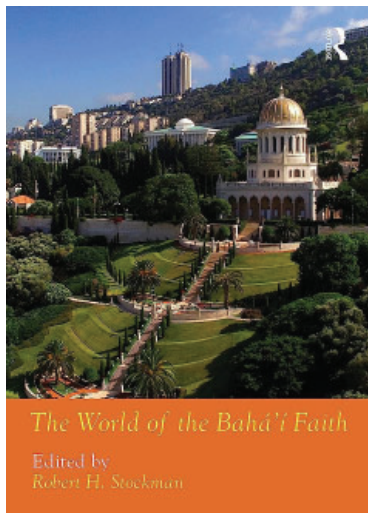


## Book Review



*The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, edited by Robert H. Stockman. Routledge, 2021, 666 pages.

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*The World of the Bahá'í Faith* is a recent publication in the “Routledge Worlds” series of scholarly guides to world religions. The book is aimed at “students and scholars studying world religions and comparative religion” (i), and in keeping with its mandate as a reference book, the contributions in the volume provide an accessible and remarkably thorough overview of what has already been mapped out in Bahá'í primary and secondary sources on a wide range of topics. Yet the book goes beyond consolidation, with many authors providing novel perspectives and fresh analytical approaches to their subject matter. Every reader is sure to derive new insights from their

engagement with this collection.

The introduction by editor Robert H. Stockman frames the work as an overview of a religion in motion, one whose purpose and direction are elaborated over time as the successive leaders of the Bahá'í community find it progressively able to take on the next stage in the program embedded in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. This is a helpful framing, even for chapters covering topics that might seem inherently static, such as those dealing with core features of philosophy or doctrine, or periods of history now past. The significance and implications of even these topics are revealed progressively over time, as the community accumulates more experience in whose light to better appraise them.

*The World of the Bahá'í Faith* surveys a broad range of topics. There is inevitably some overlap between chapters, given the impossibility of perfectly carving up into discrete conceptual segments a phenomenon like a world religion, whose scripture, community life (both global and local), philosophy, engagement with the outside world, and capacity to transform the individual, are all inextricable facets of a whole. The textbook is divided into six parts. A first part, “Leadership and Authoritative texts,” devotes a chapter to each of the Central Figures, the Guardian, and the Universal House of Justice, with a corresponding chapter on the writings of each. The second part, “Theology,” deals with the core distinctive Bahá'í teachings on God and the interaction between the

divine and humanity, but also with interfaith relations and the harmony of science and religion. The next section, “Humanity,” acts as a bridge between philosophical topics and areas of practical concern; it discusses the Bahá’í understanding of the nature of the human being, spirituality and the soul, but also explores the implications of the human’s spiritual reality for unity in diversity within the social realm. The fourth section, “Society,” considers the Faith’s relationship to such aspects of humanity’s collective life as art, economics, education, family, and work. “The Contemporary Bahá’í Community” explores Bahá’í concepts that structure community life, from long-standing features whose implications continue to be developed—such as the Covenant and the Administrative Order, consultation, and devotional life—to topics of intensive learning in the contemporary community, such as constructive agency and a culture of learning. There is also a chapter devoted to the history of the persecution of Bahá’ís in Iran, which acts as a bridge to the final part, “History and spread of the Bahá’í community,” containing region-specific histories of the Bahá’í Faith as well as demographic details. The “References and Further Reading” sections in all the chapters, and in particular these final chapters on regional histories, are a rich resource for further study. The regional chapters inevitably focus more on broad trends than details, aiming as they do to tell the story of the Bahá’í experience in vast territories over many decades of time, and

Stockman notes that a hoped-for chapter on the “long and remarkable—and little researched” history of the Faith in the territories of the former Soviet Union never materialized (xvii). We echo the hope he expresses that this volume may inspire further research into the many areas which these overview chapters can, of necessity, only briefly allude to.

It is a strength of the multichapter format that it brings together contributions from a wide range of authors, many of whom are drawing on their own extensive scholarship in a particular area. This not only allows readers to benefit from a broad range of expertise; it also provides them with a set of complementary perspectives and approaches. The strength of this diversity of approaches is exemplified by the chapters on the Writings of the Central Figures, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice. Nader Saiedi’s discussion of the Writings of the Báb is a primarily thematic overview, which acts as a wonderfully accessible abridgement of his more expansive scholarship on the topic in *Gate of the Heart*, and could easily be recommended as preliminary reading to anyone approaching that work for the first time. Conversely, Steven Phelps’ article on the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh takes a dramatically different, though equally valuable, approach; after a brief discussion of overall content and style, it embarks on something similar to Adib Taherzadeh’s *Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*, providing a synopsis of many of Bahá’u’lláh’s most important Writings—including

many untranslated works that are little known amongst non-Persian Bahá'ís—categorized by the period in which they were revealed. If the discussion of the context and content of the works is necessarily far briefer than in Taherzadeh's four volume opus, the range of works covered may actually be greater, and gives the reader an appreciation of the stunning volume and breadth of Bahá'u'lláh's literary output. In their chapters on the Writings and utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the English-language writings of Shoghi Effendi respectively, Mina Yazdani and Sandra Lynn Hutchinson adopt almost a synthesis of the two approaches just described: a smaller number of major texts are examined in depth and thematically analyzed. Each approach is of great value on its own terms, and is well tailored to the distinct nature of each literary corpus.

A variety of approaches are taken in the rest of the volume as well. Certain chapters on philosophical topics are essentially summaries of a Bahá'í position; similarly, some of the chapters focusing on how Bahá'í concepts inform practice (in education, for example) seek to discern and articulate a conceptual framework, rooted in the writings and guidance and informed by collective experience, within which to treat their subject. Other chapters, dealing with either the philosophical or the practical, go beyond presenting a Bahá'í understanding of the subject matter, and seek to contextualize such an understanding within broader scholarship and experience. The practice-centric

chapters on “Constructive Resilience” and “A Culture of Learning” do this, for instance, by drawing on Gandhian social action and the philosophy of science respectively; but so does the essentially philosophical chapter on “Progressive Revelation,” which correlates this core Bahá'í teaching with certain other philosophical and religious understandings of the role of religion in history. This comparative approach is valuable where present, particularly when it is used to highlight the kinds of questions or problems which the Bahá'í position seems well suited to address. Todd Smith and Omid Ghaemmaghami, for instance, frame their chapter on “Consultation” by exploring certain deficiencies in prevalent modes of communication, which gives the topic an urgency and immediacy that will appeal to the student learning about Bahá'í consultation for the first time. In some chapters, this kind of framing risks overwhelming the discussion of the Bahá'í position itself; Augusto Lopez-Claros' chapter on “Economics,” for example, is perhaps a better example of how someone working from a Bahá'í position might make a contribution to wider discourses, than of how one might present the Bahá'í position specifically. However, as in the chapter on consultation, the incisive diagnosis of the economic and ecological situation humanity faces today crystallizes the importance of considering what a Bahá'í contribution in this area might be.

The comparative approach is not the only viable one, of course, and some

of the strongest contributions take a different tack. The chapter on “Science and Religion” by Steven Phelps is a case in point. Engaging with the wider scholarship on this topic in anything more than a cursory manner would be impossible in a short chapter; instead, the author focuses on carefully articulating the underlying philosophical foundations of a principle with which most Bahá'ís are familiar, but whose coherence with fundamental Bahá'í conceptions of ontology and epistemology may not often be consciously considered.

It would have been helpful for the sections on the history of the Faith to include some discussion of their approach to sources. The accounts typically adhere to the versions of events familiar to Bahá'ís. There are other accounts of these events that present matters differently; in places these accounts are alluded to, but not often on points where they differ from the “canonical” Bahá'í account. In this reviewer's opinion, the choice here is certainly justifiable, but the justification might have been made explicit given the intended general audience. Peter Smith's article on “The History of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths” deals with this issue particularly effectively. Drawing on his earlier scholarship in the field, the author canvasses the range of perspectives on the meaning of events in Bábí history—were the besieged at Fort Tabarsi revolutionaries, or willing martyrs?—in a way that is particularly valuable in the study of history, where the impossibility of reading

the hearts and intentions of the actors means that no matter whose version of a story one accepts, one is making a statement of faith (in one source over another, if nothing else). Smith deftly places a range of interpretations before the reader. This occurs in some of the other chapters dealing with history, but not as consistently; in these, a brief explanation of which sources are being considered would have been welcome.

However, with this quibble aside, and given the enormous potential for complexity in presenting detailed histories of the Faith, the historical chapters do an admirable job of providing a clear narrative for the student, preserving essentials while avoiding getting bogged down in too many unfamiliar names.

The discussion of sources leads into a broader question that a student might ask about the volume. It presents an essentially “insider” view of the Bahá'í Faith; the religion's teachings and practices are explained on their own terms, by scholars who are also members of the community. There is no sustained effort to interrogate the Bahá'í Faith from an outsider or critical perspective. Someone approaching the study of the Faith for the first time might wonder whether this risks presenting a one-sided view of the religion, one that obscures controversies and critical challenges.

The “insider” perspective is, in my view, the correct one for this volume, for reasons both practical and conceptual. As a preliminary point, the authors in this volume are subject matter

experts, which is of course the primary consideration in creating a reference work; it would be difficult to find more qualified contributors. From a practical perspective, while there are certainly reputable scholars of the Faith who are not Bahá'ís themselves, many of the facets of the Faith as a dynamic religious movement would be difficult to comment on from an outside perspective. At some point, sociologists may take a sustained interest in Bahá'í community building processes, for instance, making a contribution by someone outside the community on this topic perfectly feasible; as it stands, however, those best placed to provide an accurate and detailed explanation of these processes will most often be, if not Bahá'ís themselves, those actively involved in Bahá'í-inspired community activities.

This connects to a broader point about voice. It is important for any student of the Bahá'í Faith—particularly a novice to the topic—to understand the Faith as a living religious tradition on its own terms. This is well understood in fields like anthropology, where the aspiration to an “objectivity” in which outsiders study a population as though they themselves are socially unconditioned—or perhaps belong to a perfect cultural standard against which others can be measured (a legacy of thinkers as diverse as Hegel and J.S. Mill)—has long since been abandoned. Today, the voices and perspectives of those who represent the group being studied are privileged. In an age of postmodern sensibilities, where respect for religion

is often based more on its importance to culture than in any acknowledgment of its possible connection to an ontologically transcendent reality, the Bahá'í Faith may at first glance appear less worthy of such deference to its own subjective voice than some other traditions. Can a community as new, as diverse, and as global as this claim to have a culture in the same sense as traditions that are far older and more rooted in a particular set of linguistic, ethnic, or geographic contexts? The Bahá'ís, of course, would say yes—and the support for that claim would be the very kinds of social phenomena documented by participant observers in this volume. But the question of voice goes deeper than respecting the subjective viewpoint of the members of a community simply because it *is* their viewpoint; it has an epistemological dimension as well. As Michael Karlberg and Todd Smith suggest in their chapter on “A Culture of Learning,” there are kinds of experiential knowledge that can only be fully acquired through participation. If any access to such knowledge is to be achieved through the mere reading of a text, then the text itself must reflect participants' voices:

a common vocabulary is also emerging that enables growing numbers of people to benefit from accumulated knowledge, progressively clarify concepts, and share emerging insights. Indeed, much of the vocabulary cited in the preceding discussion is rich with meanings that can only be fully

grasped by participating in processes of collective study, practical application, and experiential learning—similar to the way a common vocabulary is articulated and takes on meaning in a scientific field of enquiry. (470)

*The World of the Bahá'í Faith* is available as hardcover and e-book, with a paperback edition to be released later in 2023.

And of course, the importance of experiential knowledge is not restricted to participatory activities such as community building; it emerges as well in individual spiritual practices such as prayer.

This is not to deny that an outside perspective has its own value; this perspective may access a different knowledge that is less accessible from within the community. But where such a perspective approaches foundational truth claims from a position of skepticism, as is common in the academic study of religion, there is a risk—particularly in an introductory study—that it will derail the student from understanding the religion on its own terms. Skepticism, like faith, is a kind of bias: it says “not until you prove it,” but too often enters the field with a fixed idea about what constitutes a valid standard of proof. *The World of the Bahá'í Faith* presents the student of religion with a coherent, sustained, and cross-disciplinary understanding of not only a body of information about the Bahá'í Faith, and the concepts that structure that information, but the underlying commitments that give the Faith life in the hearts of its followers—the place where, in the final analysis, true religion is ultimately found.