DOI: 10.46586/er.15.2024.11630
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Entangled Religions 15.2 (2024)
er.ceres.rub.de

"I woke up and knew, spiritually, I have just accepted the faith"

Agency and Dream Ethnography in the Bahá'í Faith

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ABSTRACT This paper focuses on how first-generation Bahá'ís view dreams and visions as confirming their choice to become Bahá'í. It presents life story interviews, highlighting the significance of their dream narratives in religious conversion. The study emphasizes that these dreams integrate their prior religious identity, mainly through the appearance of messengers of God serving as supernatural agents, which conforms to Bahá'í beliefs in progressive revelation. It advocates for anthropological attention to Bahá'í dream accounts, presenting dreams as premonitions or encouragements for conversion and acknowledging leaving a previous faith. The paper calls for investigating dreams' bridging function, viewed by converts as a nonhuman and non-institutional force aiding conversion. It aims to explore agency in dreams concerning religious conversion by analyzing dream accounts from first-generation Bahá'ís' life stories, illustrating how dreams influence and transform individual beliefs.

KEYWORDS Bahá'í Faith, religious conversion, agency, dreams, supernatural agents

Introduction

> *"I knew I had a decision to make, then I had this vision"* (Dubán,[1] Ireland)

In all Abrahamic religions, dreams and visions are part of the religious and cultural narrative of the scriptures. This applies to Jacob's dream in the Torah, St. Paul's in the Apostles, and Muhammad's in the Quran. Dreams have also played a symbolic role in the history of religious conversion (Bulkeley 1995, 2014; Lohmann 2000). Dream research provides new ways of understanding individual cases of religious conversion by highlighting the multilayered interaction of personal, cultural, and spiritual forces at work in conversion dreams—a dream experience through which an individual transforms their beliefs or religious affiliation. Based [1]

1 Throughout the paper, I use pseudonyms to keep the interlocuters anonymous.

on dream accounts from the life stories of first-generation Bahá'ís, this paper explores how dreams can act as transformative agents that shape individual beliefs.

[2] Various scholars have provided distinct interpretations of agency, yet all definitions speak of the active role of individuals. Hannah Arendt (1958) sees agency as the ability to act on one's own account, that is, in a sense, the capacity to take the initiative. According to Arendt, an individual's freedom is determined by their capacity to change their situation and decide to act, irrespective of their assignment to a specific realm or their relationships of dependence or individual sovereignty. According to Peter van der Veer (1996), the modern notion of agency entails assumptions of freedom, legal and moral responsibility, rationality, and individualism. Common in all these formulations of agency is the postulation of a rational actor who acts upon the world and is responsible for his actions. Furthermore, self-empowerment is emphasized within modern Western theories of agency (1996, 7). As Talal Asad has stated: "Everyone has agency; everyone is responsible for the life he or she leads" (1996, 272).

[3] This paper employs an anthropological lens to examine the role of dreams in religious conversion and the sense of agency that converts hold. The main research questions are: What role do dreams play in the decision of first-generation Bahá'ís to become Bahá'í? How do dream experiences impact an individual's sense of agency? What are the shared symbols and motifs in dream accounts of first-generation Bahá'í from different religious and ethnic backgrounds? Through these questions, I explore how dream ethnography among new Bahá'is can contribute to the broader anthropological understanding of dreams as a universal cultural phenomenon and their role in religious conversion.

[4] The Bahá'í Faith, named after its founder Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), originated in Iran in the late nineteenth century and is one of the world's youngest monotheistic religions. Its fundamental values call for removing boundaries between religions, genders, cultures, and countries. The Bahá'í Faith does not contain a system of authoritative clergy (Smith 2008).

[5] The theological principle of the Bahá'í Faith is the unity of the revealed religions. According to this principle, God sends a messenger who transmits the epistle, the word of God, to human beings in every generation; that is what is called "progressive revelation." Bahá'u'lláh claimed that he embodied all the messianic figures of the four religious traditions: Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam (Buck 1986, 159). In the Bahá'í Faith, unlike in most varieties of Abrahamic religions in which converts are required to renounce their past beliefs and commitments to create a rupture, first-generation Bahá'ís narrate their religious identity as a progression rather than a conversion (Makhani-Belkin 2023, 8).

[6] Drawing on dream accounts of first-generation Bahá'ís from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, this paper analyzes the role of dreams in their decision to become Bahá'í. Without clergy and given the principle of progressive revelation in the Bahá'í Faith, I suggest dreams play an active role and influence in their becoming Bahá'í. With no one to convert them and no conversion ritual, first-generation Bahá'ís take an active role in their process of becoming Bahá'í, where their dreams serve as confirmation of their own agency. Here, dreams are not merely passive experiences but can actively affect a person's choices and actions, leading them to a religious conversion. Moreover, in all dream accounts in this paper, God's messengers from their birth faith serve as agents of change to their new religious identity.

Anthropology of Dreams

In the early twentieth century, anthropologists often left the topic of dreams to psychology, primarily due to the dominance of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic perspective (Stewart 2004, 7). However, it is essential to note that Freud's approach does not account for the specific cultural meanings attributed to dreams. [7]

In *New Directions in the Anthropology of Dreaming*, Jeannette Mageo and Robin Sheriff (2021) claim that anthropology, unlike other social sciences, allows the field and informants to define the terms and experiences under study. Dreams, therefore, are considered cultural artifacts that anthropologists and informants unearth together, leveraging the dreamers' knowledge of their own experiences, personal histories, and cultural backgrounds alongside the anthropologists' understanding of cross-cultural comparisons and cultural theories. In certain societies that hold dreams in high regard, dreaming is a valuable tool for gaining new perspectives on waking life (2021, 1). [8]

Amira Mittermaier (2012) states that the "anthropology of dreams" refers to the academic exploration and analysis of dreams within anthropology. This approach involves studying dreams and related discussions to gain insights into complex aspects of human experience, including questions of subjectivity, agency, and ethics (2012, 249). Mittermaier provides valuable insights into the nature of dreams in the current Muslim culture of Egypt, where dreams are significant in the cultural fabric, shaping personal and communal experiences. According to her research, specific dreams serve as conduits for messages from Elsewhere, visitations, divine inspiration, and ongoing forms of prophecy. While deeply personal, these dreams also hold collective significance, reminding the dreamer and their community of the interaction between the otherworldly and tangible worlds. In Egyptian dream narratives, multiple forms of agency converge as dream visions act upon the dreamer, compelling them to engage in self-cultivation practices and navigate the complexities of their lived experiences. In many religious traditions, dreams are highly regarded as they are believed to arise from a realm beyond the dreamer, known as "Elsewhere." These dream narratives illuminate non-secular, relational forms of subjectivity, offering insights into individuals' connections with the divine or supernatural within their spiritual beliefs (2012, 260). [9]

Mittermaier's work might suggest how believing in dreams as conduits for messages from Elsewhere or divine inspiration impacts an individual's sense of agency in embracing new religious beliefs or converting to a different faith. In the dream accounts presented later, first-generation Bahá'ís describe how messengers of God from their initial religious background play an active role in their decision to become Bahá'í. [10]

Pnina Werbner (2003) shows the transformative power of dreams in influencing the decisions of individuals and communities to convert to a new religious path. She discusses the dream of a specific Muslim Sufi murid (disciple), which was such a transformative experience that his entire village chose to become murids. The revered Sufi saint and his disciples were deeply influenced by dreams and visions guiding their actions and beliefs. The saint's life and authority were perceived as deeply interconnected with divinely inspired dreams, illustrating the spiritual journey and personal transformation towards a higher level of spiritual understanding (2003, 136–38). In this paper, we will see how the dreams and visions of first-generation Bahá'ís have motivated them towards a spiritual journey that resulted in them becoming Bahá'í. [11]

Most anthropological studies on dreams have centered around specific cultures, ethnicities, or religions. However, the anthropologist Douglas Hollan (2004) introduced the concept of [12]

"selfscape dreams," which are emotionally and perceptually vivid dreams that reflect how the dreamer's current organization of self relates to various parts of the self, the body and other people and objects (2004, 172–74). These dreams map out the terrain between the body and the world and can reveal aspects of self-organization. Hollan provides examples of selfscape dreams from different cultures, demonstrating how the mapping of the self in selfscape dreams goes inward to the body and outward to people and objects in the world. The dreams exhibit substantial variation across cultures and even among individuals within the same culture, highlighting their global aspects. These dreams reveal the dreamer's self-identity, self-perception, and how they navigate their relationships with others and the environment.

Through a comprehensive understanding of dreams in different contexts, dream ethnography enriches our knowledge of human experiences and their intersections with culture, religion, agency, and identity. The case studies in this paper exemplify the complex relationships between dreams, agency, and religious conversion. They show how conversion dreams act as personal experiential verification for the Bahá'í Faith, as there is no clergy to facilitate the conversion or verify dreams' communal or cultural role. How do such dreams motivate individuals to explore and confirm their new beliefs? How does their interpretation influence the dreamer's spiritual journey and sense of agency and validation? [13]

Agency and Dreams in Religious Conversion

Conversion is perceived as a passive and outside force rather than something converted, initiated, or performed. At the same time, researchers have addressed the issue of agency and free choice and the power that converts have over themselves and the conversion process (see Rimestad 2024). In religious conversion, agency refers to the individual's ability to choose and take actions that lead to their conversion. [14]

In most religions, the conversion process involves the presence of agents that promote and facilitate the conversion. Nonhuman expressions of influence in religious conversion may arise through diverse channels, frequently perceived as divine or supernatural forces. Some examples are divine communication, miraculous events, revered scriptures, supernatural entities, and ancestral guidance. These agents can take various forms, including human individuals such as clergy, religious leaders, or community members. In some cases, multiple external agents may play a significant role in the conversion process. These agents often perform the conversion ritual and guide individuals through the transition. [15]

Here, I borrow the concept of "supernatural agents" as entities outside the human sphere that can also play a significant role in religious conversions and potentially impact an individual's decision to embrace a new faith or reaffirm their commitment to an existing one. The presence and actions of supernatural agents in dreams may act as catalysts, prompting contemplation, reflection, and transformative experiences that align with the individual's spiritual journey and the conversion process. These dreams might be perceived as divine messages, signs, or a heightened spiritual journey, encouraging the individual to pursue new religious beliefs. Additionally, if the dream challenges or presents an alternative perspective to their existing beliefs, it could lead to introspection and a reevaluation of their spiritual path, potentially steering them toward a conversion experience. [16]

Dreams during conversion are assigned practical meaning in the conversion narrative. In addition, when dream accounts are shared and jointly interpreted, they may be integrated into cultural and religious practices. As Kelly Bulkeley (2014) argues, dreams can be a potent [17]

catalyst for change, aiding individuals in overcoming obstacles, resolving conflicts, and finding new directions in their spiritual journey. Within religious traditions, dreams are often viewed as a means of communication between humans and the divine, with prophetic dreams serving as messages or interventions from a guiding spiritual force (2014, 259).

[18] The power of dreams in religious conversion is evident in their ability to bridge between traditional religious beliefs and newly adopted faiths. Susan Rasmussen (2015) presented through her ethnographic work how the dream serves as a narrative tool for navigating the tensions between traditional Tuareg religious practices and the more orthodox Islamic practices promoted by the Kunta. The dreamer's encounter with the spirit and his reluctance to fully engage with it symbolizes his ambivalence towards the changing religious landscape (2015, 642). In another work, Rasmussen focuses on Kabyle immigrant converts in France and their conversion from Islam to Christianity in their home region of Kabylie in Algeria, North Africa, before migrating to France. Rasmussen (2022) employs Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotype, which examines how language represents configurations of time and space. By analyzing dreams as chronotypes, she explores the interplay between cultural and religious distances over time and space, revealing both the continuity and disruptions experienced during the conversion process.

[19] While dreams can represent the tensions and disruptions inherent in religious conversion, as explored in Rasmussen's ethnographic works, they also serve as powerful vehicles for integrating and synthesizing traditional beliefs with new religious frameworks, providing continuity amid change.

[20] Dreams generate symbols and metaphors that aid this integration, exemplified by Constantine's vision and subsequent actions guided by Christ (Bulkeley 2014, 261–62). Patricia M. Davis's (2005) study of dreams and visions among the Anglo-Saxons highlights the transformative role of dreams in converting Anglo-Saxon England to Christianity. Dreams were instrumental in introducing and integrating the new religious and cultural paradigm, combining Anglo-Saxon and Christian themes and metaphors (2005, 75). Understanding how dreams have historically facilitated conversions allows us to appreciate the enduring significance of dreams in religious contexts.

[21] Melanie G. Rosen (2021) delves into the concept of agency in dreams and how dreams are compared to waking experiences. According to her, the sense of agency in dreams refers to the feeling of control or agency that a dreamer experiences over their dream body and world (lucid dreams). This sense of agency is often reduced or absent in dreams but can sometimes be similar to or even enhanced compared to waking. In some dreams, the dreamer feels an increasing sense of control of their dream bodies and a sense that they can control elements of the dream world (2021, 695–97). Rosen's interpretation integrates the dream experience into the individual's belief system, potentially reinforcing existing convictions or instigating a transformative shift towards embracing a new faith. The dream-induced agency can be a powerful force, confirming spiritual growth and confirmation for conversion.

[22] Patrick McNamara and Kelly Bulkeley (2015) present a theory of the role of dreams as a source of creativity in religious ideas, focusing on the cognitive process of forming supernatural agents. Supernatural agents (SAs) are non-human entities with autonomous powers and intentions. They hold unusual powers far beyond the capabilities of ordinary agents (e.g., flying, time travel, mind-reading). The researchers suggest that the dreamer initially holds agency in the dream, attributing intentions and actions to the dream characters, including supernatural agents. In dreams, altered agency perception, especially during REM sleep, leads

the dreamer to attribute heightened agency to supernatural characters, given the change in how agency is perceived compared to wakefulness. The dreamer perceives actions and intentions as originating from these characters, considering them highly influential within the dream narrative (2015, 2).

Conversion Dreams in the Bahá'í Faith

[23] Turning to first-generation Bahá'ís, it is essential to note that dreams and visions have played an important role in the Bahá'í Faith from the beginning. They shaped the manifestations of the Báb (1819–1850), the herald of the Bahá'í Faith, and Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), the founder of the faith, validating their recognition and acceptance as messengers of God by the first followers of the faith. In the Bahá'í writings and texts describing the faith's history, the first followers' dream accounts also play a significant part. Usually, a messenger of God, often Muhammad, appeared in their dreams. They then decided to accept the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh as messengers of God and follow their teachings. Therefore, these dreams became conversion dreams that narrated the establishment of the faith in its early years in Iran. For example:

> [24] That night, I dreamed I was walking in a wilderness, and someone was following me. "What is your desire?"
>
> [25] I said, "I beg God to give me two wings so I can fly."
>
> [26] Suddenly, I realized that I had two wings and was flying. I flew for some time until I reached a vast arena full of people. I saw a high pulpit on which the Prophet Muhammad stood. All the prophets and messengers were seated there. At that moment, I turned into a dove. I flew up and settled in one of the niches on the pulpit.
>
> [27] The Prophet placed a necklace around my neck, and I flew away to unseen places that no words can describe. There, I saw people in a state of prayer, among them my mother. I gave her the necklace and flew away again. (Khánum 1987, 21–22)

[28] In her dream, Munirih Khánum (1847–1938), a woman from a Muslim background in Iran, dreamt about the Prophet Muhammad. But alongside him, she also saw other messengers of God. Her dream of other messengers alongside the Prophet Muhammad signifies an acknowledgment and acceptance of the lineage of prophets and messengers of God, which aligns with the Bahá'í teaching of progressive revelation.

[29] In another account, a dream played a significant role in the decision of Rayhān Rayhāni (1859–1949), a Jewish Iranian, to join the Bahá'í Faith. After struggling for five years to reconcile his beliefs and overcome his fears of not recognizing the Messiah, he had a conversion experience in the form of a dream. As a result of this experience, he became Bahá'í (Amanat 2013, 6). In many dream accounts presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), the son of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet Muhammad confirms their decision to follow the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh (1971).

[30] Although there are references to dreams in the Bahá'í Faith and documentation of dream accounts of people who became Bahá'í, this issue did not get much attention in the following decades. In his dissertation from 2008, Mwangi Paul Nganga describes the Sinai Church's[2]

2 The Sinai Church, situated in southern Tanzania, established and led by Yohannes Simbowe and Petero Simbeye (Nganga 2008, 1).

dreams and visions that paved the way for their acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith in the 1960s in Uganda. The cultural environment and experiences of the members of the Sinai Church shaped their choice to embrace the Bahá'í Faith. Certain aspects of the Bahá'í teachings, such as the oneness of God, religion, and humanity, resonated with the Sinai teachings and expectations, leading to their acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith. Nganga describes how the dreams and visions of the Sinaists also revealed a sense of fulfillment and anticipation. For instance, the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel, was linked to their own *Mlima Sinai*:[3] Yohannes Simbowe, one of the community's leaders, visited the Bahá'í World Center and recalled having seen it in his dreams many years earlier in relation to *Mlima Sinai*. Following his return to Uganda, Simbowe shared his experience with the community members, validating their decision to become Bahá'í (Nganga 2008, 119).

Thus, the historical background of the Bahá'í Faith has acknowledged the power of revelatory dreams. However, as we will see, my interlocutors were unaware of these precedents at the time of their conversion. [31]

Methods and Analysis

This paper presents a segment of a broader endeavor involving 82 interviews with 60 individuals who joined the Bahá'í faith. The interviews were conducted through online platforms such as Zoom and Skype and in-person sessions held in Ireland and at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel, between 2020 and 2023. The primary subjects of these interviews were individuals who joined the Bahá'í Faith. These first-generation Bahá'ís exhibited diverse religious origins, predominantly from Christian upbringings, with others reared in Jewish, Muslim, or mixed-religious family contexts. [32]

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the initiation of digital fieldwork in 2020 and hence commenced through virtual platforms. The initial phase involved contacting acquaintances within the Bahá'í community. Being a non-Bahá'í researcher, this stage was crucial in establishing initial connections. Throughout this research initiative, 60 individuals were interviewed, representing 16 nationalities: Belgium, Belarus, Canada, Chile, Germany, Guyana, India, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Tanzania, the UK, and the USA. However, given that most interlocutors are Europeans, there is a substantial Christian demographic, and most participants emanate from a Catholic upbringing.[4] [33]

The interlocutors narrated their life stories during the interviews uninterruptedly and were not asked directly about dreams. But several of them shared them spontaneously. They wove the dreams into their life story and described their journey to become Bahá'í. It is essential to acknowledge that dream accounts are influenced by language, history, religious factors, and cultural frameworks (Bulkeley 2014, 258). Reporting about dreams is greatly affected by conventions of narrating and telling, the social context of who is telling what to whom, and the difficulty of expressing imaginal experiences in the linear and discursive structure of verbal language. [34]

Furthermore, the dream as narrated is not the dream as experienced (Hollan 2004, 180). [35]

3 *Mlima Sinai* is a site in Uganda named after the biblical Mount Sinai. It is a sacred shrine where the Sinai Church believes that God meets with them and gives them directions (Nganga 2008, 58).

4 An Institutional Review Board approved the study at Ben Gurion University. The interlocutors were given a consent form, agreeing to share their life stories and to be recorded. Most interviewed people agreed that I could use their real names, yet I used aliases; the coded data and the interlocutors' names were stored separately.

Therefore, interpreting dreams involves considering the interlocutors' input regarding the memory sources and connections to current life events (Bulkeley 2014, 258). Understanding dreams is challenging as the experience cannot be directly accessed, and my knowledge as a researcher is limited to the knowledge of the interlocutors. According to Barbara Tedlock (2001), dreams are private mental experiences that cannot be directly observed, while dream reports are public social performances that are accessible to researchers. Tedlock emphasizes the importance of studying dream sharing as a communicative event rather than trying to access the dream itself (2001, 249). Thus, my interlocutors and I shared the act of interpretation and analysis of their narratives. First, after sharing their dream accounts, they added their interpretation of it. In the second stage, after reading the transcripts of the interviews, I added a layer of interpretation based on the basic tenets of the Bahá'i Faith, anchoring the analysis in anthropological theories about dreams.

In the next part, I present dream accounts of first-generation Bahá'í from various religious backgrounds and extract common themes in their narrative about their conversion. [36]

Supernatural Agents, Agency, and Dreams

While sharing their life stories and their narrative about how they became Bahá'í, interlocutors described having dreams and visions. As mentioned, the interlocutors in this paper in broader research came from 16 nationalities, various ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. Thus, these narratives cannot be explained by cultural models and practices of a particular ethnic or religious group. For example, Sarita was Guyanese but lives in Europe; her background is Hindu-Muslim; David came from an orthodox Jewish family in the United States but lived in the Balkan region; Siobhan, an Irish woman now living in North America, came from a Catholic background and Dubán, an Irish man from a Catholic background had returned to Ireland after many years living in North America. Despite dreams historically and religiously playing a role in the Bahá'i Faith, the interlocutors did not mention or show knowledge about this historical role. [37]

Once they had shared their dream accounts,[5] I analyzed the emotions, motivations, and internal conflicts expressed concerning these dreams. I considered how the dreams confirmed, challenged, or influenced their decision to become Bahá'í. The dreams, which were all related after the decision to become Bahá'í, were of two types: the "revelation dream," which foreshadows, indicating a future event, their spiritual journey, and their revelation of the Bahá'í Faith, and the "confirmation dream," representing prophets and historical events from their birth faith supporting their decision to become Bahá'í. In all dream accounts, my interlocutors described their own sense of agency, their active part in the new religious identity, as well as the agentic role played by the messengers of God. [38]

5 The interlocutors used the terms dreams and/or visions.

Revelation Dreams

> *"The first time I heard about the Bahá'í Faith, it was in a dream"*[6] (Sarita, Guyanese, grew up in a Hindu-Muslim family) [39]

At an early stage of the interview, recounting scenes from their life, several interlocutors incorporated dreams into their life stories. In this way, they presented the dreams as visions of the beginning of their journey to become Bahá'í. They positioned their connection to the Bahá'í Faith at an early stage of their conversion narrative before they became familiar with the Bahá'í Faith. Although they did not know how to tell at the time what the dreams meant and what they represented, they knew that they possessed a meaning in their lives. During the life story interview, looking back on their journey to become Bahá'í, they could retrospectively interpret what they had been unable to understand before knowing the Bahá'í Faith. After they became Bahá'í, these dreams took on the meaning of a prophetic vision, a spiritual path they were meant to follow. Sarita, from Guyana, declared herself a dreamer from a young age, and she learned about the faith through a recurring dream: [40]

> The first time I heard about the Bahá'í Faith, it was in a dream. I like dreaming, and as a young teenager, I used to have a dream; I would see all the messengers of God flying, and I was flying with them. They were from all the different religions, from going back to Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity. It was incredible, this dream, and I had it not only once but several times. And then, I recognized all the messengers. But in the end, there were two of them whom I didn't recognize; I didn't know who they were. And there was an accident, Jesus, he had his neck falling, and the two at the back said, oh, there's no problem, we'll heal him. And the messenger at the end said: "See, we're all from God, and we can all heal each other." It was really significant; it just told me I wanted to know who were these two messengers. (Sarita, Guyanese) [41]

Sarita's dream describes her spiritual journey using the metaphor of flying. According to Jeannette Mageo (2022), flying in a dream represents a form of empowerment, liberation, and increased self-assurance, which helps dreamers address and overcome their real-life struggles (2022, 238–42). Sarita's flying dream presents a spiritual experience that expresses her connection to higher realms, manifested in God's messengers. As Mageo suggested, it might also represent her feeling of empowerment and control over her life, including her spiritual life. [42]

The presence of the messengers suggests a spiritual connection and alignment with divine guidance. Sarita's dream incorporated a core theological principle of the Bahá'í Faith: progressive revelation. She uses the Bahá'í terminology of "messengers of God," as they all carried out the words of God. Yet she does not recognize the last two at the time of the dream; after becoming Bahá'í, she later acknowledged them as the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. In her dream, the prophets flying next to her are "supernatural agents" with autonomous powers and intentions facilitating her conversion process; they possess the ability to communicate with her in the dream and deliver divine messages. In her account, the prophets in Sarita's dreams influenced her thoughts and actions, resulting in her becoming Bahá'í. [43]

The dream presented served as an expositional element, providing the dreamer with infor- [44]

6 The grammar and wording of the interlocutors' accounts remain unchanged to accurately reflect their linguistic expressions, respecting their diverse ethnic backgrounds.

mation about their own life in the Bahá'í Faith and motivating her to embark on a spiritual quest. Her flying depicted her agency in moving towards a spiritual and religious path with the help of supernatural agents. Thus, she understood the outcome of her dream as a "religious progression" (Makhani-Belkin 2023, 8), leading to her becoming Bahá'í. She describes her sense of agency in the dream:

> It (the dream) stimulated me to start investigating. Unfortunately, I started investigating politics first. So I was looking for some people who are really working towards the betterment of mankind. (Sarita, Guyanese) [45]

Confirmation Dreams

> *I wanted to get to the other side (of the river), and that was the dilemma I felt.* (Dubán, Irish, grew up as a Catholic) [46]

[47] Becoming Bahá'í engages a process on two levels. The first is the community: devotionals,[7] firesides,[8] and study circles,[9] all hosted by community members. Since there are no religious leaders, no conversion agents promote the process or facilitate their self-declaration. Another level is the personal investigation of truth by reading Bahá'í writings and books and actively asking questions. The two principles of the Bahá'í Faith, no clergy and personal investigation of truth, means that first-generation Bahá'ís play an active role in becoming Bahá'í; they employ a high level of personal agency, what can be called "Self conversion." Nevertheless, dreams may be integral to the self-conversion process.

[48] Dreaming about the messengers of God presented the unity of all religions and progressive revelation as part of their socialization to the Bahá'í Faith and community. The symbols in their dreams are related to their religious and cultural background, but they also hold meaning in the Bahá'í Faith. Therefore, since the Bahá'í Faith lacks formal conversion rituals and agents, conversion dreams might fulfill the role of conversion rituals. Referring to Victor Turner's (1964, 1969) ritual perspective, conversion rituals often involve a series of structured, symbolic actions performed under the guidance of religious authorities or community members. However, in the Bahá'í Faith, in which clergy or authoritative figures are absent, dreams may serve as an alternative mechanism for confirming their process of becoming Bahá'í.

[49] The dream accounts presented in this paper are spiritually significant, as the dreamers receive guidance and insights that help them navigate their spiritual and religious path and confirm their decision to become Bahá'í.

> I remember the day I became Bahá'í and recognized and accepted Bahá'u'lláh; I had a vision within myself as if I had a feeling inside. I felt like I was standing at the base of Mount Sinai with my ancestors, and they said: "Good job, you have fulfilled our mission." That's what they told me. It's just a personal experience. I felt very attached and connected to them. (David, American, from a Jewish family) [50]

[51] David was born and raised as an orthodox Jew in the US, coming from a dynasty of rabbis from Eastern Europe. By becoming Bahá'í, he could no longer fulfill the role his family expected

7 Devotional meetings occur in communities to explore the spiritual dimension of human existence, bringing Bahá'ís and their acquaintances together, and reading sacred texts and prayers from all faiths.
8 A Fireside is an open gathering hosted by Bahá'ís inviting people to their homes to discuss the faith.
9 A joint study of a series of books by the Ruhi institute known as the "Ruhi books". See: www.ruhi.org.

from him: to become a rabbi and serve his community, but he did not feel remorse. The dream occurred at the base of Mount Sinai, the site of divine revelation in Jewish history, where God appeared to Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments. The presence of David's ancestors can suggest a connection to his familial and cultural heritage (Judaism), and their affirmation implies his need for validation.

As mentioned in previous research (Makhani-Belkin 2023), Bahá'ís narrate their process of becoming Bahá'í as not converting, as they do not disconnect from their religious past. The Bahá'í Faith incorporates all religious traditions; David's vision conveys a sense of spiritual fulfillment and recognition. Standing with his ancestors at the base of Mount Sinai symbolizes his connection to his shared spiritual and cultural heritage and not a break from his religious or ethnic background. [52]

At the base of Mount Sinai, the Israelites awaited the descent of Moses, eagerly anticipating the bestowal of the tablets embodying God's sacred covenant. Their anticipation endured for a span of forty days and nights, ultimately culminating in the reception of the divine tablets. But in David's retelling of the story, instead of accepting the Tablets of the Covenant, he received the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Moses is one of the messengers who spoke the words of God according to the Bahá'í Faith. Therefore, this story serves the narrative of religious progression as David does not detach himself from his Jewish identity and heritage. Instead, he receives confirmation from them that Bahá'u'lláh and the Bahá'í Faith are in continuity with his Jewish background. He also attributes his own agency to the dream, resulting in him accepting the faith. [53]

Siobhan came from a big Irish Catholic family who immigrated to North America. She received a rigorous Catholic education and practiced the faith, but as an adult, she came to learn about the Bahá'í Faith. For several months, she hesitated to become Bahá'í. She described herself as an active learner, went to devotionals and meetings, and engaged in Bahá'í activities, yet she did not declare her faith. Something was holding her back when a dream solved her doubts and confirmed her decision: [54]

> I had a dream that really confirmed it [becoming Bahá'í]. I struggled with leaving the Catholic faith, even though I felt I was on a sinking ship. It was a big step in my mind. And then I had a dream. My dream was so vivid. I was standing on a riverbank, and there was a rushing river in front of me, and I felt this presence. I imagined Jesus; I just felt this sacred presence. It wasn't really a vision of a human being. And so I felt his presence in my dream, and when I looked across the river, I saw 'Abdu'l-Bahá. On the other side of this rushing river was 'Abdu'l-Bahá standing there, holding out his hand. And I turned to this the sense of his being beside me and said: what should I do? And all of a sudden, there was a force on my back that pushed me into the river; I woke up, and this meant I was to become a Bahá'í. So that was Jesus telling me it was okay and that I was doing the right thing. (Siobhan, Irish) [55]

The dream occurred at a liminal stage in Siobhan's life—she had already left the Catholic Church but had not yet declared her belief in the Bahá'í Faith. She feared becoming Bahá'í would disappoint her family and did not want to reject her faith in Jesus. She would have to make a decision soon. Siobhan dreamt of a river, a recurring motif in the Bahá'í dream accounts and other dream ethnographies (Lohmann 2000; Bulkeley 2016). Crossing a river symbolizes a transitional phase or significant change in her life. It represents a transformation [56]

from one phase of life to another, indicating personal growth or a shift in perspective. Here, crossing a river can symbolize embarking on a faith journey.

Victor Turner (1964, 1969) also emphasized the role of symbols in facilitating communication within a community, helping individuals negotiate their place and identity within that community. In the case of first-generation Bahá'ís, the symbols in dreams, such as messengers of God or crossing rivers, might serve as a platform through which they engage with and find their place in their new religious community. The confirmation dreams by first-generation Bahá'ís took place at a liminal period in their life when they were studying the faith and developing their spiritual path. The imagery of crossing a river signifies their spiritual progression from their cultural and religious background toward the Baháí Faith. These symbols help first-generation Bahá'ís to process their journey, manage ambiguities, and integrate into their new religious community. [57]

The presence of Jesus in her dream might indicate that Siobhan longed for spiritual guidance during this transformative phase. This dream is similar to one of the historical dream accounts from the early days of the Bahá'í Faith. The first dreamers from a Muslim background envisioned Muhammad; Siobhan dreamed of Jesus as she came from a Christian background. Quite interestingly, she envisioned 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh in her dream, and not the prophet himself. At the time of her dream, she had a photograph of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in her house. Since Bahá'ís are prohibited from showing the photograph of Bahá'u'lláh,[10] this might explain why she could not have envisioned Bahá'u'lláh. However, she recognized the dream as a spiritual confirmation to become Bahá'í. In her dream, Jesus guided her on her spiritual path to become Bahá'í; therefore, he served as a conversion agent. But Siobhan had to cross the river by herself, emphasizing her self-agency in the conversion process. Siobhan shared her dream with me and gave an interpretation, explaining what she thought after waking up. [58]

> Maybe I was searching for some sense that it was okay to do this on a spiritual level and that being pushed [crossing the river] felt this. I couldn't see hands on my back. And I woke up with a gasp, and I lay there and knew right away – I thought that meant that spiritually, I have just accepted the faith. This was before I signed my card [declaration]. So I knew from that moment on it was going to be okay, and it was almost like trusting God. I am not a person to leap into anything. I really study things. I really gave it a lot of thought, and this was so different because I was leaping. It was going against how I normally functioned in the world. So, it was more from the heart. I think my spirit recognized this is right. (Siobhan) [59]

In her reflection, Siobhan recognized the agency embedded within the affecting role of her dream and how her dream affected her thoughts, feelings, and behavior. To her, the dream facilitated and confirmed what she felt in her heart. It reflected her internal process of accepting the Bahá'í Faith and making a spiritual commitment. The feeling of being pushed without seeing hands on her suggests a force or influence guiding her, possibly representing an external and internal pressure to make this spiritual leap, as she was ambivalent. [60]

Interestingly, Siobhan used the term "leap of faith," coined by philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1992). To Kierkegaard, faith does not have logic, reason, and rationality. Therefore, a leap of faith is trusting something despite lacking logic, motivation, and rationality (1992, 14). A leap of faith typically involves deciding or committing to something based on trust, intuition, [61]

10 There is only one photograph of Bahá'u'lláh at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel; Bahá'ís can see it during the pilgrimage. Therefore, Bahá'ís often display a photograph of 'Abdu'l-Bahá at their homes.

or belief rather than relying solely on logical reasoning or empirical evidence. For Siobhan, a leap of faith entails overcoming doubts and uncertainties and embracing the new faith from the heart.

There was another dream account with similar symbols of the river and a prophet in my sample: Dubán, an Irish man from a Catholic family, was investigating the Bahá'í Faith in Ireland in the 1970s. First, he self-explored by reading books and the Bahá'í scriptures. Yet, he was left with many questions and turned to a community member. With the further reading of prayer books, he described: "I felt connected." He continued what he called a "hippie" lifestyle, but [62]

> I knew I had a decision to make. And I remember, at one stage, I had this vision where I was standing on the bank of a river, and there was this rope. So when somebody has to get to the other side of the river, they grab a rope, and they have to swing to the other side of the river. Despite the fact that I had, for all intents and purposes, walked away from Catholicism, Catholicism hadn't walked away from me. So, it was still deep in my DNA. Am I leaving this behind? It was like pulling me. It was pulling me back to Catholicism. I wanted to get to the other side. And that was the dilemma I felt. But with the use of the Bahá'í prayers, I was able to get to the other side. (Dubán, Irish) [63]

In this dream account, the river also represents the passage from one phase of life to another or from one state of being to another. Standing on the river bank suggests that Dubán was at a significant crossroads in his life, facing a decision that would lead to his conversion. But in his dream, he also had a rope that symbolizes support or guidance. Dubán wanted to cross over to the other side, but his past, the Catholic faith, was pulling him back. The Catholic faith was tattooed to his identity to such an extent that although he had already left the church, the church was still a part of him. Therefore, at this stage of his investigation of the faith, the dream manifested his self-agency and active role, resulting in his declaration to become Bahá'í. [64]

We can further understand this process through Victor Turner's (1964, 1969) understanding of universally recognizable 'dominant symbols.' These symbols hold a central place in the collective understanding of a community, often embodying its social and religious values. Two of these, which appear in all dream accounts narrated by the interlocutors, regardless of their religious and cultural background, portray messengers of God and the act of crossing a river; these dominant symbols convey messages of guidance for the seekers and are recognized across many religious traditions. Here, they serve as active symbols in their journey to become Bahá'í. [65]

Following her father's death, Sarita from Guyana grieved his death extendedly: [66]

> I had this beautiful dream of my dad; I saw him, and he was sitting in a place. I mean, words just cannot describe the beauty of it and how peaceful and happy he was: it was on the slope of a mountain. I didn't know where it was; there was a white building, a beautiful Roman-style building, and then there were all these gardens with beautiful flowers, just magnificent, and coming down, there's a path halfway, and there are some monuments. In one of them, my father was sitting in the middle; it really was so beautiful that I couldn't even find the words to describe his beauty and the beauty of the place. Then, when you continue to look down, [67]

> there's a road going all the way to the sea, and it was just beautiful. If it ever existed on Earth, maybe one day I'd see it. But at that time, it was just a dream. I didn't think that it really existed. That's where my life started because I started investigating the faith. (Sarita, Guyanese)

While Sarita shared her dream account, I immediately recognized the place she elaborately described. It was the Bahá'í Gardens in Haifa; however, she could not name the site at that point in her life. Later, she saw a picture hanging in her lecturer's office; it looked familiar as it was the place she saw in her dream. The lecturer, a Bahá'í himself, told her about the Bahá'í Gardens in Haifa. Following this, she started to learn about the faith. In the later stages of her life, she met her prospective husband during her pilgrimage to the Bahá'í Gardens. Sarita acknowledges that the dream catalyzed her journey to become Bahá'í. The dream reflects that her feelings toward her late father were an agent of change. The images of what later became known to her as the Bahá'í Gardens foreshadow her spiritual journey to the Bahá'í Faith. This dream resembles what Nganga (2008) documented in the Sinai community's dreams about the Bahá'í Gardens. In both dream accounts, the Bahá'í Gardens in Haifa, a pilgrimage site, appeared in their dreams before learning about them or the faith. [68]

Although the dream accounts presented reflect people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, they share similarities. Every dream account includes prophets and characters from their religious background. David envisioned Mt. Sinai with his Jewish ancestors, and Dubán and Siobhan saw Jesus. Sarita came from a mixed religious background and saw all the messengers of God, including what she learned later were the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. This is similar to previous Bahá'í dream accounts of prominent Bahá'í figures at the beginning of the faith ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1971). Since nineteenth-century Iran was predominantly Shia Muslim, their dream accounts included the prophet Muhammad. These dreams can be categorized as "prophetic dreams," messages or interventions from a guiding spiritual force (Hollan 2004, 175), sometimes viewed as divine communication or reflections of one's spiritual state. [69]

In Judaism, dreams involving tsaddiqim, carrying spiritual messages or guidance, contribute to both personal and communal religious narratives, supporting connections to religious teachings and figures (Bilu 2010, 310). In Irish Catholic culture, dreams are viewed as divine messages providing guidance or insights into one's spiritual journey and potential signs from God (Quintelli-Neary 2009, 1). In Islam, divinely inspired dreams are seen as direct messages from the divine, guiding the dreamer with "a gift from Elsewhere" (Mittermaier 2012, 254). In Hinduism, dreams are a state where the soul (deva) experiences past, present, and new phenomena, merging elements of reality and unreality and offering insights beyond the waking state, from mundane reflections to prophetic visions, thus embodying a spiritual journey connecting the individual with the cosmic order (Dange 1998, 76). [70]

In these dreams, the prophets enabled the dreamers to cross the river and bridge between their birth faith and the Bahá'í Faith. In their narratives, first-generation Bahá'ís did not leave the messengers of God on the other side of the river's bank but crossed with them after their confirmation. Contrary to dreams about Jesus, which resulted in conversion to Christianity (e.g., St. Paul and Constantine), in these dreams, Jesus confirmed their decision to become Bahá'í. Within the dreams, the messengers of God function as agents of legitimation and confirmation. They help first-generation Bahá'ís cross to the other side of the river and confirm that they did not disconnect them and that they were still part of their spiritual journey and new religious identity. [71]

The four accounts presented here share the idea that their dreams were part of an internal [72]

and personal process leading them to become Bahá'í. The dreams are still described as a catalyst to investigate the faith or become Bahá'í. Therefore, the dreams represent and confirm the dreamers' ownership of the decision. Moreover, since there is no conversion ritual in the Bahá'í Faith, these dreams serve as confirmation dreams, emphasizing the active role first-generation Bahá'ís take in their process to become Bahá'í.

Ethnographies about dreams in religious conversion have shown that testifying and sharing dream accounts with other community members is a dominant part of the converts' culture and new religious community and, in some cases, is part of the conversion. However, in the dream accounts presented here, none of the interlocutors shared their dreams and the effect on their decision to become Bahá'í—Not to their family, spouse, or other Bahá'í members, even if they came from a 'dream culture' where the cultural context and beliefs influence the interpretation and expression of dreams, shaping how individuals perceive and share their dreams within the broader society (Shulman and Stroumsa 1999, 3). [73]

Moreover, sharing dreams is not a practice that is common in the Bahá'í community in Ireland, and as Dubán said: "Dreams were part of our Celtic culture, but it was suppressed when we became Catholic." Therefore, dreams are not seen as a reflection or representation of the communal norms and standards of conduct for the Bahá'í Faith or community. Converts' dream accounts do not play a role in the Bahá'í community's life; Bahá'ís do not promote or encourage dream telling, and they do not fulfill any function in communication among community members. The first time the interlocutors ever shared their dream accounts was through telling me their life stories; by doing that, they wove their dreams into their life story, constructing a narrative about their journey to become Bahá'í. [74]

> I'm happy that I could tell someone my story without feeling bad because I never told anyone, not even my family; I never told them about my dreams because they say you're always dreaming, and dreams don't mean anything. But I think they do; It's like a vision. I think when you're dreaming, your soul leaves the body, kind of. Sometimes, I don't like to dream because whatever I dream materializes. (Sarita, Guyanese) [75]

Discussion

Through dream accounts, I explored converts' agency in their decision to become Bahá'ís. The findings suggest that dreams are essential for understanding the process. Dreams reflect personal, active, and internal choices and contribute to a narrative of continuity and progression rather than rupture or discontinuity. [76]

The interlocutors' diverse cultural backgrounds appear in the dream accounts. Each ethnic and national group may have unique beliefs, cultural idioms, practices, and interpretations of dreams. I sought to explore how individuals from different ethnicities and nationalities negotiate their cultural identities and experiences through their dreams. Intriguingly, despite the diverse ethnic and national backgrounds of the interlocutors, a discernible pattern emerges upon examining their individual dream accounts. The commonality was apparent in the symbolic representation of messengers of God and a recurrent theme involving the act of crossing a river. These shared elements transcend cultural and national boundaries. [77]

The power of dreams in religious conversion is evident in their ability to bridge traditional religious beliefs with newly adopted faiths (Bulkeley 2014, 262). In religious conversion, dreams [78]

serve as critical channels between the personal psychological realms and the institutional forces of religion. Dreams often embody cultural symbols and psychological elements that motivate individuals to introspection or shifts in religious identity. As presented by various theorists and study cases in anthropology, dreams are not merely private experiences but are also connected with cultural significance that religious institutions can harness to affirm conversion narratives. When individuals report dreams involving divine figures or symbols associated with a new religion, these experiences can be interpreted by the new religious communities as signs of divine calling or spiritual validation. The dreams, then, facilitate the convert's integration and socialization into the religious institutions. This bridging function of dreams highlights their dual role as both personal experiences of the dreamer but also as an institutional religious legitimization. However, since there are no conversion agents or conversion rituals in the Bahá'í Faith, for first-generation Bahá'ís, dreams play a significant role in bridging and facilitating the process of becoming Bahá'ís. Their dreams and encounters with supernatural agents facilitated the socialization of the Bahá'í Faith and the community, the unity of all religions, and progressive revelation. Though unaware of the critical role of dreams in the history of the Bahá'í's Faith, first-generation Bahá'ís used similar symbols and narratives.

The dream accounts presented in this paper were a platform to bridge the old and new religious identities. The presence of figures from the interlocutor's birth faith in the dreams may be interpreted as signs, messages, or transformative encounters that validate their decision to become Bahá'í. In the dream accounts, those supernatural agents assisted them to progress to the other side of the river, towards the Bahá'í Faith. The messengers of God and the Israelites are "supernatural agents" who play a dual role in first-generation dream accounts. First, they reveal the Bahá'í Faith and its core principles through dreams. Second, they facilitate their religious progression towards the faith. Initially, in their dreams, these messengers of God are depicted as revealers of the core principle of the Bahá'í Faith of progressive revelation. The supernatural agents are to inform the dreamer of doctrinal tenets but also to confirm the new religious framework. The second role of these supernatural agents is to actively facilitate the individual's religious advancement towards the Bahá'í Faith. While the supernatural agents help them to navigate the religious path, first-generation Bahá'í's reaction to these interactions—by crossing the river themselves, illustrates their own personal agency in becoming Bahá'í. Although the messengers of God served as conversion agents in their dreams, in the end, the dreamers had to cross the river by themselves, emphasizing their self-agency in the conversion process. [79]

Bilu (2010) and Mittermaier (2012) demonstrated the communal role of dreams accomplished by telling them to others. People dream or interpret together, thus supporting the reality of the revelation. People in the larger community or society believe in and value individuals' stories and experiences about their dreams. In the case of the Bahá'í Faith, first-generation Bahá'ís shared their dream accounts with the researcher and not with the community. First, although there are historic dream accounts of first-generation Bahá'ís, it was not evident that the interlocutors were aware of them. Therefore, it was not a cultural artifact in the Bahá'í community. Furthermore, the dream accounts were part of their conversion narrative, emphasizing their self-agency in becoming Bahá'ís. [80]

Dreams offer a unique avenue for exploring the transformative power of religious experiences and how they shape individuals' paths and identities. Dreams can serve as a platform for experiencing religious contact or engaging with religious figures, deities, or symbols from various belief systems. Individuals may have dreams in which they participate in conversations, [81]

receive teachings, or undergo profound experiences involving religious entities or ideas from diverse religious traditions.

In this research focused on the Bahá'í Faith, the interlocuters recounted dreams that reflected encounters of religious elements from different traditions. These dreams served as a mental space where the mind processed and reconciled various religious influences from both past and present, as manifested by religious figures. The specific nature and meaning of these dream encounters were influenced by the dreamers' cultural and religious context and their personal beliefs and experiences. Examining dreams as a form of religious contact can offer valuable insights into how individuals interpret, internalize, and integrate religious ideas and practices and how these experiences shape their religious identities and beliefs. [82]

Acknowledgments

I wish to extend my thanks to several individuals whose contributions have been crucial in the completion of this paper. First and foremost, my advisor, Professor Jackie Feldman, encouraged me to pursue this path of dreams in conversion narratives. I am also deeply grateful to the coeditors of this special issue, Dr. Minoo Mirshahvalad, Maria Papenfuss, and Dr. Sebastian Rimestad, for their diligent work on the issue and their insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. Additionally, I would like to express my appreciation to the anonymous reviewer for their critical and constructive comments.

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