their philosophical and scientific discoveries from his words and statements” (154). Brown briefly dissects the various strands of legend and historical tradition surrounding the two figures, noting that Bahá'u'lláh's statements clearly follow Islamic sources concerning them. Brown is interested in two questions: “what relevance does the Hermetic legacy in Islam have to Bahá'í thought in general, and what attitude should Bahá'ís take toward these references in view of the declared infallibility of Bahá'í scripture?” (154). In answer to the first question, Brown discovers parallels between concepts and statements in Hermetic and Bahá'í literature regarding cosmological questions. There is also a close parallel between statements in one of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets of the Elixir and the Emerald Tablet of Hermes as cited in an Arabic source. In both cases it seems to Brown that Bahá'u'lláh, at least in part, quoted or paraphrased the Hermetic source and implicitly, at least, confirmed it as authoritative. Brown suggests that the close parallels between Hermetic and Bahá'í texts in these and other areas will provide fruitful ground for future comparative studies. Brown goes further than this. The Hermetic writings refer to a “craft of nature”, a “hidden craft” by which the “alchemical elixir” can be produced. “Bahá'u'lláh,” states Brown, “believed in the truth of the hidden craft” (173). Brown suggests that Bahá'u'lláh chose to keep the reality of the “hidden craft” concealed from all but a few of his followers. Readers will be aware of tantalizing references in Bahá'u'lláh's writings to the alchemical transmutation of substances, and of Bahá'u'lláh's metaphoric use of alchemical processes to describe spiritual transformation, but may be uncomfortable with the

notion of occult elements in a religion supposed to be compatible with science and reason. The alchemical strand in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings deserves a more thorough discussion than Brown has provided here; I came away from the article somewhat unsure of the status and importance of the hidden craft in the general corpus of Bahá'í thought.

The discrepancy between the Hermetic tradition as reflected in the Islamic sources cited by Bahá'u'lláh, and the findings of modern scholarship relating to Hermes and Apollonius brings Brown's second question into focus. The issue is similar to that explored by Juan Cole some twenty years ago in his article "Problems of Chronology in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Wisdom".¹⁵ In light of the Bahá'í belief in the infallibility of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, Brown sees two alternatives for Bahá'ís: "the first," he suggests, "is to accept a non-metaphorical statement given in revelation as factually true, by virtue of the authority invested in the Manifestation of God, even though by the standard of current academic scholarship it is considered improbable" (176). Despite their being unverified, Brown sees no reason why Bahá'ís could not accept Bahá'u'lláh's historical statements in regard to Hermes and Balinus as factual. The second alternative is to see the statements more broadly and contextually – an instances of Bahá'u'lláh adopting a local tradition in order to make more important points. This remains an open issue for Bahá'í scholarship.

J. A. McLean's "The Possibilities of Existential Theism for Bahá'í Theology" assesses potential contributions of "believing" or theistic existentialism to Bahá'í theology. One significant contribution, for example, drawn from the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, is to restore an engagement between academic studies and the crucial issues of religion as experienced by the individual. "We may ... well ask" writes McLean, "where [does] such a vital reality as divine love fit into the philosopher's schemes?" (190). McLean argues that the "annihilation of the religious subject in the objective question" is a concern pertinent to contemporary Bahá'í studies of religion (191), and that "Bahá'í theology should retain as one of its major tasks... the provision of meaning or insight into the 'real life' of the individual" (192). McLean discusses a number of "defining points" of existential theism from a Bahá'í perspective: the "engaged subject" in the "search for truth"; living-in-the-world; overcoming "alienation from God"; "the personal mode in divine subjectivity"; existential and "epiphanic" moments; and the "realism of confronting self" (194) and concludes his essay with a consideration of existential meanings in Bahá'í history and scripture. Summary of McLean's presentation of these various themes is beyond the scope of the present review but I confess to having found McLean's essay an accessible and persuasive example of the values of scholarship he advocates.

In summary, this volume is diverse and rich with ideas, and repays careful reading and reflection. Editor McLean, the authors, and Kalimat Press deserve thanks for producing an important contribution to contemporary Bahá'í scholarship.

¹⁵ *World Order* 13.3 (1979): 24-39.

Leroy Ioas, Hand of the Cause of God

Author: Anita Ioas Chapman

Publisher: George Ronald, Oxford, 1998, 397 pages

Lua Getsinger, Herald of the Covenant

Author: Velda Piff Metelmann

Publisher: George Ronald, Oxford, 1997, 414 pages

Reviewer: Robert Weinberg

The writing of a biography is enormously challenging because any one person's life can be interpreted in many ways. Difficult enough as it is for most human beings to make sense of their own existence, along comes a writer who attempts to weave that life into a logical story, understand its events and incidents via a chronological time frame or through recurrent motifs or areas of the subject's life activities. Authors with different viewpoints may attempt to present and interpret the life of another from the perspective of their own sphere of interest – be it historical, psychoanalytical, or voyeuristic. Take any iconic or important figure of the past century - from Winston Churchill to Marilyn Monroe – and one can find literally dozens, if not hundreds, of biographies where the evidence of a life lived is picked over vulture-like time and again from differing perspectives and ideologies.

For a Bahá'í writer, the biographical process presents still further complications. Bearing in mind we still find ourselves in the earliest years of the history of the faith, many of the books about significant figures in Bahá'í history are the first of their kind. This may create a tendency for readers, writers and publishers to see such works as “definitive” when it would be natural to assume that a multitude of books about the faith's central figures, and the likes of Tahirih, Martha Root and Louis Gregory, will be written in the future, each of them approaching their subject from different thematic viewpoints.

Equally, the “heroic” acts of many of the figures under discussion have become the stuff of our sacred history. Therefore questions arise about how “human” a picture should be painted of such heroes. Will revealing certain controversial aspects of their human natures or personal lives diminish their status as role models? Or is there yet more inspiration to be had in the realisation that these people were ordinary human beings who despite tests and idiosyncrasies of their own managed to make a significant contribution? These, after all, are individuals whom devoted believers still name their children after. Some of these characters are remembered affectionately by people still living. And some Bahá'ís today are their offspring or direct descendants.

Two recent publications from George Ronald publishers take very different approaches to this task. A biography of Hand of the Cause of God Leroy Ioas – remembered and loved by many – has been written by his daughter Anita, and an account of the life of the legendary teacher Lua Getsinger, conveyed largely through her own collected letters and talks has been compiled by Velda Piff Metelmann.

Dr Johnson said “Nobody can write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him.” In that respect, Anita Ioas Chapman has an advantage over Velda Piff Metelmann in that she was able to observe the life and work of her subject from the most intimate of vantage points. However, even she

acknowledges that his workload allowed him little time to be with his children.

Leroy Ioas shines through this biography as a kind of all-American Bahá'í hero – energetic, talented, hard-working, practical, reliable and wise. From the age of 16, when he met 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Ioas was a dedicated servant whose life revolved around obedience to the centre of the faith. Although he was a railway executive for Southern Pacific by occupation, his talents were quickly recognised by Bahá'ís from his election to the national spiritual assembly of the United States, to his appointment as a Hand of the Cause in 1951 and then to direct service to Shoghi Effendi in Haifa as secretary-general of the international Bahá'í council and, after the Guardian's passing, as one of the "Custodians" of the Bahá'í Faith. On Ioas' arrival in Haifa, Shoghi Effendi told him, "You have had a brilliant career in the Cause, now this is the climax of it. Your work was not only satisfactory, but brilliant. Now you are reaching another stage, at the international centre of a World Faith. In your capacity as a Hand of the Cause and member of the International Bahá'í Council, you will be at the very centre - not at its circumference but at its very heart. Being its Secretary-General the work will revolve around you" (161). Ioas combined bullish determination, exhausting activity and unswerving faith to achieve his tasks and relieve Shoghi Effendi's burden of work.

What makes this biography more than the simple conveying of a life is that Ioas' story is recounted against the backdrop of historical events which saw the faith progress through the earliest years of its development in the west. It provides insight into the systematic plans of Shoghi Effendi in raising the administrative order, and how Ioas became his most valued and reliable right hand man. There is much to celebrate in this life and Ioas' daughter has fashioned an inspiring and readable account. She has not ignored the more challenging aspects of his character either. Ioas' intense involvement in activities that kept him away from home "deeply saddened" his wife, because "she almost never saw him" (126). Similarly, Ioas' interpersonal manner seems also to have attracted criticism. "Sometimes it resulted from his riding too roughshod over people's opinions, short-circuiting discussion to get things done. A colleague said he was 'not a great communicator'" (127). Ioas, like all who arise to serve the faith, had his own spiritual battles to fight, especially it seems in developing the virtue of patience. His daughter has done well to highlight quietly his struggle without diminishing the value of his mighty achievements and services.

The main frustration with Velda Piff Metelmann's work on Lua Getsinger is the one-sided account of the story largely owing to the author's almost total reliance on Getsinger's own letters and diary notes. The author has clearly had access to previously unexplored and unpublished sources. Yet some of the questions that inevitably spring to mind when Getsinger refers in her own words to a particular incident or a person's actions go unanswered or unsubstantiated because there is rarely another voice to respond or place a remark in context. This is despite the author's apparent use of Robert Stockman's works on American Bahá'í history that include information which would have given Getsinger's story greater coherence.

Otherwise this is a rich collection of previously unpublished materials charting the teaching expeditions and spiritual development of one of the faith's outstanding teachers. The author's desire to find out more about Getsinger grew from her being asked to deliver a talk on Getsinger at a women's seminar in Holland. She wondered why so little was known about this figure who became known as the "Mother

Teacher of the West”¹⁶ and “Herald of the Covenant.”¹⁷ She was puzzled that such a figure was called in her obituary by May Maxwell, “a bruised and broken reed trodden and crushed to earth”¹⁸ who died alone, “far from all those who should have loved her and cherished her as a priceless gift from God...”¹⁹ An earlier, inspirational but extremely hagiographic account by William Sears and Robert Quigley, *The Flame* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1972) did little to answer those questions.

What emerges is the story of a woman who genuinely did become aflame with love for the faith and determined to burn away her life in service to it. But her activities not only reaped marvellous victories, they resulted in her being the target of rumour and gossip, some of it possibly initiated and perpetuated by her increasingly jealous and resentful husband. Through many of these letters, the reader hears Getsinger’s version of events or her allusions to hurts inflicted upon her but one wishes for more access to Edward Getsinger’s point of view for the sake of balance.

At the beginning of the book, the author issues a disclaimer that “this book does not claim to be a complete biography.” While this book has much to recommend it, what it highlights is the need for more to be written about Lua Getsinger. Although many fascinating insights into an extraordinary life have already been unveiled, it will take yet more painstaking research and a more objective arranging of the facts to piece together the more intricate details of Getsinger’s later life. To that future enterprise, this publication will be a useful resource and starting point.

¹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1942) 643.

¹⁷ Juliet Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1983).

¹⁸ *The Bahá'í World* Vol. VIII 1938-1940 (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1942) 643.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 642.

The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach

Author: Moojan Momen

Publisher: Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 1999, 626 pages

Reviewer: Christopher Buck

Moojan Momen's *The Phenomenon of Religion* is a phenomenology of religion not to be confused with Ninian Smart's Phenomenon of Religion.²⁰ Note the distinction between the terms, phenomenon and phenomenology. Both derive from the Greek root, *phainomenon*, meaning, "that which appears." Add the suffix, *logos*, which means "reflection." The phenomenology of religion is a methodological approach to the academic study of religion, influenced by the philosophical phenomenology articulated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). It is the complement of the history of religions. Together, the history of religions and phenomenology of religion comprise what was once called the "science of religion" (German, *religionswissenschaft*) and, later, "comparative religion," the preferred term now being the academic study of religion, also known as religious studies. (The problem with the latter term is that it is somewhat misleading in that, while the object of study is "religious," the methodology is not.)

As a "reflection" on religious "appearances," the phenomenology of religion is a branch of the academic study of religion that focuses on religious phenomena, or observable data. It is informed by several sub-disciplines, such as the psychology of religion, anthropology of religion, sociology of religion, and the philosophy of religion (Momen surveys these in Chapter 3, "Theories of Religion," 52-83). Religions are not, however, reducible to purely sociological or psychological explanations, according to phenomenologists. Their investigations are purely descriptive rather than explanatory, although the phenomenological method, on comparative grounds, may discover underlying structures, patterns, and universals in human religious experience. While phenomenology of religion opposes reductionism, and accepts the cognitive consistencies of religious "appearances," it is not theology (a normative, metaphysical approach from within a particular worldview), although phenomenology has certainly been accused of being a covert theology in making overt ontological claims that core religious phenomena may be manifestations of the Sacred. A classic in the field is Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950), *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933, tr. as *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*). Conscious or not of writing within this tradition, Momen has chosen a title for his book that resonates with the phenomenology of religion.

The goal of the phenomenology of religion is to attain what Husserl termed "eidetic vision" (from Plato, the Greek word *eidos* signifying the "inner essence" of a phenomenon). Eidetic vision is the intuitive apprehension of essence of a phenomenon. This is achieved through the use of two methodological tools. The first is the exercise of *epoche* (Greek, "to hold back"), or suspension of judgment, in which phenomenologists "bracket" the biases of their own interpretive stances. In so doing, they are able to employ a second methodological tool, *empathy* (critical empathy), by which they can "enter" into religious phenomena. This has led to the relatively dispassionate, rather than confessional, teaching of religion at universities.

²⁰ London: Macmillan, 1973.

The myth of objectivity having now been exposed, the phenomenology of religion typically synthesizes what anthropologists have termed the *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) approaches, as a constraint on the subjectivity of each. This ideal complementarity was structurally put into practice when the great Canadian historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (mentioned on p. 82), established the Institute of Islamic Studies at Montreal's McGill University, in stipulating that half of the students should be professing Muslims, while the other half should be non-Muslims. With respect to the emic/etic dichotomy, Momen discloses his own orientation: "The present writer's inclination is to view both approaches as necessary" (81). Here, the Bahá'í Faith is represented, not as an Abrahamic faith (as many readers might have expected), but as a New Religious Movement (NRM). Placed in this category, the author circumvents the problem of strenuous objection by orthodox Muslims who privilege Islam, historically and salvifically, as the "last" world religion. To place the Bahá'í Faith on a structure par with Islam is, at this point, a move that is theologically freighted by an implicit truth-claim and one that is sure to be interpreted by academics and Muslims alike as motivated by apologetic (Bahá'í) interests.

As such, *The Phenomenon of Religion* is the first serious phenomenology of religions to be contributed by a Bahá'í scholar, apart from specialised studies by other Bahá'í academics. (In so saying, I do not think that Momen conceived of his book as a phenomenology of religion in the strict sense, because he is also interested in psychological [even biological] as well as sociological theories of religious phenomena – reductionistic approaches that phenomenologists tend to oppose. In terms of his philosophical orientation, Momen seems to be inclined towards relativism.) *The Phenomenon of Religion*, therefore, is not a work of Bahá'í studies. The reader may well ask, if this is so, why does a review of Momen's book appear in the pages of the *Bahá'í Studies Review*? The answer is to be found in the way Momen has integrated Bahá'í studies within the broader scope of religious studies. As the author himself states: "In the course of writing this book it soon became apparent that, to keep it to a reasonable size, examples for every statement could not be given from all the many religions of the world. Therefore a selection was made of six key religions. From the religions of the Abrahamic or monotheistic Western tradition, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were selected; from the Eastern, Indian line of religions, Hinduism and Buddhism; and as a representative of the new religious movements, the Bahá'í Faith" (7).

The title of Momen's book, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, is a little confusing, because the author also speaks of "religious phenomena" (4) in the plural. Momen explains the sense in which he employs the term "phenomenon": "Religion, as a human phenomenon, is founded on the basis of what is described as being the experience of the 'holy' or the 'sacred'" (21). So begins Chapter One. After surveying world religions and theories of religion in Part I (19-83), the author employs a three-dimensional approach in his phenomenology. Experiential, conceptual, social descriptions of religion comprise Parts II (85-181), III (183-297), and IV (299-527) of this four-part volume. I find that Momen weights experiential and social dimensions of religion almost to the exclusion, at times, of the conceptual.

After speaking of a "relationship between human beings and a transcendent reality" as "the central experience of religion," Momen notes that: "The study of religion becomes possible when a further factor is introduced: when this central

experience finds some form of expression. The minimal level of this expression is language – when a mystic describes his or her experience, for example. Other expressions of religion include doctrinal formulations, stories and myths, rituals, religious hierarchies and administrative structures, popular religious forms, art, music, architecture and so on” (2). For this review, I would like to inventory some of the topics that Momen covers, using a paradigm for the phenomenology of religion as a framework of analysis. This paradigm is of my own devising, although the basic dimensions derive largely from the work of Ninian Smart. The paradigm below includes most of the items Momen has listed above:

Doctrinal Dimension (*metaphysics, philosophy of religion*)

- **Cosmology** (cosmogony/theodicy): An entire chapter (8) is devoted to “The Nature of Reality” (185-212), one of the strongest chapters in the book. Cosmogony is covered in “Time, the Origins and End of the World” (207-11), which I found to be underdeveloped, as cosmogony is typically a foil for sociogony and moral order. The first creation narrative of Genesis, for instance, exalts the Sabbath to such a degree that God himself “rests” on the seventh day, in observance of the Sabbath! The Zoroastrian cosmogonic myth is paradigmatic of moral choice. However, the section on theodicy, (literally, the “justice of God,” but referring to any doctrine of the origin of evil), “Evil, Sin and Suffering” (213-225), presents a sophisticated and useful typology of theodicy, with a sidebar on the ontological dualism of “Zoroastrian Cosmology” (217).
- **Anthropology** (soul/consciousness/purpose): Chapter 9, “Suffering, Sacrifice and Salvation” (213-41), begins with an overview of the human predicament (including the problem of theodicy), which any salvation offer has to address. In the logics of any salvation- or liberation-based religion, the offer of salvation/liberation is inherently linked to what is defined as the human problem, be that sin or suffering or any other form of existential angst. While the soul/conventional self is certainly central to world religions, it gets short shrift in Momen’s book, not because of any deficiency of treatment, but from lack of an in-depth treatment. See also pages 204-205 on human nature, and the conclusion (536-7).
- **Soteriology** (predicament/salvation): Salvation is introduced in two brief sections, “The Path to Salvation” (34-5) and “The Goal of Salvation” (35). Chapter 9 is devoted to “Suffering, Sacrifice and Salvation” (213-41). A useful chart (“Words Used for Salvation in This Life and After,” 238) lists technical terms in Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá’í Faith. (Presumably Judaism lacks a definitive notion of individual salvation, although it has a more or less developed notion of corporate salvation.) No Persian or Arabic technical term is provided for Bahá’í salvation.²¹ Absent is a discussion of the several theories of the Atonement in Christianity. Momen makes this observation, which I think is quite an important one: “Probably no area in religious studies offers more intractable problems for those who look for an underlying unity in the religions of the world” (233). In view of the lack of a

²¹ As to the transliteration of religious technical terms throughout the book, from Sanskrit to Arabic, macrons and subdots are dispensed with.

Bahá'í systematic theology, Momen's comments on Bahá'í salvation are worth mentioning. He states that the Bahá'í concept of salvation involves both "individual and social salvation for humanity as a whole" and that, moreover: "A third element is also necessary to achieve salvation, and this is the grace of God" (237).

Elsewhere in the book, however, Momen presents a typology of "Pathways to Salvation or Liberation" schematically represented in charts on pages 118 and 121. This typology is given in Chapter 5, "Pathways to Religious Experience" (117-40), and is as follows: Ritualism (117-20), Legalism (120-23), Evangelism (123-25), Social Reformism (126-29), Asceticism (129-30), Monasticism (130-32), Gnosticism (132-35), Mysticism (135-37). Momen seems to equate religious experience with salvation in saying: "Since the religious experience gives one the feeling of salvation or liberation, these pathways to religious experience may be called pathways to salvation or liberation" (117). Bahá'í salvation appears to be located in social reformism (126, 128; cf. 43). One difficulty in this analysis is that a complex of several of these "motifs" have already been identified by sociologist Peter Smith in his monograph, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions*, as constitutive of a Bahá'í ethos. A dimensional analysis of Bahá'í soteriology might have disambiguated Bahá'í salvation from a common misperception of its being primarily invested in social reform, to the practical exclusion of doctrinal, mystical, artistic and other concerns.

- **Eschatology** (afterlife/apocalypse): Eschatology is the "doctrine of last things." In the same chapter, doctrines of the afterlife are treated descriptively. An entire chapter is devoted to the other major concern of eschatology, "The Promise of a Future Saviour" (242-67). Momen's chart of "Comparative Eschatology" (243) is excellent, with Taoism and Zoroastrianism added to the six religions he treats throughout the book. Texts describing "The Golden Age that will Follow the Coming of the Saviour" (252-53) enrich the discussion. The author's "Typology of Future Saviours and Millennialist Movements" (254-61), while apparently derivative, is engaging. This chapter is richly illustrated (albeit in black-and-white), although a better graphic representation of the Hindu messiah Kalki (249) might have been found. Sections on "Disconfirmed Prophecy" (262-64) and "Causes of Millennialist Movements" (264-66) are also valuable.

Ritual Dimension (*anthropology of religion*)

- **Calendar** (type/special features): I could find no substantive discussion of sacred calendars, including the Badí' (Bahá'í) calendar. This would have afforded a golden opportunity to have highlighted yet another distinctive feature of the Bahá'í religion, while commenting on its resonances with the ancient Zoroastrian calendar.
- **Rites of Passage** (rites of life/life-crisis rites/rites of faith): Victor Turner's theory of "liminality" is recounted, within the classical, three-phase analysis of "Rites of Passage" (281-84) current among anthropologists.
- **Observances** (festivals and fasts/pilgrimages): No separate section exists on festivals, and pilgrimage is hardly represented. Fasting is discussed (105-8).
- **Worship** (communal/domestic): Generally, one of the overall strengths of Momen's work is his emphasis on religious experience. Covered on pages 117-21, 105-108.

Ethical Dimension (*philosophy of religion*)

- **Laws** (prescriptions/proscriptions): The subject and significance of religious law is commented on (120-23, 352). This is an important topic in the history of religions because of recurring tensions between exoteric and esoteric polarities, as well as the problem of antinomianism, or religious indifference to law.
- **Intentions** (motives/reactions): While Momen explains the phenomenologist's quest to apprehend the intentionality or "whatness" of the phenomenon (67), the role of intentions or motives is not a focus in this volume. Like the soul/conventional self, the subject of intentionality is as central as it is elusive, its elusivity rendering its centrality too challenging for scholarship to treat in depth.
- **Virtues** (saints/saintliness): Confucian virtues are mentioned (44), but I could not find reference to the classical cardinal/theological virtues in traditional Christianity, nor Buddhist virtues. Role models - saints, paragons of virtue, moral exemplars - are noted (345).
- **Ethics** (moral principles/social principles): Covered on pages 338–62. A helpful chart of "The Golden Rule in the Religions of the World" (344).

Artistic Dimension (*art history, iconography*)

Chapter 18 is written on "Religion and the Arts" (455-74). This chapter begins with a controversial observation: "Most descriptions of religions concentrate on doctrinal or organizational matters. These aspects of religion are, however, only of peripheral importance for most religious people" (455). For Bahá'ís, however, doctrinal and organizational matters matter a great deal. Here, institutional aspects take on an equally spiritual as well as exoteric significance, as Bahá'í institutions represent the canalizing of Bahá'í spirit and moral imperatives, translated into the social sphere. Indeed, the Bahá'í administrative order comprises the very planks and pitch of "the Crimson Ark," a dynamic Bahá'í symbol allegorized in Bahá'u'lláh's "Table of the Holy Mariner" and in the "Tablet of Carmel."

- **Music** (liturgical/devotional): Various forms of scripture chanting/recitation are reviewed (104), as well as sacred music in general (456), while hymns are commented on in passing.
- **Architecture** (temples, shrines, pilgrimage sites/assembly halls): Photographs are presented (472-74, 278-9). Beyond the photographs themselves, the symbolic features as well as artistic merits are captured in some of the captions, which often prove to be one of Momen's strategic successes in effectively communicating with his audience.
- **Performance** (dance/drama): Sacred drama is mentioned (456), as is sacred dance (456, 458), with a sidebar on "Dance in Native American Religion" (458).
- **Symbols** (literary/concrete): There is a short section on "Religious Symbols" (278-79). A section of Chapter 18 focuses on "Art and the Symbolic Universe" (459-62), followed by "The Historical Development of Religious Art" (462-71). A schematic of emblematic symbols of ten world religions is provided (172), accompanied by a highly informative caption, although some of the symbols (such as the Bahá'í nine-pointed star) are not explained. A page devoted to "Religious Metaphors" (102) is also quite intriguing.

Mystical Dimension (*psychology of religion*)

- **Goal of Attainment** (quest/preparation): Momen mentions the “quest mode” (163) as one of the modalities of the religious life. The quest is the point of departure for mysticism itself, which is arguably the most fascinating of all religious phenomena.
- **Activities** (spiritual exercises/mystical orders): There is a stimulating section on “Meditation and Brain Function” (169-70). Monastic communities (130-32) serve as mediators of contemplative experience. This is Momen at his finest, contributing uniquely, from the vantage of his medical expertise, to the phenomenology of religion.
- **Stages** (path/progress): While stages of mystical ascent are not discussed, there is a fascinating section on “A Psychological Model of the Stages of Religious Experience” (99-100) as well as “Fischer and a Map of Mental States” (173-76).
- **Peak Experiences** (visions, auditions/transformations): “The Mystical Experience” (95-7) is adumbrated briefly (with some relevant texts on page 38). “Experiences of Trance or Mystical Ecstasy” (176-78) are treated in a somewhat medical fashion. A chart depicting “Pathways to Altered States of Consciousness” (174) reflects Momen’s interest in the medical literature on the subject. Visions are mentioned in passing, as is meditation (108).

Social Dimension (*sociology of religion*)

- **Distribution** (heartland/diaspora): Diffusion is an important element in the social description of religion. Two charts, “Estimated Number of Adherents of World Religions” (504) and “Rate of Growth and Spread of World Religions” (505), are very useful. A chart, “The Spread of Islam” (318), follows the historical diffusion of Islam, as does “the Spread of the Bahá’í Faith up to 1950” (500) for the Bahá’í religion. Religious diasporas have received much recent attention in academic literature, as significant immigrant populations in North America and Europe have radically altered the religious landscape of the West. There is very little discussion of this important religious phenomenon in Momen’s volume. Notwithstanding, the author provides a chart, “Distribution of World Religions” (32).
- **Organization** (hierarchy/community): “From Personal Piety to Organized Religion” (323-28) focuses on the development of Islamic identity and praxis. A typology of religious sects is elsewhere given (74-77), followed later by a thought-provoking section on “Exclusion of Women from Religious Hierarchy” (440-42). Absent is a systematic treatment of forms of religious governance, although religious functionaries are discussed *in passim*.
- **Relations** (church/state relations/interfaith relations): A strong chapter discusses church/state relations (404-31).
- **Missions** (domestic/foreign): Missionary activity in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Bahá’í Faith is covered in passing. The three great missionary religions of the world are Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, along with the Bahá’í Faith and certain New Religious Movements in the Hindu and Buddhist worlds. Judaism was once a missionary religion, during the Second Temple period. Momen provides an arresting photograph, well worth a thousand words, of Hasidic Jews in Safad, Israel trying to convert other Jews (486). The

desired effect of missionary work is conversion. Attention to conversion is one of the strengths of Momen's book, with an entire chapter (6), "Faith, Belief and Conversion" (141-65), written on this topic.

Other comments

In the section, "Definitions of Religion" (26-28), what is probably the most famous definition – that of anthropologist Clifford Geertz – is notably missing. (Momen provides his own definition, which is repeated in the "Conclusion" [535-6]). The author says that Geertz is among those who do not find "grand theories of religion" helpful (80). Momen prescinds from his own theorising about religion, allowing the reader to take into account the wide array of theories that the author is able to pack into this information-rich volume. While Momen's three dimensions of the experiential, conceptual, and social are useful organizing principles, the reader is presented with a veritable maze of data. This is both amazing and confusing. The data presented are bewilderingly eclectic, in what might be described as an organised fragmentation.

From the foregoing inventory, one can see that Momen's treatment of mysticism – a major dimension of religious experience – engaging, but piecemeal. The same holds true for Momen's discussions of religious symbols, although, in the concluding chapter, the author pulls together the various treatments of religious symbols to be found throughout the book (528-29). While Momen is cognizant of important theorists whose work he admirably integrates into the book, my sense is that this integration, although skilful and relatively seamless, is not synthetic. To be fair, this was not the author's purpose. He had, in fact, anticipated such criticism in writing a disclaimer in his conclusion: "The disadvantage is that the work as a whole lacks any overall unifying theoretical basis and is thus less coherent" (528). More consistency in data selection and representation might have helped crystallize the book, as I explain below.

As stated above, there were six religions that Momen had originally intended to foreground: viz., Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith (7). Taking the book as a whole, the six religions that Momen said he would primarily focus on do not receive even treatment. The appetisers (an abundance of anthropological data and data from religious traditions other than the six religions) overwhelm the main dishes (the six religions themselves). This, in my opinion, weakens the overall comparative power of Momen's work. Speaking as a comparativist myself, I would have liked to have seen a more consistent and thorough treatment of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith in all of the major phenomenological categories. This is partly accomplished in the various charts and other sidebars that Momen provides throughout the book, such as "Differences between Eastern and Western Religious Thought" (37) and "Comparative Eschatology" (243). There should have been more charts like the latter, perhaps one for each major category of religious doctrine. Fortunately, a number of sidebars show the author to have been faithful to his intention, such as "The Start of the Ministry" (306-8), where experiences of "prophet-founders" Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and Bahá'u'lláh are represented. (Presumably, the figure of Kṛṣṇa is probably too mythical to have been included here.) Charts of the "Lives of the Founders of World Religions" (310) and "religious Role Models for

Women" (442) show the author's typological and comparative prowess at his best.

Conclusions

Momen's erudition is vast, magnetically eclectic. His eclecticism is unique in this respect: In the academic literature to date, the Bahá'í Faith has frequently been unrepresented or, at best, under represented. This is because the Bahá'í Faith is not (yet) regarded as a major world religion. As an emergent movement, the Bahá'í Faith is more accurately classed as a minor world religion (although it may be a major world religion in the making). Momen has implicitly suggested that the Bahá'í Faith is the most significant of the NRM's (New Religious Movements), and he may well be right. Bahá'í readers will appreciate the abundant yet judicious representation of the Bahá'í Faith throughout.

While the author is himself a Bahá'í, all religions are treated with critical empathy. A test of the merit of an academic work in religious studies is its methodological integrity, independent of any confessional or reductionist bias, and its intersubjective availability. *The Phenomenon of Religion* withstands that scrutiny. Moreover, it is an accessible book. With patience and perseverance, the nonspecialist will be able to understand it. This is no *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Momen's volume is formidable, not by virtue of its style, but by dint of its sheer massiveness. As a complement to the more established theories of religion, Momen contributes a chapter (7), "Towards a Scientific Understanding of the Religious Experience" (166-81), a treatment rarely found in the standard literature. This is probably the most challenging chapter in the book. This mass of data and theory notwithstanding, Momen succeeds in articulating his phenomenology with engaging clarity.

The Phenomenon of Religion comprehends some of the major theorists in the academic study of religion and translates their theories for the benefit of the nonspecialist. The major strength of *The Phenomenon of Religion* – indeed, its signal contribution – is that, for the first time, it has made the academic study of religion and its phenomenology available to the public.

Just as Momen's earlier work, *An Introduction to Shi'a Islam*, was first published by George Ronald and later reprinted by Yale University Press, I would like to recommend that joint publishing ventures between Bahá'í-owned and academic presses be more vigorously pursued. I would like to close with a comment on the problem of "market": Bahá'ís and readers in general who support such valuable and illuminating scholarship as Momen's *The Phenomenon of Religion* need to make it a priority to purchase and promote such books in the marketplace. This sends a clear message to academic publishers that there can, indeed, be a popular appreciation for academic endeavours that make a significant spiritual difference in deepening our understanding of what it means to live in a religiously pluralistic and socially evolving world.