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Challenging apostasy: Responses to Moojan Momen's 'Marginality and Apostasy in the Baha'i Community'

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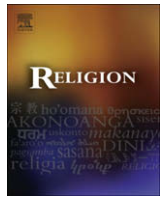
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Challenging apostasy: Responses to Moojan Momen's 'Marginality and Apostasy in the Baha'i Community'

Introduction

The Baha'i religion is a modern creation which spread from 19th century Iran around the world. *Religion* enjoys a unique position among journals in our field in that it has a comparatively strong record in publishing scholarly work on this modern religion. Although the Baha'i religion is usually not included in works on 'alternative' or 'controversial' religions, scholarship on this religion is a highly controversial arena, as witnessed by an exchange between Denis MacEoin on the one hand and Muhammad Afnân and William S. Hatcher on the other in *Religion* in the early to mid 1980s. One of the reasons for the controversial nature of Baha'i scholarship is the insider/outsider problem. In the case of the Baha'is, only a minority among the few academics engaged in Baha'i scholarship seem to have no present or past commitment to this faith.

Although not its main topic, this situation is addressed in a recent article on 'Marginality and apostasy in the Baha'i community' by Moojan Momen, published in issue 3, 2007 [pp. 187–209] of this journal. Momen, himself a Baha'i and current editor of the *Baha'i Studies Review* (published since 1991), is an independent British scholar who has written extensively about Shia Islam as well as on Babi and Baha'i religious history. Having read a draft of this article, I had suggested some changes to Momen (a fact he duly acknowledges in note 1) and recommended publication of the article to the then European editor of the journal, who subsequently had it reviewed externally and in turn suggested further changes of his own (acknowledged in the same note).

In his article, Momen points to what he perceives as a 'group' of people who (for various reasons) exited the Baha'i faith or who no longer belong to Baha'i institutions. Momen finds that these persons warrant classification as 'apostates' in a technical sense of the term established by the sociologist of religion and expert on New Religious Movements David Bromley, that is, involving contested exits and affiliation with 'oppositional coalitions'. In light of this definition, apostates are to be distinguished from 'leavetakers,' to whom these two qualifications do not apply. Based on sketches of the 'apostate careers' of 12 individuals, nine of whose names he discloses, Momen seeks to establish six features that apply to this group of Baha'i 'apostates' (although not all features apply to each of the individuals whose 'apostate career' he sketches). One of the points Momen makes is that the Internet has given apostates and their concerns visibility, and helps them to create communities of opposition. Another point refers to the observation that apostates are among the leading voices in academic scholarship on the Baha'i religion.

Momen's points about the effectiveness of electronic communication were soon confirmed by the reception of his article, which immediately stirred many debates on various lists, blogs, and websites on the Internet. A Google search brings glimpses of the debate to light. The debate soon spilled over to the academic sphere. Not a month had passed after the publication of the article before Robert Segal, my predecessor as European editor of *Religion*, received messages from seven of the 12 'apostates' in Momen's interpretation, who felt that their individual religious careers had been misrepresented by Momen. In addition, one person who was mentioned anonymously and not as an apostate in the article expressed his dissatisfaction in a letter to the editor, complaining that the information provided was incorrect. Moreover, several affirmed that they had never been in touch with some of the other 'apostates' listed by Momen and therefore were not part of any 'group' at all.

Segal assured all correspondents individually that the editors 'recognize the obligation of the journal to give the aggrieved a chance to state their views'. *Religion* remains committed to safeguarding the right of persons to object to what they perceive as misrepresentation. This holds for scholars, scholarly interpretations and groups of scholars (see the controversy about Sterling in vol. 37) as much as for everybody else mentioned on the pages of the journal.

As the incoming editor, I soon reached an understanding with Denis MacEoin, a former contributor to this journal who features as one of the apostates in Momen's article, that he should draft a reply to Momen's paper which would address some of the underlying problems of interpretation. Once editing of MacEoin's paper was completed it was sent out to the remaining seven persons. Subsequently, four were satisfied and no longer felt a need to respond individually. Three others, however,

reaffirmed their desire to speak for themselves. Accordingly, I invited them to compose their own replies, under certain conditions: they should only correct factual errors or challenge the scholarly content of Momen's article; the replies should not contain any ideological or theological statements or attacks ad hominem; finally, the replies should only be directed to Momen's original article. The incoming drafts were then edited in conformity with these guidelines until a consensus was reached with the respondents (involving considerable compromise in two cases). As I had announced to all respondents beforehand, once all the replies were finalized, the author of the original article would be invited to compose a rejoinder, and this again was edited until mutual consensus was reached.

The reader will notice that there are two types of replies. While all four protest against the way they are presented by Momen—some in stronger terms than others—two authors (MacEoin and McGlinn) challenge the legitimacy of the scholarly framework of Momen's article, whereas two others are concerned with the representation of the religious group they are now actively promoting.

On reading these replies, it should become clear that the importance of their publication lies not only in giving aggrieved individuals a right to state their views and to correct their public representation, but also in the issues they implicitly or explicitly raise. Here are two mutually interlinked issues:

- Research ethics and protection of personal integrity

This incident clearly points to the absence of a code of research ethics in our field. The fact that so many individuals felt a need to protest against what they perceive as misrepresentation illustrates the need to take potential dangers to the integrity of persons more actively into account in the review process and editorial decisions. Possibly, we need to change our procedure in cases where people are targeted in ways that go beyond the usual forms of scholarly discussion (such as in reviews). The editors of *Religion* have begun discussing the possibility of dedicating a special issue on research ethics in the study of religion(s).

- Language games

Momen adopts a technical definition of the term apostate. This definition refers to a class of phenomena. By applying this definition he engages a model that makes the religious biographies of a number of people appear homogenous. From this perspective, they constitute a coherent group (which several of the listed people denied). Referring to people as 'apostates' creates an interpretative coherence of their religious careers, their thinking and acting. This definition cum classification cum interpretative model is unfolded into an explanatory narrative that predicts and explains attitudes and behaviour. At the same time, Momen admits that even such a technical definition and corresponding classification leaves room for subjective interpretation when it comes to inclusion when he states that '[d]eciding who should or should not be classified as an apostate is, of course, subjective' (p. 200). By the same token, the very decision to refer to persons as 'apostates', although justified in a sociology of religion language game, can obviously be perceived as offensive by the people classified in that manner, given that the word is also used in non-technical manners in other discursive contexts, for example by religious authorities. The fact that Momen plays a double role as scholar and active (possibly even influential) Baha'i seems to blend these language games in a particular manner. The different discursive positions lead to mutually exclusive perceptions of what is at stake. What amounts to an 'attack' varies according to the various perspectives that are adopted: what one person perceives as sound scholarship is read as part of an apostate campaign by another, while that same perspective appears as oppressive fundamentalist orthodoxy disguised as scholarship from another angle; what appears as hateful to one side is merely informative to the other. The respondents, then, deny the existence of the 'group' hypothetically created by Momen's classification, thereby challenging its validity. Moreover, they create various counter-narratives, counter-models, counter-classifications, and counter-definitions, where agency is moved to the other party. Several discursive tactics are used: the narrative of censorship and inherently compromised nature of affiliated scholarship necessarily ridiculing and misrepresenting its others (MacEoin); the model of intra-religious reform leading to the creation and subsequent exclusion of internal others (McGlinn); the classificatory system of takfir and apologetics that has to distort its others (Glaysner); and the denial of ascribed attitudes and emotions as well as the redefinition of the status of organizations from individual 'sects' to 'widespread beliefs' (Stetson).

The editor leaves it to the readers to decide themselves which of the suggested definitions, classifications, models, and narratives they find more plausible and compelling. The underlying issues—and others that could be addressed—would warrant extensive discussions. So would certain other topics addressed by the authors, such as the ideological, theoretical, and methodological implications of labelling a religious entity as a sect, cult, new religious movement, or world religion, respectively. The discussion will probably continue on the Internet. At this point, it remains for me to thank the author and the four respondents for their patience and collaboration.

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Personal allegiance and the loss of balance in Babi and Baha'i studies: A response to Moojan Momen's "Marginality and Apostasy"

The Baha'i religion is a small international community whose members wish to be perceived as adherents of a 'major world religion'. This creates problems for Baha'is, since outside observers may contradict their self-perception and use different criteria to evaluate their status.

Momen's (2007) article is an attempt to defend that self-perception by casting doubt on the work and motives of ex-members whom he terms 'apostates'. Momen will have assumed that few if any of his readers have much knowledge of Baha'ism, much less of his own role within the movement. The only indication of his position in this regard is the words 'I am a Baha'i' (in the *Vitae* at the end of the article).

Momen's career as a Baha'i has been marked by a strong commitment to the official line on doctrine, history, and obedience to the Baha'i authorities. His books have all been approved by official institutions and published by Baha'i-owned publishing houses. Although not a trained academic, he is erudite, and his writings cover an impressive range of topics, but always within the boundaries of Baha'i acceptability.

One of his better known works is *Selections from the Writings of E. G. Browne on the Babi and Baha'i Religions* (Momen, 1987). The Persianist E.G. Browne (d. 1926) devoted a great deal of his writing to these subjects, and Momen seemed to do a useful service to scholarship by publishing his shorter writings. However, this was undermined by the exclusion of any of Browne's work that is critical of the Baha'is or favourable to their Azali rivals. Momen publishes an encomium of the Baha'i leader Baha' Allah, but Browne's praise of his rival Azal is censored out. The compilation is next to useless for any serious purpose, except to bolster Baha'i self-regard. It sets the tone for his current article.

All Baha'i writers, whether academic or not, must submit their work to 'pre-publication review', where panels of laypersons examine it for conformity to official doctrine or approved history. This policy, which has penalties attached for noncompliance, has had a devastating effect on scholarship within the religion and is one reason why many Baha'i academics, myself included, have left it.¹

Momen, however, goes further than review: all the individuals he thanks for comments on the paper, (apart from Religion's editors) are eminent Baha'i loyalists. Seven, including himself, are—or have been—staff of the Wilmette Institute, an agency of the National Assembly of the Baha'is of the US. One is a former member of the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Another has been coordinator of the Research Office of the US Baha'i National Centre. One is a psychologist, another a historian, and another an educationalist/vocal performance graduate. There is not a single non-Baha'i academic in the list.

Senior Baha'i authorities have often indicated that they disapprove of 'materialist' or secular approaches to learning, and discourage Baha'is from taking non-Baha'i views to form opinions on aspects of their faith, even in factual areas like history. Divine revelation, they insist, must be given as much weight as historical fact or science, and 'divinely inspired' histories must receive priority over evidence gained from painstaking research:

[T]he Revelation of the Manifestation of God is the standard for all knowledge, and scientific statements and theories, no matter how close they may come to the eternal principles proclaimed by God's Messenger, are in their very nature ephemeral and limited' (*The Universal House of Justice*, cited The International Teaching Centre, 9 August 1984).

It is axiomatic to Baha'is that human beings cannot influence divine religions in any way. Asserting the opposite has exposed several academics to criticism. Commenting on Momen's review of his book *Resurrection and Renewal*, Yale professor Abbas Amanat writes:

On a number of occasions Momen also questioned the relevance of sociopolitical dynamics in the birth and development of the Babi movement. He does so not from a post modernist perspective (which would have been refreshing), but from a pre-modernist, divine-interventionist perspective in which human agency does not seem to have a place. (Amanat, 2005, p. xxiii)

Elsewhere, the Universal House of Justice makes it clear that the requirements for Baha'i scholars have nothing to do with modern academic standards: 'These [Baha'i] requirements are of course not reflected in the standards currently prevailing in Western academic institutions' (Letter dated 5 October 1993; *Universal House of Justice*, 1993a,b).

According to Baha'i historian Robert Stockman (one of Momen's advisors):

... the American Baha'i community has been heavily, but by no means completely, insulated from the intellectual trends in American society by the consistent focus of the Baha'i on their scriptures and their obedience to their elected Baha'i

¹ Baha'i censorship goes beyond this. In 2005, the U.S. Baha'i authorities issued instructions to all their regional and local institutions to terminate the purchase of all books published or sold by an independent Baha'i publisher, Kalimat Press. The effect has been to bring the press close to closure.

institutions. Finally, the Baha'i religion has elaborate rules of discourse that strongly direct and sharply limit the nature of discourse among Baha'is'. (Stockman, 1995)

In addition to the unhealthy climate for scholarship created by the Baha'i administration, Momen's account of 'apostates' cannot be separated from a long-standing tradition of Baha'i heresiography which imputes the darkest possible motives to a long list of dissidents and former members.

Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), the Guardian of the Baha'i religion² and a prolific writer in English, devoted many passages to individuals. Here is an abbreviated list of terms applied by him to 'covenant-breakers', dissidents, apostates and opponents³:

Diabolical, ambitious, malevolent, deluded, 'shameless apostate', brazen, infamous, insidious, 'vile whisperer', Anti-christ, 'the living embodiment of wickedness, cupidity and deceit', blasphemous, unspeakably repugnant, perfidious, unquenchable animosity, arrogant, treacherous, despicable, 'blind, uncontrollable animosity', 'the most shameless, vicious, relentless apostate', 'the incarnation of Satan', 'fiendish ingenuity and guile', infernal, nefarious, defectors, betrayers.⁴

All this in the mid-20th century. From a writer whose work is deemed infallible. This is the intolerant world to which Momen, as a true believer, belongs, and I think it not unreasonable to suppose that his analysis of Baha'i apostates derives more from this tradition than from Bromley's findings. He speaks of a 'campaign' against the Baha'is (p. 187),⁵ describes apostates as 'a dark mirror image' of true believers, speaks of a 'community'⁶ of apostates which constitutes 'an anti-religion' and is filled with negative motives, above all resentment. He calls them 'wayward' (p. 192), calls one of their books a 'distorting mirror' in which the Baha'i religion is 'twisted and disfigured beyond recognition' (p. 194) describes academic articles as 'attacks' (p. 200), speaks of the apostates 'obsessive hatred' (p. 200), claims ludicrously that 'they exist only to vent their hatred of the core Baha'i Faith' (p. 206), and speaks of their 'accumulated hostility' (p. 206). This is not academic language. It is certainly not tempered or balanced language. Momen clearly shares with Shoghi Effendi and other 'core members' a deep-rooted fear of disobedience to religious authority.

At times he simply loses touch with reality: 'Although in fact only one of the apostates currently holds an academic post, apostates have been very successful in their use of the academic media to present their views. Several have published books and articles in respectable venues' (p. 206). That isn't surprising, given that a number of this group are qualified academics. Not only that, but Momen, who has never held an academic post, has himself published articles in a variety of 'respectable venues', including Religion. Sauce for the goose.

Momen is entitled to his beliefs, but he is not entitled to wrap them in the gold leaf of a spurious academicism, replacing prejudice with a thin veneer of scholarly objectivity. His standards are manifestly not those of the academy, even if he uses the medium of an academic journal and the framework of a sociological theory to present his views.

His inventiveness is not to be denied. He has taken a disparate group of individuals with greatly varying relationships with Baha'ism, sucked them dry of any real individuality, and squeezed them into a framework poorly suited to the use he puts it to.

He writes of my 'attacks' and describes my early academic work on Babism as 'apostate articles'. I wonder how my extensive academic work on Babism qualifies as 'attacks' on a quite different religion, and why my critique of some elements in Baha'ism is somehow illegitimate, even though it comes from a straightforward secular liberal viewpoint, whereas Momen's criticism, coming from a strictly orthodox Baha'i position, vaunts itself as both 'academic' and 'true'. It's also difficult to see how I can be an 'attacker' when I describe Iranian vilification of Baha'ism as 'gross, dishonest, and vitriolic' (MacEoin, 1986, p. 59).⁷

Everywhere, Momen is out to ridicule or dismiss work done by his dissidents. He belittles Johnson's study of Blavatsky as simple 'debunking', mauls Garlington's intelligent and thoroughly researched history of Baha'ism in America (Garlington, 2005),⁸ and makes no attempts to come to terms with Cole's or my extensive studies on Babism and Baha'ism.

Several other 'apostates' have written to me since reading Momen's article. They are unanimous in saying that Momen misrepresents them and their work. Above all, they deny that they 'share an obsessive hatred of their former religious community' (p. 200).

There are, indeed, some individuals who seem to match his descriptions; but far more are just academics (like Garlington, Cole, or myself), intellectuals (like Scholl or Bacquet), or uncomplicated non-conformists like Marshall. By imposing his own

² Ar. Wali amr Allah, Custodian of God's cause.

³ Words and phrases taken from selected titles available at: http://www.bahaindex.com/component?option=com_bookmarks/Itemid,6/mode,0/catid,12/navstart,0/search,/.

⁴ Shoghi Effendi's typification of the Other as a force of evil is also clear in his triumphalist accounts of Christians and Muslims and his rather racist view of Iranians and others ('the most decadent race in the civilised world, grossly ignorant, savage, cruel, steeped in prejudice, servile...'). See MacEoin (1989, pp. 21–23).

⁵ The campaign exists in Moojan's imagination. I have never been involved in such a campaign, have never been invited to take part in one, and have been told the same thing by other 'apostates'.

⁶ What community? I for one had never even heard of most of the people Momen names, and had never communicated with any of them. Others have written to me to much the same effect. Some are extremely ill at ease with others with whom they are supposedly associated. There simply is no 'community'.

⁷ The present writer has defended the Baha'is elsewhere.

⁸ One independent reviewer describes it as 'a sympathetic yet gently critical study' (Choice, February 2006).

interpretation on everyone's motives, Momen creates a conspiracy theory in which a single 'group' or 'community' engages in a 'campaign' against the Baha'i faith (p. 187).

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Picking the right theory: A response to Momen's modelling of the Baha'i community

In his 'Marginality and apostasy in the Baha'i community,' Moojan Momen refers to 'a Canadian Baha'i and a New Zealand Baha'i living in the Netherlands, who have both, like Marshall, been declared not to be Baha'is because of their persistent challenges to the Universal House of Justice' (Momen, 2007, p. 200). I am the New Zealand Baha'i concerned. What Momen says about me, and about the elected body which heads the Baha'i community, the Universal House of Justice (UHJ), is incorrect. The UHJ has not, to my knowledge, claimed that I have challenged its authority. I have not done so, and Momen offers no substantiation for his statement. I believe an apology is in order.

A second error is that the UHJ has not declared that I am not a Baha'i. Rather it has instructed that my name must be removed from the rolls of the Baha'i community as not 'meeting the requirements of Baha'i membership.'¹ It has made similar rulings in relation to other believers whose organisational membership has been revoked. Through this wording, the UHJ makes a distinction between individuals' continuing self-identification as Baha'is, and their recognition as members of the Baha'i community with its attendant privileges and duties: between the Baha'i Faith as a religion, and the Baha'i Administrative Order as an organ with particular functions within that religion. As we will see, the distinction is important in choosing the right theoretical framework for studying the Baha'i Faith.

The UHJ issued a circular letter which explains its actual reasons for rescinding my membership, a letter which Dr. Momen must know, but which he curiously fails to mention.² Far from challenging the UHJ, I have twice applied to be re-enrolled, which entails accepting the authority of the UHJ as the head of the Baha'i community. Alison Marshall and the 'Canadian Baha'i' have also sought to join the Baha'i community and have been refused. It is not that these people do not believe in the religion, or that they do not wish to be community members, or that they reject its values, but rather that the UHJ does not want them on the rolls. This cannot be understood in terms of Scheler's resentment, or studies of sects and their apostates. Rather, the explanation will be found in the politics of power and change in the religion, and the reasoning given by the religious institutions concerned.

Momen has drawn heavily on research inspired by Bromley's studies of contested exits from the high-tension New Religious Movements (NRMs) founded in the 1970s, such as the People's Temple (Bromley, 1998a, pp. 3–4, 10), where the leave-taker has found a role in the anti-cult movement and has assisted anti-cult organisations in invoking 'social control measures ... against NRMs' (Bromley, 1998b, p. 19). However, the Baha'i Faith cannot usefully be treated as a cult: it does not conceive of itself in tension with society, does not foster an 'us and them' dichotomy, and can therefore be rather tolerant of internal diversity, and given its cosmopolitan character and lack of resident communities, is not able to achieve a total cultural environment (cf. Barker, 1998, pp. 83–84). Moreover, of the Baha'i 'apostates' whom Momen discusses, only Ficicchia has fitted Bromley's definition of an apostate: a leavetaker from a cult (subversive organisation) who works with an anti-cult

¹ Online at <http://bahairants.com/date/2005/11/or http://tinyurl.com/2arz8c> accessed 15 December 2007.

² <http://www.bahai-studies.ca/archives/UHJ%202005-11-14.pdf> or <http://tinyurl.com/2gw5bb> accessed 15 December 2007. The UHJ's argumentation is based on a selective quotation from my book *Church and State* (McGlenn, 2005). What I actually wrote can be seen (page 1 of the Foreword) at http://www.sonjavank.com/sen/pdfs/cs_intro.pdf or <http://tinyurl.com/2xn4oo> accessed 15 December 2007. Since the misrepresentation is quite transparent, it seems most likely that what I had written was incorrectly reported to the UHJ, and not by them.

movement (oppositional coalition) to elicit social control measures against the cult. This definition is compounded from Bromley (1998a, p. 5), which Momen (2007, p. 188) cites, and from Bromley's (1998b, pp. 19–21, 26) further explanations. Momen says that he will use Bromley's rather narrow definition, but he then switches to a broader definition that includes religious sceptics such as Bertrand Russell, yet when he comes to select his 12 'Baha'i apostates,' his stated criterion is that they have conducted 'a prolonged campaign against the Baha'i community;' (Momen, 2007, pp. 188, 189, and 192, respectively) although not all have done so. William Garlington owes his place in Momen's (2007, p. 196) list solely to his authorship of a college-level introductory text about the Baha'i Faith (Garlington, 2005), which devotes several pages to the events in the US Baha'i community which Momen himself has covered at greater length in this article, although Garlington reports them non-judgmentally. In his conclusions, Momen finds that several apostates have been successful in publishing in the academic media (Momen, 2007, p. 206). Momen has himself produced the phenomenon he discovered, by labelling several scholars in the field as apostates. Neither Baha'i studies nor the Baha'i community have benefited.

To understand the dynamics of change in the US Baha'i community in particular, we have to turn from theory that explains the cult and anti-cult movements originating in the 1970s to different parallels. The model I suggest is an analogy with Catholic Modernism in the early 20th century: that is, of a contested but significantly supported reform movement, within a religion that is strongly embodied in a church structure. On that basis I would like to make three points, concerning intra-religious reform movements, definitions of religious membership, and the importance of change in the religious community.

As for the first, our model should distinguish intra-religious reformers from the dissidents or embittered ex-members of a sect. In a sect or subversive organisation, the leading cadre is free to define the values of the community, whereas in a religion, the values are found in a tradition and, most often, in written scripture. The religion's values are distinct from what a church leadership may say at a particular time, and it is a given that they are imperfectly understood and practised: a religion is always on the way towards realising itself. It is therefore to be expected that some people in a religion, outside a church leadership, may grasp overlooked aspects of its values or draw attention to some gap between present conditions and ideals in the community. They may take initiatives to help the community live out its values, as they see them, and this may create tension with the leadership or important groups in the community.

In the case of the Baha'i Faith, the direct accessibility of the religions' values is increased by written scriptures, which themselves encourage self-study, and by a provision which debar the UHJ from making pronouncements on doctrines and the meaning of scripture (Shoghi Effendi, 1938, p. 150). The arrival of the Internet enabled a broad discussion, within the English-speaking Baha'i community, about what Baha'i teachings are and about what kind of religious community and society is envisioned in the Baha'i scriptures. Despite some attempts to close the discussion, it has continued and, as Momen (2007, p. 204) concedes, changes have occurred 'in the direction suggested by some apostates.' This in itself tells us that the Internet phenomenon Momen describes was not apostasy in the making, but rather the periodical self-evaluation, and tension, which is normal in a long-lasting religious community.

One indicator of broad participation in this self-evaluation has been the Talisman discussion group. On 16 March 1996, this had about 180 subscribers, 11 of whom had email addresses at the Baha'i World Centre,³ which had a staff of about 400–500. As Momen (2007, p. 195) has noted, other Talisman participants were members of Baha'i administrative institutions outside the World Centre. So we may say that a significant minority of the English speakers among the leadership cadre and the religion's adherents were participating, with a wide diversity of views. Another indicator is Dialogue magazine, which had nearly 2000 paid subscribers in the 1990s, when the American Baha'i community had perhaps 40,000 active believers (personal communication from the publisher). The Yahoo group Talisman9 has 353 members today (21 January 2008), making it one of the largest Baha'i discussion groups. The re-evaluation is continuing; the discussion is at times irreverent, irrational and ill-informed, and even mischievous, but it has also been a powerful stimulus to intellectual life in the community.

Second, we should distinguish between types of membership. When studying a sect, this is hardly necessary: belief and self-identification closely correspond to organisational membership. But in religions, the believer normally has a choice of 'church' memberships or the option of belief without membership. In the case of the Baha'i Faith, the UHJ appears to distinguish between organisational membership and self-identification as a Baha'i, as I noted above. But for reasons particular to the Baha'i Faith, there is not, and probably never will be, a viable alternative 'church' within the Baha'i Faith; there is a choice between administrative enrollment or unenrollment, but no significant switching to alternative administrations or distinct fellowships. In the past decade, Western Baha'i communities have seen a growing phenomenon of self-identification as 'unenrolled Baha'is.'⁴ The Yahoo discussion list 'unenrolledbahai' has 237 members today (22 January 2008), and averaged 159 messages per month over 2007, a significant minority of the Baha'i discussion volume. The Yahoo group ex-Bahai, with 408 members today and 297 messages per month over 2007, also appears to include many members who have left the organisation rather than abandoned Baha'i belief. By Momen's (2007, p. 197) own account, five of his 12 'apostates' have maintained some form of Baha'i identity.

Third, our model must include change within the religious community as a factor. Momen's analysis, and that of Brinkerhoff and Mackie (1993, pp. 238–239) which he uses, discuss disaffiliation without considering that not only individuals,

³ i.e., @bwc.org. (From my notes of a Majordomo query). More World Centre staff may have subscribed without using their bwc.org addresses.

⁴ Outside of the West, many national Baha'i administrations do not maintain adequate membership rolls, and in a number of Islamic and totalitarian states, and in China, there is neither a national administration nor membership rolls, although there are Baha'is.

but also communities, may change. In their analyses, religious communities are assumed to be constant: if a distance develops, it is because the individuals have moved.

In the case of the Baha'i community, Dr. Momen and I are agreed that there has been a marked 'change of culture' in the Baha'i community over the past 10–15 years, associated with the introduction of 'Ruhi method' catechism classes. Over the same period, there has been a marked fall in enrollments and an increase in formally notified withdrawals and expulsions in the US Baha'i community, as well as the development of a 'penumbra' of unenrolled Baha'is around the enrolled community. A report written by the National Spiritual Assembly of the USA in 2007 observes that there has been a 50 percent drop in enrollments since 1997, and that 'this year' (2006) 'withdrawals (369) from Baha'i membership have risen 30 percent.'⁵ This is a phenomenon worth study. It appears analogous to the general growth in unchurched religion, but it is more rapid by far. A proper study, using questionnaires and interviews, would be required to reveal how many of these people are exiting the religion and how many are only ending their administrative enrollment, and their reasons for doing so. My experience in the Baha'i community leads me to think that one significant factor is the policy-driven 'change in culture' for which Momen has been a leading theorist and apologist.⁶ Other contributing factors that show up in the exit narratives are feeling burdened by excessive administrative and missionary work, long-unfulfilled expectations of 'entry by troops' and the achievement of the unity of nations by the year 2000, and the usual range of interpersonal conflicts and personal motivations for disaffiliation from any religious community. I doubt that the few vocal opponents operating primarily through the Internet are a significant part of this story.

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A case of misrepresentation

In Moojan Momen's article 'Marginality and Apostasy in the Baha'i Community' (*Religion* 37 [2007] 187–209), I was mentioned as one of 12 former Baha'is 'identified as apostates' (p. 192) who have launched 'a prolonged campaign against the Baha'i community' (p. 192). Momen claims that all 12 of us 'share an obsessive hatred of their former religious community' (p. 200) and are 'engaged in a continuous chain of acts of revenge' (p. 200) against the Baha'i Faith.

In my case, these are inaccurate allegations. I harbor no hatred toward Baha'is, and I actually find many positive features in their spiritual worldview, despite my disagreement with some of their beliefs and religious institutions. I rarely write about Baha'ism or Baha'i issues any more, but I do maintain a website at www.bahai-faith.com in which I share my experiences in the Baha'i Faith and critique the religion from the standpoint of my new faith commitment, Christianity. None of the contents of that website, or anything else I have written about Baha'is or Baha'ism, are hateful, obsessive, or vengeful. My interest is simply to provide information to people about my perceptions of the Baha'i religion and its organisation, in the hope that they will think very carefully before joining, and will consider alternatives such as the liberal Christian and Universalist beliefs I hold now.

Momen inaccurately states that Christian Universalism is my 'own sect' (p. 197) that I founded. In fact, Christian Universalism is a fairly widespread belief held by people who come from several major denominations, especially among liberal Christians. This view of Christianity predates me and, in fact, predates the Baha'i Faith. The Universalist Church of America (a historic Christian Universalist church which became the ninth largest denomination in the US at its peak) was founded by John Murray, Hosea Ballou, and other prominent ministers in the early 1800s, and eventually became part of the

⁵ <http://www.bahairants.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/05/ridvan-2007-annual-message.pdf> or <http://tinyurl.com/2omv4q> accessed 15 December 2007. The withdrawal figures will be understated, since they rely on individuals taking the initiative to renounce their administrative membership, or Baha'i belief.

⁶ See, for example, M. Momen, 'A Change of Culture' online at http://bahai-library.com/index.php5?file¼momen_change_culture or <http://tinyurl.com/2r2hnc>, accessed 15 December 2007.

interfaith Unitarian Universalist Association. Several organisations also exist specifically for Christians who believe in Universalism, both within that denominational tradition and outside it.

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A response to Takfir

Moojan Momen's paragraph about me in his article 'Marginality and Apostasy in the Baha'i Community' (Religion 37 [2007] 187–209, p. 198), under the guise of scholarly content and factual statement, is a litany of falsehoods and distortions about who I am.

Holding two degrees from the University of Michigan, I studied there with the poet Robert Hayden, who was a Baha'i, and edited both Hayden's *Collected Prose* (University of Michigan Press, 1984) and his *Collected Poems* (Liveright, 1985). A man of formidable intellectual integrity, Robert Hayden loathed fundamentalist Baha'is. Sharing his assessment, I discuss Hayden's actual views on the Baha'i Faith at length in my essay about him in my recently published *The Grove of the Eumenides: Essays on Literature, Criticism, and Culture* (2007). I have also published three other books of poetry and prose, have a forthcoming volume in Spring 2008, and have been a Fulbright-Hays scholar to China and an NEH scholar on India; but since I'm supposed to be a 'marginal' Baha'i 'apostate,' Momen, like all zealous Baha'i apologists, can only treat people with caricature and slander, as has been done by fundamentalists for over a decade on talk.religion.bahai and elsewhere online.

Implicitly deriding my four years of community college teaching, Momen conveniently leaves out that I taught English literature and rhetoric for seven years at Gunma University (Japan), Illinois State University, and Oakland University.

Momen claims that I had 'personal clashes with Iranian Baha'is' (p. 198). Apparently someone thought so and reported something to someone. What is the accusation and who is my accuser? In Western law, the accused have the right to know and confront the accuser, in order to protect the innocent from libel.

Haifan Baha'is have often denied the existence of other Bahai denominations. Following that pattern, Momen implies that the Reform Bahai Faith does not exist. The Reform Bahai Faith began August 19, 2004, although its roots go back to Ruth White, Mirza Ahmad Sohrab, Julie Chanler, and other early Baha'is who were similarly maligned for not accepting the fundamentalist interpretation of Baha'u'llah's Teachings, based on the purported will and testament of Abdu'l-Baha, written by the family of Shoghi Effendi, and pronounced a fraud in 1930 by Dr. C. Ainsworth Mitchell of the British Museum: http://www.reformbahai.org/CAMitchell_Report.htm.

The Reform Bahai Faith is already much larger than any other Bahai denomination, including the three combined that the NSA of Wilmette is currently suing in the US District Court of Northern Illinois. See http://trueseeker.typepad.com/true_seeker/court_case.html.

My website 'The Baha'i Faith & Religious Freedom of Conscience' may be the most comprehensive effort made to document the fanaticism that has taken over the largest Baha'i denomination. See <http://www.fglaysher.com/bahaicensorship>.

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Four heroes and an anti-hero

Although some response to my article (Momen, 2007, all references not otherwise attributed are to this article) was to be anticipated, the extent of the Internet campaign that has been waged against it on webpages, blogs and e-mail lists has been greater than I anticipated. Not all of the comments on the Internet have, however, been negative. One ex-Baha'i who has gone on to become a Catholic records his own experience of participating in various apostate e-mail lists and states: 'They act exactly the way Momen describes them' (Jonah, 2007). I have had similar private e-mails.

Because of restrictions of space, it is impossible to respond to all of the points raised in the four published replies and I have been forced to pick a selection of them. Some of the points made in these replies seem to be the result of these individuals forgetting what they themselves have written and done. Eric Stetson denies that my description of apostasy applies to him and implies that he is rarely involved with the Baha'i Faith now. Yet he is constantly updating his webpage, where he writes on

some apostate issues, tries to place the Baha'i Faith as a 'cult' and includes links to material written by other apostates such as Frederick Glaysher and Juan Cole as well as 'testimonials' from former Baha'is with titles such as 'Baha'i Faith is a cause of dislike, hatred and division'.¹ Although Stetson may not have written this latter material himself, his inclusion with evident approval of it on his website, suggests his agreement with it. The website also includes the statement that he has founded (and still runs) the 'Ex-Bahai' e-mail list. He therefore fits the definition given by David Bromley and used in my article.² Similarly, Frederick Glaysher demands to know who it is that has accused him of personal clashes with Iranian Baha'is. What I wrote was in fact based on his own statements in a file which is on his website and records his early experiences of disaffection with the Baha'i community (Glaysher 2008, see references to 'Persians' on pp. 50, 60, 61–2, 74–5, 80–81, 84, 109). Glaysher insists that his Reform Baha'i Faith has many members worldwide. He has been asked on several occasions on Internet lists to produce evidence for this and has failed to do so. With the exception of someone from India who for a short time identified himself with it and then withdrew, no one else has ever identified themselves or been identified as a member.

With regard to Sen McGlinn's response, he was not included in the list of apostates in my article because his writings do not parallel those of the others on my list. They do not deal with the usual apostate issues; they do not contribute to the apostate mythology; they do not take the form of an apostate narrative; and they do not contain the persistent and bitter attacks on the Baha'i institutions that characterize those who are on the list. Space did not, however, permit me to detail all of these considerations for every individual discussed and, in the case of McGlinn, I referred only to the last point by saying that he and another person 'do not share the *ressentiment* described by Scheler' (p. 200). This may have abbreviated matters too much and caused readers to think that *ressentiment* was the sole determining factor. Several of the other objections raised by McGlinn are in fact already explained in my article: for example that apostate attacks are no longer confined to New Religious Movements (p. 189); and that the Baha'i apostates can be said to have formed their own Internet oppositional coalition (p. 201). My statement that Sen McGlinn's disenrollment was due to "persistent challenges" to the Universal House of Justice is an inference that I have drawn from letters of the Universal House of Justice going back to 1995. The letter of the Universal House of Justice to which he refers, and which he chides me for having ignored, relates to something he had written but does not say this was the cause of his expulsion.

In the next part of his response, McGlinn goes on to propound a 'different theory' or 'model' for the phenomenon that I have described. But what he is proposing is a study of people exiting the Baha'i Faith (people who have left, i.e. 'leavetakers', or been expelled). He is of course welcome to write a paper on that subject and use any theory he feels is suitable, but my article is about Baha'i apostates (people who have exited the Baha'i community and then carry on a campaign against it) and in my article I have demonstrated a correspondence with other examples of this phenomenon described by other scholars. So the theoretical basis I have chosen for my article is suitable.

Denis MacEoin has quoted Abbas Amanat's egregious comments on my analysis of the socio-political dynamics of the Babi movement. I am quite happy for readers of *Religion* to look at my article on this subject (Momen, 1983; see also Smith and Momen, 1986) and judge Amanat's comments for themselves. It is strange however that MacEoin has raised this as part of his disparagements of me, given that he has frequently cited this article in his own works (including his two books on Babism, two of his papers cited in my article, and elsewhere) without ever voicing any criticism of it. His criticism of my book *Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne* is also wide of the mark. In that book I have given in full Browne's article 'The Babis of Persia' in which there are copious references to Azal and his claims and writings – I have 'censored' nothing. Then MacEoin has quoted selectively from Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice to make the Baha'i Faith appear intolerant and anti-intellectual. If I had the space, I could equally present a range of quotations that would make them appear the acme of liberalism and modernity.³ The fact is that the Baha'i Faith is a much more varied landscape than the stark picture MacEoin draws. With respect to 'the intolerant world', to which MacEoin states I belong, I would invite those who wish to judge for themselves whether academic Baha'i studies is as shackled, distorted and unacademic as MacEoin makes out to look at the last few issues of *Baha'i Studies Review*.⁴ The names of those on the editorial board of the journal are published and can be judged as to whether they conform to MacEoin's 'panels of laypersons' description. It is they who review the articles in the journal (except occasionally when their expertise does not cover the subject of a paper and another person is invited to review an article). In other words, there is no more 'censorship' involved in this process than with any other academic journal.

One of the main points that MacEoin seems to want to make is that there is no community or network of apostates and no campaign. I can understand that he may think so since he has never participated on Internet groups for more than a short time (as far as I know), but such groups do exist, as described in my article and as McGlinn's response and the responses I describe in the first paragraph above confirm. Of the ten post-1996 apostates described in this article, five had participated in *Talisman* before 1996 and all have participated since that date on either alt.religion.bahai or the main apostate lists. Also in my article I have described these Internet groups as primarily providing support and plausibility structures – not as being the platform for campaigns (although some of that does go on as well, as the Majnun posting that I describe, p. 195, showed).

¹ <http://www.bahai-faith.com>, which was most recently updated on 16 December 2007 (accessed 14 February 2008). See sections 'Behind the Facade: Cult-like Tendencies in the Baha'i Faith' and 'Former Baha'is and Ex-Baha'i Christians: Selected Testimonials' on the opening page of this website.

² Stetson now states on the opening page of his website (see previous note) that he 'has been named in an academic journal of religion as one of the 12 most significant ex-Baha'is of the modern era.' This is of course a gross misrepresentation of what I have said in my article.

³ Regarding Shoghi Effendi, see for example 1968, p. 63; regarding the Universal House of Justice, see for example 1989, p. 7.

⁴ Volume 13 can be viewed at <http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals.php?issn=13548697>.

In the main, the campaigns have been carried out on an individual basis, as in MacEoin's own case. The fact that within a couple of weeks of my article being published, there were already a dozen or more responses to it on apostate webpages and blogs is evidence of a well-established and active network, especially since the overwhelming majority of those responding were not academics and had probably never even heard of this journal before.

Would I change anything in my article as a result of these replies? Yes, I would – no paper is beyond revision. First, as I discussed in my article (p. 200), deciding who does and does not fit into the category of 'apostate' is a difficult business. I now think that it would be better to remove William Garlington from the list. Although his latest book is clearly favouring apostate issues over those of core Baha'is (as I have described on p. 196), I do not, on reflection, think he can be said to have carried on a sustained campaign over a period of time. Second, at the suggestion of the former editor of *Religion*, I moved Max Scheler's definition of apostates from much nearer the end of the paper, where it originally was, to the beginning and consequently added to the article further references to it. In retrospect, I regret agreeing to this move (although the responsibility is, of course, entirely mine) as some have thought that it implies that I am using Scheler as my definition of apostates. I am in fact using David Bromley's definition in picking out the 12 apostates whom I describe (and I state this on p. 188). Scheler's definition was introduced because I think it sheds light on the phenomenon. Much of the offence seems, however, to have been caused by Scheler's definition and the original structure of the paper would probably have caused less offence. Thirdly (as pointed out to me in a private e-mail), I regret my failure to mention an important article by David Piff (2005) that covers the Talisman episode in some detail and presages some of the points made in my article.

Finally, I must thank the editors of *Religion* for publishing what I assume readers will have noted are four further documents of evidence that support several of the main points that I make in my article in describing this episode of apostasy in relation to the Baha'i community:

- that this is a highly articulate group of people whose efforts have been directed at making their views known through the Internet and through academic media (see all four responses);
- that one of their strategies has been to try to turn the status of the Baha'i Faith from that of an 'allegiant organisation' to that of a 'subversive' one, or a 'cult', mainly by representing the Baha'i institutions as repressive and authoritarian (see comments of MacEoin and Glaysher);
- that while Bromley's definition of an apostate calls for the person to have joined an oppositional coalition, these apostates have effectively formed their own oppositional coalition through the medium of the Internet and the creation of e-mail groups (see the useful statistics provided by McGlinn on these);
- that there are set issues (summarized in my article, pp. 202–203), to which the apostates continually revert (and some of which MacEoin here repeats);
- and that the experience of the apostates is the exact opposite – a dark mirror–of that of the core members (see MacEoin's comments, especially on academic Baha'i studies).

I will leave it for readers of *Religion* to judge for themselves whether or not they detect a trace of *ressentiment* in one or two of these responses. It appears that the Internet apostate Baha'i community regards my article as a further episode in their mythology of persecution and harassment (see p. 202) and will no doubt see these four respondents as heroes in this mythology, while presumably I am to be added to the list of anti-heroes.

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