

***Bahá'í Faith: The Basics* (Routledge 2021) by Christopher Buck Ph.D**

Review Essay by J.A. McLean

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The Basics Series from Routledge Publishers

The object of this review was written as one of eleven volumes in the “The Basics” series, conceived by Routledge publishers to provide introductions to a variety of religious topics, mainly within Christianity. Nine volumes treat Christianity, while two volumes are dedicated respectively to Islam and the Bahá'í Faith. The fact that the Bahá'í religion appears independently from Islam at Routledge press is in itself significant: it means that unlike the early treatments of the Bahá'í Faith in the first half of the twentieth century, which often referred to it as a reformist sect or movement within Islam, the religion co-founded by the Prophets the Báb (1819-1850) and Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) has within the intervening years largely been accepted by experts in the field as an independent world religion. In the Middle-East, unlike the western world, hostile stances taken toward the Bahá'í Faith continue to label it, as in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a “misguided sect,” a judgment that is being used to justify systematic persecution.

Doctor of Religion and Associate Attorney

The reception of every scholarly book depends, not only on its ability to convince, but to a great extent on the reputation of its author. As one would expect, those who have been invited by Routledge press to produce these volumes, are noted authorities in their fields. Christopher Buck has earned the right to be counted among the foremost English-language Bahá'í scholars today. He joined the Bahá'í Faith in 1972 at the age of 22. In the academies of religious studies, as distinct from the theological faculties, those who are both practicing believers and scholars, are sometimes suspected of lacking objectivity and are relegated, consequently, to the status of apologists. Christopher Buck's commitment as a believer, however, has not hindered his ability to write objective, serious, in-depth analyses of the Bahá'í Faith that have contributed to a fuller understanding of this youngest of the world's religions (1844-).

His work has earned the praise of religion scholars outside the Bahá'í academy who have noted his contribution to a greater understanding of the doctrines and sacred literature of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as related subjects. Buck taught religious studies (1994-2004) at Carleton University (Ottawa), Millikin University (Illinois), Quincy University (Illinois) and Michigan State University. Although he has retired from university teaching, since 2001 he has remained

active teaching courses with the Wilmette Institute. At the time of this writing (2021), he has taught about 50 courses as a faculty member, mainly on Bahá'í sacred scripture.

This review mentions only his contribution to the academic study of religion, but it bears mention that from 2007 to the present, Buck has been working as an associate attorney with Pribanic and Pribanic LLC in White Oak, Pennsylvania. To the year 2021, he has written 7 academic books and 173 articles, not to mention his teaching assignments. Most of his output has an explicit or implicit, often comparative Bahá'í focus. He writes as a generalist who correlates Bahá'í scripture, doctrine and history to his chosen topics which are wide-ranging. His body of work includes religion in America, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, American literature, African-American culture and race relations, social justice issues, and indigenous religions. Although the word “ground-breaking” is perhaps overused regarding a scholar's work these days, in Buck's case, it is fully justified. He pursues the topics that have piqued his interest systematically.

Historical Overview of Introductions: General, Scholarly and Academic

It may be instructive to situate Christopher Buck's book within the historical line of a number of the more notable introductions to the Bahá'í Faith that have been written during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. At the outset, I should mention the following distinction between “general,” “academic” and “scholarly.” Introductions to any religion are intended to be read by as large an audience as possible; they are usually intended for the general reader. To fulfill that function, they must be written in relatively clear prose. The “fully-dressed” academic approach to such works would not serve the author's purpose to convey information about the religion in question to as wide an audience as possible. Introductory books consequently usually do not qualify as being “academic” in the strictest sense of the word: a profusion of dense footnotes, peppered with references, and a tangle of ideas would actually defeat the author's purpose—unless he or she is writing solely for an academic audience. Yet the reader expects such a presentation to be “scholarly.” The author should have read the academic literature on the history, doctrines, rituals, calendar, organization and community life and activities of the religion under study. In that sense, the books that are reviewed below, convey both tone and content that are elevated and scholarly, without being bloodless academic fare.

Dr. John E. Esslemont

The most well-known and widely used general introduction is Dr. J.E. Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, first published in 1923, a key book that was written under the partial advisement of the third central figure of the religion, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), whose guest Dr. Esslemont had been in Haifa during the winter of 1919-1920. In 1937, the edition underwent some revisions at the suggestion of Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), the former head and “Guardian” of the Bahá'í Faith. The last and fifth edition updated the book to 2006.

Mr. John Ferraby

In 1975, John Ferraby, a graduate of King's College, Cambridge, published *All Things Made New*. Although Mr. Ferraby's is a general introduction, it also has the merit of a more scholarly approach to the Bahá'í Faith. Mr. Ferraby, a "Hand of the Cause," was one of 42 distinguished Bahá'í teachers appointed by Shoghi Effendi, who had been encouraged to write by him and to whom the book is dedicated. John Ferraby had the advantage of passing time that had witnessed the considerable international growth and development of the Bahá'í Faith and its institutions. His book was more comprehensive in scope than Esslemont's could have been at the time. It followed Esslemont's basic outline, but it also included chapters on the Bahá'í community and its administrative order which scarcely existed during Esslemont's lifetime. Ferraby also had the advantage of the expert, elegant translations of the Bahá'í sacred writings by Shoghi Effendi and the latter's own writings, which greatly added to the knowledge of the history, teachings and international organization of the Bahá'í Faith. This availability allowed him to delve into the Bahá'í teachings in greater depth. *All Things Made New* lives up to the author's description: "A Comprehensive Outline of the Bahá'í Faith."

Dr. William S. Hatcher and Mr. J. Douglas Martin

The year 1985 marked a turning-point in the publication of introductions to the Bahá'í Faith. William S. Hatcher, a professor who specialized in mathematical logic and scholar of science and religion and J. Douglas Martin (M.A.), an author and historian by training, who was elected to the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith in 1993 until 2005, wrote *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion*. It was first published in a hardcover edition by Harper and Row (1985) that was intended for the mass market. It earned the comment "Fascinating...An Appealing and Informative Work" from *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*. It was later reissued by the US Bahá'í Publishing Trust. Revisions were made in 1998 and 2002.

The bibliography of the 2002 edition shows that it referenced some of the academic material that was then available. Although this literature was consulted during the drafting of the book, the authors clearly had in mind to avoid being obtuse. The text is written in straightforward prose from which academic jargon is noticeably absent. Departing from Esslemont's and Ferraby's approach, Martin and Hatcher made a conscious attempt to provide an accounting of the then current stage in the international development of the Bahá'í Faith. Chapter 10, the last chapter in their book, is entitled "On Into a New Century." The Epilogue concludes with a forward look into the future, "The Challenge of Success."

Dr. Moojan Momen, Dr. Wendi Momen, Dr. Peter Smith, Ms. Frances Worthington, Dr. Robert Stockman

Although the following is not an exhaustive survey, the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a proliferation of Bahá'í secondary literature, including the publication of other introductions to the Bahá'í Faith, some of them shorter, others longer. In 1988 historian and

sociologist of religion, Peter Smith, published *The Bahá'í Religion: A Short Introduction to its History and Teachings*. Twenty years later (2008) his longer scholarly book, *An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith*, was published at Cambridge University Press. Historian of religion Moojan Momen published three shorter works: *A Short Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith* (1997), *The Bahá'í Faith: A Short Introduction* (1999), and *The Bahá'í Faith: A Beginner's Guide* (2008). He also co-wrote with his wife, Dr. Wendi Momen (International Relations), *Understanding the Bahá'í Faith* (2006).

In 2012 librarian, master gardener and interfaith activist Frances Worthington (M.A.) published *Bahá'í Basics*, a simple, catechetical-like introduction based entirely on question-and-answer format. Despite its simplistic approach, Worthington's book still provides a solid, basic introduction to the history, practices and progressive nature of the Bahá'í teachings. Stockman's *The Bahá'í Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury Academic 2013) presents both the experiential viewpoint of an engaged Bahá'í, but it also combines the more detached, analytical approach of the scholar, thus satisfying both insider and outsider views.

What is significant about the “baby boom” generation of scholars is that Peter Smith, Robert Stockman and Christopher Buck have doctoral degrees in religious studies, or as the preferred latest buzz phrase has it, “the academic study of religion”—the implication is that theology and apologetics/fundamental theology, by contrast, are not academic enough. Stockman, who has been a Bahá'í since 1973, is currently adjunct professor of religious studies at Indiana University South Bend. Peter Smith, who joined the Bahá'í Faith in 1964 at the age of 16, retired in 2019, having served on the faculty of Mahidol University, International College in Thailand beginning in 1985.

Method: The Disease-Cure Model

Buck approaches the Bahá'í Faith using “a disease/cure model.” This approach has practical implications: “Religions, simply put, try to cure the world's ills. The “cure” depends on the “illness” being treated. As the diagnoses vary, so do the remedies... The illness/cure approach is an attempt to understand something of the internal logic of each religious system's way of coping with the human existential challenge.” (p. 15) He gives examples of this principle from Buddhism, Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith. The starting-point for Buck's methodology is grounded in the Bahá'í belief system that Bahá'u'lláh is “the divine physician for this day and age.” (p. 17)

The disease diagnosed by Bahá'u'lláh is “disunity,” a euphemism for some very harsh realities that have inflicted incalculable suffering on the human race: violence in all its forms, both physical and mental, i.e. war, strife, contention, and conflict; even the modern social sicknesses of dysfunctional family relations, of bullying and harassment, whether sexual or physical, would have to be included in this key word disunity. As Buck explains Bahá'u'lláh, the remedy for all these pathologies would be to acknowledge the role of the Prophets and their

teachings, whose latest Divine Manifestation/Prophet is in fact Bahá'u'lláh. Buck quotes Bahá'u'lláh: "The Prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sicknesses of a divided humanity." (p. 17) Bahá'u'lláh's "sovereign remedy" for this age, which is unlike any other in both its present dangers to civilization and its limitless possibilities, would be "the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith." (p.18)

Contemporary Relevance: An Outstanding Feature

One outstanding feature of this book for either Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís is its contemporary relevance. Even well-informed readers could not possibly be fully aware of the overview presented by Buck of all the multifarious activities taking place in the Bahá'í world community. Any introduction to a religion is bound to become dated, although some of the basic facts remain unchanged. The changes occurring in historical time demand the practical necessity of published works that give a more contemporary description of the religion. Already Smith (1988) gave a then current account of Bahá'í activities with the mention of Bahá'í schools, socio-economic development, cultural and minority activities, Bahá'í involvement at the United Nations with the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information, and the Bahá'í Office of Social and Economic Development established in 1983.

The Title, Format and Organization

I draw first the reader's attention to a minor point in the title. Although Bahá'ís are used to saying "the Bahá'í Faith," the title of Buck's book has no definite article before "Bahá'í." Clear organization greets the reader (p. ii) with a single-sheet summary of the contents that are virtually identical to the "Contents" (p. ix): Beliefs and Principles (spiritual and social teachings); History including the Covenant; Scripture; Institutions (Bahá'í Administrative Order); Building Community; Social Action; Public Discourse (the Bahá'í International Community); Vision (Foundations for a Future Golden Age). An extensive bibliography/references and handy glossary and index are included. In chapter 7, special mention is made of "Building Community," one of the appealing points of Bahá'í community activities.

Of the 10 chapters of the book, fully 3 chapters, *Building Community* (7), *Social Action* (8), and *Public Discourse* (9) deal with contemporary Bahá'ís outreach. Each chapter concludes with a bullet summary. Quotations appear in a smaller font than the main body of the text which means that the book is actually denser than it first appears. In certain chapters, texts that the author wishes to emphasize are boxed off. The last chapter *Vision: Foundations for a Future Golden Age* (10) is bound to incite the curiosity of more optimistic, futuristic readers. In the vast world of religious discourse, scarcely anyone today is writing or speaking about a future golden age. Such a prospect may seem hopelessly idealistic to the skeptic. For Bahá'ís, however, the future golden age is a hopeful prospect whose foundations they are currently laying through a process of spiritual and social education, grounded in a uniform global curriculum, guided by

democratically elected and appointed international institutions that function uniformly throughout the Bahá'í world.

Building Community: An Appealing Contemporary Feature

Using an historical, comparative overview, it is fair to say that the world's religions have reached a stage of homeostasis; they are well-established and enduring. Their activities are largely directed to maintaining and preserving the status quo within each of the respective faiths. The Bahá'í Faith, however, being the youngest of the world's religions, has the vigor of youth on its side. In the year 2021 CE, it will reach the 177th year of its existence. In the long lifetime of a world religion, this span of time corresponds to early childhood; and yet, within less than 200 years, the Bahá'í Faith has attained a maturity that bodes well for its future development. Having survived a bloody persecution in Iran at its birth and infancy, a long period of repression in the Middle-East, especially in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is now emerging from obscurity onto the world stage, during which it is increasingly being recognized as an independent world faith that offers progressive solutions to world problems.

The Bahá'í community is currently engaged in a dynamic global developmental stage. "Building community" is held up as one of the unique contemporary features of the religion. In chapter 7 Buck provides a cogent explanation of the religion's worldwide program of community building based on "the four core activities:" devotional gatherings, study circles, children's classes and junior youth groups. Systematic implementation of these four activities began in 1996; they involve all ages and strata of global society. At a deeper level, it will be readily understood from Buck's analysis that these four activities involve more than a grade school curriculum. They correspond rather to four essential aspects required for human development: worship, education/learning, character formation for the adults of tomorrow, and active community service that completes the more passive, but necessary fundamentals of prayer and study.

The devotional gatherings may appear to be a mere simplified modern update of Christianity's *lectio divina*, followed by action in the world—"Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37), but combined with the other three core activities, beginning in childhood, and extending in adulthood, they constitute a comprehensive program of the individual's intellectual, social and spiritual formation combined with community development. For the present, it seems that the "four core activities" will remain in place for the foreseeable future. Buck writes, quoting noted scholar Moojan Momen, that such a vast undertaking has never before been witnessed, either in secular or sacred societies or organizations:

Thousands of Bahá'í communities worldwide have been engaging in social service projects as part of an overarching process of "community building" where "community" is broadly defined. Community building means enhancing both the spiritual and material nature of the local community through a grassroots approach. Educational classes and

service opportunities are offered to children and youth, as well as to adults. According to Bahá'í scholar Moojan Momen 'This is new. In the entire scope of human history, no organization or faith has ever implemented anything like it—a simultaneous worldwide social development program designed to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.' A Bahá'í sense of community is one of solidarity, given the emphasis on unity and the oneness of humankind that is central to the Bahá'í teachings and worldview. This sense of solidarity extends to friends of the Faith and to other contacts as well. Far from [being] insular, Bahá'í communities are social spaces without borders—communities of friends, making new friends. (p. 156)

Social and Economic Development

Social and economic development refer to such key areas as education/schools, agriculture, health, the arts and media, economic development projects, and the advancement of women. The author gives current examples of some 40,000 Bahá'í-inspired, faith-based, short-and-long term projects taking place internationally. In chapter 8, Buck reports that the Office of Social and Economic Development, established in 1983 by the Universal House of Justice, was replaced in November 2018 by the Bahá'í International Development Organization. The BIDO watches over and provides guidance to those communities involved in social and economic development projects taking place internationally in the Bahá'í community. It is anticipated that this organization will have at its disposal economic resources available through the “Bahá'í Development Fund.” Buck reports that little information was available on the BDF at the time of writing.

Bolivia's Núr University (1982-)

Among the outstanding examples he cites in the field of education is Bolivia's Núr University, founded in 1982 by Dr. Eloy Anello (d. 2009) and his brother Francisco in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia's largest city. Núr University was the first privately funded university to be established by presidential decree and the first university anywhere in Bolivia to offer a graduate degree program. The student body consists of over 3000 students. Núr's Transformative Moral Leadership Program, established in 1992 by Dr. Anello and Joan/Juanita Hernandez, the coordinator of the program, offers moral and spiritual leadership, not only to entrepreneurs, but to all those who desire to be effective leaders in their chosen projects or profession. It has been used in approximately 60 projects and workshops in 40 countries.

Public Discourse: The Bahá'í International Community at the UN

Buck notes that in 2010 the Universal House of Justice, the elected international council that directs the Bahá'í world, called the Bahá'ís to participate “in the discourses of society.” To this end, in 2013 the Universal House of Justice founded the Office of Public Discourse. Participation in public discourse means not only live face-to-face dialog, but also “how relevant

Bahá'í principles may be applied to the needs and problems of society today.” In other words, the call of the Universal House of Justice meant the application of Bahá'í teachings in practical ways: “...practical applications in the process of social transformation—a process that is as dynamically evolving as it is challenging.” (p. 189) Such a challenge to be sure is a tall order. It means that Bahá'ís are developing new paradigms for the correct diagnoses and solutions to the unsolved problems that continue to bedevil a divided humanity. These paradigms are being applied to professional societies, workplaces and informal social settings as well. In short, these paradigms are being offered to any individual, group or organization, whether secular or religious, that might benefit from their insights.

At the international level, this task belongs to the UN offices of the Bahá'í International Community. The BIC was founded in 1948 as an NGO with consultative status. Its UN offices are located in New York and Geneva, with representative offices located in Brussels, Addis Ababa and Jakarta. The BIC periodically issues formal policy statements on a wide range of social and economic issues that are relevant to the business of the United Nations and its various agencies. The focus areas of the BIC include: realizing the equality of women and men; the safeguarding of human rights; development and community building; empowering youth as protagonists of change; advancing religion in the life of society; mitigating the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran.

Nine Different Modes in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

In the *Súriy-i-Haykal* (□ 51), included in *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts* (2002), Bahá'u'lláh wrote that he had revealed his verses “in nine different modes.” In one of the more creative and original sections of the book, “based on some relevant statements by Shoghi Effendi,” Buck proposes a classification of these nine modes or “styles of discourse.” He enumerates them with explanations as follows: (1) Mystical Compositions (2) Doctrinal Writings (3) Ethical Writings (4) Proclamation (5) Laws and Ordinances (6) Fundamental Tenets and Principles (7) Prophecies (8) Discourses (9) Prayers and Meditations. Buck writes that his classification “is not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive. It does not classify Bahá'u'lláh's writings according to literary style. For instance, this typology does not include the classification of Bahá'u'lláh's poetry, writings in ‘pure Persian,’ etc.” (pp. 111-112)

Suggested Minor Points for Possible Revision

- The section *Purpose of Bahá'í Faith: The Basics* should have arguably been placed earlier in the Introduction.
- The rhetorical phrase “time will tell” (pp. 53, 93) detracts slightly from the conviction of the author's argument. It tends to cast doubt on the ultimate success of the Bahá'í project. The rhetorical phrase “after all” (p. 176) is redundant.

- Max Weber is described as a “philosopher” (p. 63). He was primarily a sociologist or social theorist, political economist, even a jurist or historian, but not primarily a philosopher.
- “Work is worship” is described, based on a quotation from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as one of the “new” teachings of the Bahá’í Faith. (p. 65). To give credit where credit is due, some mention could be made of the Roman Catholic Rule of St. Benedict, *ora et labora* (work and prayer). Although the Benedictine motto was not specifically formulated as “work is worship,” it emphasized nonetheless that prayer should be accompanied by work. The Benedictine Rule had a strong influence on the European work ethic that was carried to North America. The Seal of the City of Toledo, Ohio (1873), for example, reads *Laborare est Orare*, “To work is to Pray.”
- The longish 10 line sentence on p. 166 could be broken down.
- On the first page of chapter 9 (p. 188), climate change should be included among the list of the world’s serious crises.
- The dates of Shoghi Effendi’s ministry are given as (1921-1954) (p. 133). The appointment of Shoghi Effendi did not actually take place until 3 January 1922 when the *Will and Testament* of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was officially read. Shoghi Effendi died on November 4, 1957; he remained the head of the Bahá’í Faith until the day of his death.

Conclusion

Buck’s treatment of the material is throughout well-researched, and rich in the detail that an alert reader expects. In sum, despite its unpretentious title, this book is more than the Basics of the Bahá’í Faith. It not only covers well the religion’s early history, three central holy figures, spiritual and social teachings and organization, but also it presents a complete contemporary picture of the remarkably diverse economic, social, and spiritual activities that are being planned and executed by the Bahá’í community in all countries of the world. These activities, despite their humble beginnings, bode well in the world of tomorrow to become enduring institutions that will count as major factors, not only in establishing global peace and prosperity, but also and more importantly, in promoting the organic unity of the human race.

Jack McLean is a scholar, essayist and poet who graduated with distinction with an M.A. in the History of Religions from the University of Ottawa (1972). He has won two awards from the Association for Bahá’í Studies North America, creative writing (1995) and distinguished scholarship (2013).