

SACRED ACTS, SACRED SPACE, SACRED TIME

AUTHOR: John Walbridge

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John Walbridge has written a unique and valuable introduction to the Bahá'í Faith that is both thematic and comparative. *Sacred Acts, Sacred Space, Sacred Time* creates a perspective on understanding religion that defines themes of action (religious law, ritual, and rites), space (pilgrimage sites, holy places, and the realm of the mystical), and time (religious calendars, festivals, and holy days). In so doing, the author creates a framework for comparing various religious traditions (although focusing on Islamic, Bábí, and Bahá'í traditions).

The author begins by pointing out that all religious traditions divide the known world into sacred and profane categories. His goal is to provide the reader with a sense of what is sacred in the Bahá'í Faith and to compare the forms of sacred actions, spaces, and times with those of other religions. In so doing, he highlights how the Bahá'í Faith is both similar to, and yet distinct from, other traditions. His introduction admits that most of this book was originally written as separate entries (for an as yet unpublished encyclopedia on the Bahá'í Faith) which he has skillfully knit together using themes of action, space, and time.

Another unique aspect of this book is the author's admitted attempt to "treat Bahá'í practices empirically as well as normatively" (xiii)—in other words, to describe not only what Bahá'ís ought to do but also what the social practices of Bahá'í individuals and communities actually are at this stage in the Bahá'í Faith's history. He acknowledges, however, that "[t]here are serious limits to my efforts—since there is little scholarship on the subject, I must rely mostly on my own observations, which are largely limited to American, Arab and Iranian Bahá'ís . . ." (xiii). While offering some context to the laws and ordinances found in Bahá'í scripture, these empirical observations at times seem anecdotal and random, posing more questions than they answer. The author is to be commended, however, for introducing this aspect of Bahá'í scholarship, which, as he points out, has been missing from most discussions of the Bahá'í Faith by both Bahá'í and other scholars.

Finally, the author's preface states that an additional element motivating the writing of this book was the 1992 publication in English of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the chief legal text of the Bahá'í Faith. He states that *Sacred Acts* "attempts to put the laws of the Aqdas in a larger context, not only correlating the relevant Bahá'í texts but discussing their roots in Bábí and Islamic law and comparing aspects of Bahá'í religious law to the role of law in other religions" (xiii). This is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the book, making it worth reading even for those well versed in the basics of Bahá'í principles and history. His goal of making the book useful "both to Bahá'í readers and to scholars of the Bahá'í

Faith and of related areas" (xiv) is accomplished with this thematic and comparative approach.

Part One (Sacred Acts) focuses on Bahá'í law and its roots in Islamic and Bábí law. The author begins with a brief discussion of the history of laws and legal philosophy. He describes law as deriving its legitimacy from nature (including doctrines of natural law), God, and the sovereign (or "positive law," the root of most civil laws in the Western world). In a pattern repeated throughout the book, the author then devotes one paragraph each to summarizing the essence of religious law in Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, Mesopotamian, Zoroastrian, and Chinese traditions (with a slightly more in-depth treatment of Jewish law). Those wanting to explore a more detailed global comparison may be disappointed. However, the author means this to be a prelude to a more extensive (and quite excellent) comparison of Islamic, Bábí, and Bahá'í law. He states that the importance of and emphasis on law in the Bahá'í Faith "falls somewhere between the legalistic religions like Judaism and Islam and the anti-legalist religions like Christianity" (xii).

Throughout the entire work, some of the most interesting sections were on the Bábí perspective (including Bábí rites, Bábí pilgrimage, Bábí mysticism, and the Bábí calendar). Even for knowledgeable Bahá'í readers, these sections provide new and insightful comparisons as precursors to Bahá'u'lláh's abrogation, adoption, or alteration of the Báb's *Bayán*. In fact, the author states that the "whole legal system of the Bayán thus takes on a millenarian character" (15) in that it is a whole religious dispensation preparing for the coming of "Him Whom God shall make manifest" (Bahá'u'lláh).¹ For example, the author explains the Báb's prohibition against the beating of children, which is forbidden "lest the believer inadvertently strike Him Whom God shall make manifest" (15). Part One also contains sections on rites of life and death (including prayer, worship, purity, fasting, and funeral laws) and rites of wealth (including inheritance laws and *Ḥuqúqu'lláh*).

Part Two (Sacred Space) begins with comparative discussions on pilgrimage, shrines and holy places, and cemeteries. Included are detailed accounts of Islamic, Bábí, and Bahá'í pilgrimages (complete with interesting accounts of rituals prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh for making a *hajj* to the House of the Báb in Shiraz and the House of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad). There are also excellent sections on the origins of the Tablets of Visitation to be said by Bahá'ís while visiting sacred spaces, Mount Carmel, and Bahá'í cemeteries.

Part Two ends with an engaging short chapter on "The Realm of the Mystical Imagination," describing the mystical sphere as an important component of the theme of "sacred space." An excellent discussion of Sufi mysticism is given,

1. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 198) 155.

especially of 'Atţár's "The Conference of the Birds," the famous Persian mystical poem that is the background to Bahá'u'lláh's mystical work *The Seven Valleys*. The author also discusses Bahá'u'lláh's "allegorical or semi-allegorical texts in which mythological symbols such as the Maiden, the Deathless Youth, the Holy Mariner and others are used to foreshadow His prophetic claims" (158–59).

Part Three (Sacred Time) contains analysis of the Bahá'í calendar and Bahá'í festivals (including the Nineteen Day Feast; Naw-Rúz; Ayyám-i-Há; the birthday, declaration, and martyrdom of the Báb; the birthday and ascension of Bahá'u'lláh; Riḍván; the Day of the Covenant; and the ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá). The author begins the section by stating that in the Bahá'í Faith, time is both cyclical and linear—cyclical in the yearly rhythm of festivals, holy days, Nineteen Day Feasts, and elections; linear in that "[h]istory for the Bahá'í is a teleological drama in which the maturation of the human race is worked out through religious history" (173). Religious calendars are compared in a brief history of ecclesiastical and secular timekeeping. The author compares ancient Mesopotamia's lunisolar calendar and its revision into the Jewish religious calendar, the lunar calendar of the Muslims, and the solar calendar of the Julian and Gregorian Christians and the Bahá'ís. He points out that the Bábí and Bahá'í calendars resemble "the Zoroastrian calendar much more closely than the Muslim one, being a solar calendar with non-lunar months and with months and days named for divine attributes" (182). He also provides an elaborate but very coherent discussion of the numerological aspects of Bahá'í timekeeping, such as years being counted in cycles of nineteen called *váḥids*, with each year being known by an attribute of God, and the meaning and symbolism of day, month, and year names.

At the end of the text are five appendices: (1) discussion of two important Bahá'í legal texts (the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and the *Lawḥ-i-Ṭarázát*); (2) women and Bahá'í law (with comparisons to the status of women in Muslim and Bábí law); (3) the "Greatest Name" of Islamic tradition, and the Bahá'í greeting "Alláh-u-Abhá"; (4) apostasy; and (5) the *Hurúfát-i-Álín*, or "The Exalted Letters," a tablet by Bahá'u'lláh concerning death and the human soul. It is unclear why these particular topics are covered in special appendices; one almost gets the impression that they are issues the author wanted to write about, but they did not fit neatly into his thematic structure. Finally, the author has included a bibliography of sources in English, as well as an excellent chapter-by-chapter reference essay, complete with endnotes.

In conclusion, the author succeeds in providing an original introductory book that coherently thematizes issues in religion, sociology, and history, and which also gives brief but thought-provoking comparative material of the Bahá'í Faith with major world religions (especially Islam and the Bábí Faith). While the members of his target audience are Bahá'í readers as well as Bahá'í and other

scholars, the latter group (especially those who are not scholars of Middle Eastern religions) may find a dearth of detailed comparative material, as well as few helpful empirical examples of how Bahá'ís practice sacred acts, penetrate sacred space, and live in sacred time (although the author recognizes "serious limits" [xiii] to the accomplishment of the latter goal). In addition, for those relatively unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, the lack of explanatory material when introducing new persons or issues may prove daunting (for example, Who is Shoghi Effendi? Who are the Azalís? What is the significance of the Universal House of Justice?). The back cover describes the new series "Bahá'í Studies" from George Ronald, Publishers, as a "challenging new series developed for students of the Bahá'í Faith and those teaching courses on the religion, its sociology, theology and literature, as well as the religious, social and cultural contexts of its birth and growth." In this respect, *Sacred Acts, Sacred Space, Sacred Time* is an admirable first volume worth reading.

MICHAEL McMULLEN