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**AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF CRITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS
IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE BAHÁ'Í WORLD FAITH**

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy**

**by
Vernon Elvin Johnson**

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ABSTRACT

AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF CRITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE BAHÁ'Í WORLD FAITH

Vernon Elvin Johnson
Baylor University

Chairman: James Leo Garrett, Jr.

The Bahá'í World Faith, originating in Persia in 1844 and now extending around the world, has undergone extraordinary changes in its evolution to its present stage of development. Bahá'ís freely acknowledge the evolutionary character of their religion, which results in periodic outdateding of previous teachings and practices. Edward G. Browne, Cambridge University, wrote in 1910 that "few religions have undergone so rapid an evolution" No less spectacular have been the developments in the religion since Browne made that statement.

The dissertation focuses on the major transformations which have occurred in the religion during the faith's 130-year history with a view toward ascertaining the religion's character and its present state of development, giving particular attention to the opposition each transformation aroused, the tensions in the faith it produced, and the adjustments it necessitated. These transformations were effected by the successive leaders in the faith, and each transformation was of a critical nature, producing a majority who accepted and a minority who rejected each

transformation. The study has particular relevance concerning the religion's claim that, unlike other religions, it is protected from schism.

Briefly defined, the transformations dealt with are the following:

- (1) Baha'u'llah's transformation of the Babi religion into the Baha'i faith;
- (2) 'Abdu'l-Baha's transformation of the faith into a more Western and socially oriented religion with Christian overtones;
- (3) Shoghi Effendi's transformation of the religion from its loosely organized, inclusive, and universal character into a tightly organized, exclusive, and narrowly defined religion; and
- (4) a final transformation from a religion under the guardianship of an appointed, living descendant of Baha'u'llah to a religion directed by a body of nine elected officials whose term of office is temporary.

The study is divided into three parts. Part I deals with introductory matters, a general introduction (Chapter I) and a review of previously written histories on the Babi-Baha'i movement to which references are made in later sections of the dissertation, giving attention to the different perspectives from which they are written and their relative values in providing accurate information about the faith's history (Chapter II). Part II on the birth and early history of the Babi-Baha'i movement covers the ministries of the Bab (Chapter III), Baha'u'llah (Chapter IV), and 'Abdu'l-Baha (Chapter V) and the transformations of the faith effected within their ministries. Part III deals with "modern Baha'i," the faith as an institutionalized religion, treating the ministries of Shoghi Effendi (Chapter VI) and the Universal House of Justice (Chapter VII) and their transformations.

Appended to the dissertation are two letters discovered in the course of the research, both dated March 31, 1901, from Muhammad 'Ali and Badi'u'llah to the recently formed "Society of Bahaists" and to the "president of the House of Justice."

To Dee

in appreciation for your

love, faith, and sacrifice

during the years of graduate study

PREFACE

My first awareness of the Baha'i World Faith was in reading a question and answer section of the Catholic Digest ("What Would You Like to Know about the Church?") in the January, 1964, issue while I was a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. A reader had asked how the Baha'i religion compared with Roman Catholicism, particularly in their views of revelation. Included in the answer was a brief statement of the history and teachings of the Baha'i faith. I immediately was impressed with the faith's broad concept of revelation that God had revealed himself successively through the founders of most of the major, living religions. I made no further inquiry into Baha'i, however, until I enrolled in the graduate program in religion at Baylor University and again encountered the religion as one of a number of religious movements treated in a course I took in the spring, 1965, taught by Dr. James H. Wood, Jr., who became my major professor. With Dr. Wood's encouragements, I began research into the Baha'i faith.

My first meeting with Baha'is was in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Dobbins, Fort Worth, Texas. I later visited the Baha'i temple in Wilmette, Illinois, on my way to and from a session at Davison Baha'i summer school, Davison, Michigan (August 15-19, 1966). These were the first of various personal contacts with Baha'is. I also attended the Bridgeport Baha'i summer school, near Fort Worth, in the summer, 1970.

As research into the faith progressed, the need for deciding on a particular topic of inquiry concerning the faith became more pressing. The subject of the present dissertation on the transformations in the faith's evolution has undergone its own evolution. I first planned to write on "the Baha'i Concept of Unity" and even prepared a "pilot study" for a class on this projected topic. I felt later that I should narrow this subject to "the Baha'i Concept of the Unity of Mankind." But the more I studied the religion the more fascinated I became with its history and with an emerging pattern in the religion's development. I became aware of a series of "transformations" which had occurred in the religion. The most obvious was Baha'u'llah's transformation of the Babi movement into the Baha'i religion, but J. R. Richards, who wrote a book on Baha'i in 1932, spoke also of a transformation under 'Abdu'l-Baha, Baha'u'llah's son and successor. A study of the religion's later history revealed that transformations also had taken place in the latter two stages of the religion's evolution. I proposed at this point to write on "Critical Transformations of the Baha'i Religion through Its Successive Leadership." To define more the nature of the dissertation and to give more emphasis to the evolutionary aspect of the faith, I finally decided on the present topic, which was approved by the faculty of the department of religion.

In the meantime, my major professor, Dr. Wood had accepted a position as executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Washington, D.C., and Dr. James Leo Garrett, Jr., became editor of Journal of Church and State at Baylor and assumed other responsibilities previously held by Dr. Wood. Dr. Garrett also assumed responsibility as director of the present dissertation.

To both Dr. Wood and Dr. Garrett is due appreciation, to Dr. Wood for encouragements and directing of the dissertation during the research stage and to Dr. Garrett for directing the dissertation during its actual writing. The other dissertation committee members, Dr. Bruce C. Cresson and Dr. E. H. Duncan, with Dr. Garrett made various suggestions for the correcting and improvement of the written text.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to numerous Baha'is whom I have met who have aided me in some way in the research and in understanding the religion which they espouse. The Gordon Dobbins family holds a special place in my memory and appreciation for arranging my first meeting with Baha'is. Mrs. Dobbins, especially, always most kind, offered various encouragements and leads in the research.

The Baha'is whom I met at Davison Baha'i summer school provided me with stimulating insights into their faith. Among those I met at the Davison school, I owe particular gratitude to Albert James, member of an auxiliary board to the hands of the cause, Kathleen Javid, who lectured on the life of Baha'u'llah at the school, and to Dr. S. P. Ranan, each of whom read my original "pilot study," offering their corrections and comments, and with whom I held a number of enlightening discussions.

Appreciation is due also to Florence Mayberry, a member of the continental board of counselors for North America, for her lectures and discussions at the Bridgeport school; to Stanwood Cobb, a Baha'i author, for letters of explanation; to the National Spiritual Assembly for information; and especially to Tarazu'llah Samandari, hand of the cause, with whom I was granted an interview in Fort Worth in January, 1968, during his North American teaching tour. Samandari was present at Bahji with Baha'u'llah,