

# **BAHA'I AND GLOBALISATION**

Edited by Margit Warburg,  
Annika Hvithamar and Morten Warmind

# RENNER Studies on New Religions

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# BAHA'I AND GLOBALISATION

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# Introduction

The Danish RENNER project is a REsearch Network on the study of NEw Religions. This research network, which is supported by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities, has been active since 1992. In 1998, a new grant from the Research Council allowed us to conduct a specific study on new religions and globalisation, and we initiated the project with several separate studies of new age religion and globalisation. The present book, *Baha'i and Globalisation*, which is the seventh volume of the book series *Renner Studies on New Religion*, is the second of the case studies of the project. Another book, which emphasises the theoretical and methodological aspects of the study of new religions and globalisation, will be volume eight in the series, rounding off this special RENNER topic.

Globalisation is the conventional term used to describe the present, rapid integration of the world economy facilitated by the innovations and growth in international electronic communications particularly during the last two decades. Globalisation carries with it an increasing political and cultural awareness that all of humanity is globally interdependent. However, the awareness of this global interdependency has been aired by philosophers and politicians much before the term globalisation was introduced. Thus, the founder of the Baha'i religion, the Iranian prophet, Husayn-Ali Nuri (1817-1892) called Baha'u'llah, claimed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the central doctrine of the Baha'i religion is the realisation that the human race is one and that the world should be unified: 'The utterance of God is a lamp, whose light is these words: Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch'. This is a goal that 'excelleth every other goal'.<sup>1</sup>

Present-day globalisation is a continuation of a historical process over several hundred years. This process gained momentum in a crucial period from around 1870 and the subsequent fifty years. It is notable that this period coincides with the period when the central doctrines of the Baha'i religion were formulated by Baha'u'llah and his son and successor, Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921). The sociologist of religion,

1 Both quotations are from Baha'u'llah (1988: 14).

James Beckford has noted that in some senses the faith of Baha'u'llah 'foreshadowed globalization, with its emphasis on the interdependence of all peoples and the need for international institutions of peace, justice and good governance' (Beckford 2000: 175).

The synchrony between the take-off of globalisation and the emergence of Baha'i on the world scene should not be dismissed as insignificant. Baha'u'llah's message that the world should be unified would probably not have fallen on fertile soil much before the 1870s, because the impact of globalisation was not yet begun to be felt among potential proselytes. In the late nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century, the climate for this idea was more receptive.

From the Baha'i point of view, the unification of the world is a consequence of the culmination of the spiritual development of humanity. This spiritual development has been achieved through the successive revelations of God's will in the prophecies of the different religions since the time of Abraham, with the Baha'i religion as the latest of the divine revelations. The Baha'is also perceive themselves as the vanguard of this historical process, which is destined to result in a new world civilisation, called the World Order of Baha'u'llah. This golden age for humanity, the 'Most Great Peace' is believed to be preceded by the 'Lesser Peace' in which the nations of the world reach an agreement to abolish war and establish the political instruments to secure world peace and prosperity, consonant with the Baha'i call for the unification of the world.

Thus, to study the Baha'is and their religion in the light of globalisation is to grasp an essential aspect of the Baha'i teachings, and it is with good reason that Baha'i and globalisation stands as a central case in the RENNER study of new religions and globalisation. Few other religions express so clearly in their doctrines the view that the world should be unified, politically and religiously. The Baha'is are also globalised in the sense that they live all over the world, and they deliberately aim at being present in as many locations as possible. In 2003, there were Baha'i communities in 190 countries and 46 territories of the world, and excerpts of Baha'u'llah's writings had been translated into 802 languages (*The Bahá'í World* 2003: 311).

### *The Baha'i Religion*

The different chapters of this book assumes a basic knowledge of the Baha'i religion and its historical development. A brief review will therefore be given in the following.

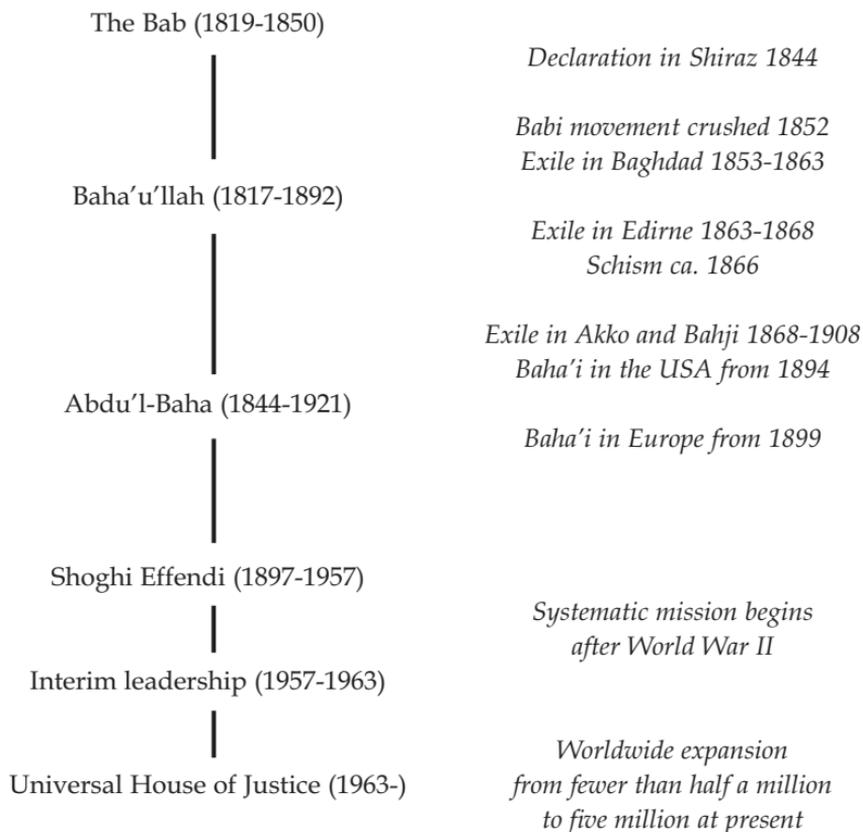
The Baha'i religion has its origins in religious currents within Shi'i Islam in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1844, a millenarian movement, called Babism, rose from these currents. The Babism provoked the Islamic establishment by insisting that their leader, Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819-1850), called the Bab, was a new prophet and a source of divine revelations. This implied in principle that the age of Islam was over. The rapid growth of the Babi movement occurred in a general climate of public unrest, and from 1848 the Babism were engaged in a series of bloody fights with the Iranian government. By 1852, however, the movement seemed to have been crushed, and the surviving Babi leaders including Baha'u'llah were exiled to the neighbouring Ottoman Empire. After a break in 1866-67 with a minority of the Babism who acknowledged Baha'u'llah's half-brother Subh-i-Azal (ca. 1830-1912) as their leader, Baha'u'llah openly declared that he was a new source of divine revelation. The great majority of Babism soon recognised the theophanic claims of Baha'u'llah, and he gradually transformed Babism into the present Baha'i religion.

Although Baha'u'llah abolished many Babi doctrines and practices, in particular the militancy and the harsh treatment of unbelievers, there is also a strong element of continuity between Babism and Baha'i. The Bab occupies a central and visible position in the Baha'i religion, and his remains are buried in a splendid golden-domed shrine on the slope of Mount Carmel in Haifa, adjacent to the Baha'i administrative headquarter, the Baha'i World Centre. The year 1844, when the Bab made his declaration, is the year one in the Baha'i calendar, which was devised by the Bab.

Through systematic mission initiated by Baha'u'llah's son and successor, Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921), Baha'i gradually expanded outside its Muslim environment. Baha'i missionaries came to the USA and Canada in the 1890s and to West Europe around 1900. Effective growth in Europe did not occur, however, until after World War II, when Abdu'l-Baha's grandson and successor, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) organised a Baha'i mission in Europe assisted by many American

Baha'is who came to Europe as Baha'i missionaries or 'pioneers' in the Baha'i terminology.

### *Chronology of Babi and Baha'i Leadership*



The above figure gives a brief chronology of Babism and Baha'i, showing the names of the leaders and some major historical internal events in the Baha'i religion. Shoghi Effendi was the last individual to lead Baha'i. Abdu'l-Baha had appointed him as leader of the Baha'is with the title of 'Guardian of the Cause of God', and he was meant to be the first in a line of 'Guardians'. However, when Shoghi Effendi died in 1957 without an appointed successor, an interim collective leadership established in 1963 the present supreme ruling body of the Baha'i religion, the Universal House of Justice.

The writings of the Bab, of Baha'u'llah, and of Abdu'l-Baha make up the canon of Baha'i sacred texts. The writings of Shoghi Effendi are not considered sacred but they are still binding in doctrinal and legislative matters. The Baha'i leaders were prolific writers and left both books and a massive corpus of letters of doctrinal significance, called tablets. Some of the central Babi and Baha'i texts are introduced and analysed in the different chapters with a view of elucidating the globalisation aspect of the religion.

### *Diachronic Perspectives*

We have sought to study the relation between Baha'i and globalisation from its historical beginning in early Babism until today. To do so, RENNER and the University of Copenhagen invited an international group of scholars to participate in a three-day conference in August 2001. The scholars who represented different fields were asked to apply their specialisations in a study of Baha'i and globalisation. All contributions are original and are published here for the first time.

The chapters of the first part of *Baha'i and Globalisation* roughly follow a chronological scheme and together they make up a diachronic sweep of the rise of the global orientation of the Babi and Baha'i religions. The opening chapter by Stephen Lambden aims at showing that the Babi-Baha'is were not unprepared for Baha'u'llah globalist thoughts. In his paper, Lambden emphasises the continuity between the globalism in the Bab's early major work, the *Qayyum al-asma'*, and Baha'u'llah's globalism, but also the breaks, notably the abandoning of *jihad* as a means of promoting a globalisation process. Todd Lawson's chapter is a philological analysis of Baha'u'llah's important early work, the *Hidden Words* from the 1850s, and with this example Lawson elucidates the further development of the global orientation of the Babi-Baha'i religion in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Baghdad. Juan R. I. Cole shows in his chapter on Abdu'l-Baha that the globalist thinking in Baha'i was now far-reaching and truly international in character. Abdu'l-Baha embraced many of the ideas of liberal modernity, and he clearly perceived that the world had become a single place even in the early twentieth century.

Abdu'l-Baha was a determined leader, and Moojan Momen's chapter gives much substance to the tight connection between Abdu'l-Baha's thinking and his practical directives in the exceptional global expan-

sion of the Baha'i religion in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In connection with this expansion Robert Stockman argues how Abdu'l-Baha's thinking inspired much of the practice of the Baha'i proselytising, and he brings to attention the practical activism of the early American Baha'is and the mutual bonds of assistance between the Baha'i communities of North America and Iran. It was, however, precisely the international orientation of the Iranian Baha'is which gave rise to allegations of unpatriotism from nationalist circles in Iran. This is shown by Fereydun Vahman who analyses a broad selection of Iranian anti-Baha'i polemic literature before the Iranian revolution of 1979. The global ambitions of the Baha'is are furthermore illustrated in Zaid Lundberg's chapter on Shoghi Effendi's *World Order of Baha'u'llah*. Lundberg carefully describes Shoghi Effendi's understanding of the Baha'i religion as part of a global evolution aiming at a world commonwealth which were to be identical with a Baha'i commonwealth. Morten Warmind puts the Baha'i emphasis on globalisation and modernity into perspective by comparing and contrasting it with another break-off movement from Islam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ahmadiyya. Margit Warburg concludes the chronological section with a chapter that integrates a view of the historical development of the Baha'i religion into a general understanding of globalisation, based on a model originally proposed by the sociologist Roland Robertson. This model is further developed in the chapter and is used in an analysis of the changing attitudes of the Baha'i leadership in relation to international politics.

### *Some Synchronic Themes*

The second part of the book gives a thematic, synchronic coverage of contemporary Baha'i and globalisation. Wendi Momen opens with a chapter on the globalisation thinking in Baha'i from a politologic exegesis of the Baha'i writings, in particular the writings of Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi. With the Internet, the individual Baha'is' reflections on their religion can now be expressed in a truly global forum. David Piff treats the Baha'i discourse on the Internet and shows its potentials for creating a new transnational community feeling among the participants and for being a seedbed for diverging and sometimes controversial discourses on Baha'i doctrines.

The ideas conveyed in the sacred texts are reflected and reinterpreted in the minds of the followers, and this is treated in several

of the following chapters. Two chapters are based on interviews of Baha'is with regard to their understanding and conceptualisation of the global ideas of Baha'i. Lynn Echevarria has conducted interviews among 21 of the oldest living Canadian Baha'is, showing how ideas of the 'oneness of mankind' and of 'world consciousness' were salient in the early Baha'i mission. Will van den Hoonaard has interviewed 18 Baha'is world-wide and has also made extensive use of Baha'i secondary and core literature to elucidate the discourse of the idea of 'unity in diversity' in different Baha'i communities. Sen McGlinn continues the thread of interpretation and re-interpretation of texts and he brings to the surface a number of divergent Baha'i stances on issues following in the wake of modernisation and globalisation, such as the relation between state and church or the equality of the sexes. Finally, Denis MacEoin points to the triumphalist aspect of the Baha'is' self-understanding as representing the religion to unite all religions in the culmination of globalisation. However, on the path ahead lie issues of secularism, and MacEoin discusses the challenges which secular values present to a religion that – rooted in Islamic thinking – aims to fuse the spheres of religion and society.

### *Issues of Terminology*

Having completed the fifteen chapters of *Baha'i and Globalisation*, the observant reader may have noted certain inconsistencies with respect to spelling (British or American usage, as regards the central term globalisation/globalization!) and the use of diacriticals. There are (good?) reasons why inconsistencies are hard to eradicate. Many Baha'i names and terms are of Persian or Arabic origin, and Baha'is usually transcribe these words with full diacritical marks in all official texts of the religion. However, their transcription does not always follow modern academic transcription systems; apart from some spelling particularities the most conspicuous difference is that the Baha'is have retained an earlier practice of using the acute accent instead of the horizontal stroke over the long vowels, a, i and u.

Fortunately, for the convenience of most of the readers who have no particular interest in the details of transcription, also many scholars who are themselves Baha'is have now chosen to reduce the use of diacriticals to a minimum. This trend set by leading specialists in the Baha'i religion is a refreshing liberation from the spelling orthodoxy

of earlier Baha'i research, and we have not wished to interfere with this in the edition of the work. Nor have we wished to standardise the denotation of the Baha'i religion itself, whether it is called the Baha'i Faith (the official Baha'i term), Bahaism, or just Baha'i.

Among the new religions of the modern age, Baha'i has indeed been one of the most successful. Today, the Baha'is claim that there are more than five million registered Baha'is world-wide and the religion is represented in almost all countries in the world. Nevertheless, the Baha'i religion has attracted less interest among students of new religions than it deserves, and the number of scholars who have Baha'i as their main research topic is limited. Most of them are, in fact, represented in this book, which is the first anthology in Baha'i studies that deals with globalisation. On behalf of RENNER and the authors I hope that it will catch the interest of students of new religions and globalisation as well as promoting the academic study of the Baha'i religion and its followers.

*Margit Warburg*

Copenhagen, August 2005

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