

---

# The Bahá'ís in Canada:

## A Study in the Transplantation of Non-Western Religious Movements to Western Societies

W. C. van den Hoonaard

Department of Sociology, University of New Brunswick

---

This study concerns the transplantation of non-Western faiths into Western settings, taking as a case study the origins and early life of the Bahá'í community in Canada. I will first give a short history of the Canadian Bahá'í community.<sup>1</sup> However, since my objective is sociological rather than historical, I will move quickly to the substance of this study, namely an examination of various factors which affected the ability of the Bahá'í Faith to be transplanted into Canadian society.

### **A Short History of the Canadian Bahá'í Community to 1948**

Although the first Bahá'í adherents could be found in Ontario as early as 1898, it was in 1902, with the arrival of May Maxwell in Montreal, that Bahá'í teaching became permanently established in Canada. Initially attracting a few people in the Montreal area, it was not until after a brief sojourn by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Canada in 1912 that the Bahá'ís formed themselves into a community. With the entry of several young people in 1927, including a number of Jewish background, the community began to grow. A scattering of Bahá'ís could also be found in Saint John (New Brunswick) and Vancouver, in addition to a few other isolated parts of the country.

A marked change in the Canadian Bahá'í community occurred after 1937 when Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, gave the Bahá'ís in Canada a plan to establish a spiritual assembly<sup>2</sup> in the capitals of every province, a goal that was achieved in 1944. The Bahá'í commu-

nity of Canada elected its own National Spiritual Assembly in 1948, gaining an independent status from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada. By 1948, the 263 Canadian Bahá'ís were thinly spread in over 40 localities. Today, Canadian Bahá'ís are found in some 1,400 places with a membership of about 22,000. Provinces and territories have not only legally recognized Bahá'í marriage, but have given recognition to Bahá'í holy days for the faith's school children. Many of its governing bodies are incorporated and the Bahá'í community of Canada operates a secondary school which grants the international baccalaureate.

The one defining feature that characterized the social and cultural adaptation of the emerging Bahá'í community in Canada between 1898 and 1948 is what I call *religious singleness*: the existence of a community of believers who, by virtue of their few members, express their faith in terms of their individual existence, while maintaining their individual ties to a wider society which does not share their beliefs. Here 'wider society' encapsulates even such small groups as one's family (including spouse, children, and other relatives), as well as larger forms of social organization, such as place of work, and social and civil institutions.<sup>3</sup> The challenge for such a new religious movement consists in maintaining a distinctive value system while having soft and permeable boundaries. This feature is particularly relevant today as the international context of new movements becomes more important than their localized expressions of community.

### **Transplant Studies: Methodological Issues**

Not many scholarly treatments of the sociology of religion deal with or have devoted much space or attention to the social process of adaptation and development of *transplanted* religious movements (more particularly, non-Christian religions) settling in alien settings.<sup>4</sup> Scholarly works to date involve a narrow band of kinds of transplanted religions selected for analysis. In particular, they explore the new religious movements over a short time-frame. The diversity of transplanted religious groups that have found a home in Western society is not something that appears as a prominent theme in such studies.

When we look at the diversity of Canada's transplanted religions, it seems important to distinguish among several kinds of non-Western religious movements. There are those based on immigrant ethnic populations, such as Sikhs in British Columbia and Buddhists in Alberta (Coward and Kawamura 1978) and the Japanese in Canada (Mullins 1989), and those, like the Bahá'ís, whose national membership is mainly derived from recruits in the host society. Stark and Bainbridge (1985)

would add another kind: imported cults that do not even have branches in the countries from which their founders came.

It will be useful then to designate what I believe to be the distinctive contributions of this study to the sociology of religion. First, it offers a long-term account of how a non-Western religious community has become established in its host setting. The study involves a timespan of fifty years, a much longer time period than is the case for many other studies. This long-term approach allows us to move away from an *ahistorical* conception of movements that is characteristic of contemporary studies.

Aside from scholarly work on indigenous religious life (e.g., Crysdale and Wheatcroft 1976, 69–99, e.v.), scholarly observations about religion in Canada usually pertain to dominant or conventional religious groups, such as Romans Catholics (e.g., Westhues 1978), Protestants, and Jews (Kallen, in Crysdale and Wheatcroft 1976, 278–88). We also seem to be reasonably well equipped with knowledge about specific movements, such as sects and cults in Alberta and in Montreal, Hutterites, Mennonites, Mormons, and Christian Scientists, all of whom Canadian sociologists refer to as the *third force* (e.g., Hiller 1978). Except for studies on Canadian Jews (e.g., Schoenfeld 1978; Brym and Shaffir 1993), what is lacking is detailed research on non-Christian or non-Western styles of religious communities, a deficiency which this study begins to redress.

Finally, this study allows me to provide an account of the origins of the Bahá'í community in Canada, for there are simply no studies of Bahá'ís in Canada.<sup>5</sup> Scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith in North America has been coming to the fore only since the mid-1980s, and two of the more thorough accounts of Bahá'í history in North America (Stockman 1985 and 1995) omitted, due to lack of materials on the subject when they were written, substantive references to early Canadian Bahá'í history.

## Religion in Canada

Religion in Canada, during the first half of the twentieth century, played a formidable role in crystallizing the cultural, social, and economic forces of the country. Religious life in Canada, with *less religious diversity* than the United States, was dominated by four large denominations. It was, in effect, a religious oligopoly (Westhues 1976, 212–3, 220), which involved a “significantly higher concentration [of religious affiliation] in a few denominations and therefore a greater power of old traditions” (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 461). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the Bahá'ís made their first appearance in Canada, 46.6% of the Canadian population were either Methodists, Presbyterians, or Angli-

cans, while Roman Catholics represented 41.6% (Walsh 1963, 156); only slightly over 10% of the population did not belong to these four mainstream religious traditions. Between 1901 and 1951, the changes in the religious affiliation of Canadians were only slight.

The first half of the twentieth century produced changes among the major denominations in Canada. There was a decline in the proportion of Catholics, though a reversal of this trend during the 1930s. Protestantism gave birth to the social gospel movement—a Christian reform movement that arose in response to the social ills of the industrial age (Fallding 1978, 150). Nevertheless, the proportion of Protestants began to decline, so that by 1951 40.9% adhered to mainline Protestantism. After 1921, Canada also saw an increase in the population adhering to other religious groups, and the “non-religious” increased from 0.1% in 1901 to 0.4% in 1951. Nonetheless, Canada preserved its religiously homogeneous image during this period.

Sociologists have characterized Canadian society in terms of its “religious conservatism, congregational ecumenism, and cooperation,” characteristics which make the religious topography less suitable for sectarianism and third-force religious activity (Hiller 1978, 205). According to Stark and Bainbridge (1985, 504), the “tendency for homogeneity to limit variety will be especially marked when people live in relatively stable, small communities.” In contrast, areas with larger and denser concentrations of population are more able to sustain deviant subcultures because ties to the normative culture are weak and anonymity prevails in such places.

The religious solidity of Canadian life was also predicated on formal and informal relations between the state and its main churches, notably the Catholic and Anglican Churches. The ‘union churches’ (Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists) also played a leading role in setting the religious temperament of Canada. The only way, it seems, that religious minorities can exist in religious monocultures is in small pockets—as a sort of religious singleness. I shall address this religious singleness as I now discuss the source of recruits, recruitment strategies, and membership and commitment. I shall also consider the culture and ideology that pertain to the early facets of the Bahá'í community in Canada.

## **Recruitment and Membership**

*Sources of recruitment.* My study, *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898–1948*, has attempted to carefully record the contributions of women to the Bahá'í community of Canada, especially, as Janet Jacobs indicates (1991, 352), because researchers have a propensity to reinforce the group's perspective on women by not being concerned with or

acknowledging the role of women in various facets of new religious movements. Women were a critical factor in the dynamics of propagation of the new faith between 1898 and 1948. The Bahá'í community consistently attracted a large proportion of women, which constituted 70% of its membership.<sup>6</sup> This fact had several implications for the Bahá'í community.

In the earlier periods the Bahá'í community was a magnet for maternal suffragettes and social reformers. They saw the Bahá'í Faith as a confirmation of *their* own ideals about anticipated social change. Their main allegiance was to their own ideals, rather than to Bahá'í ideals. The recruitment of these women to the Bahá'í community was primarily the result of the personal magnetism and capacities of individual Bahá'ís, such as May Maxwell. While the incipient Bahá'í appeal largely involved people of well-established means, the Bahá'í Faith increasingly began to attract single, urban, lower-middle-class women. This feature, given the social context of the time, meant that Bahá'ís were primarily reaching other single women, and that the strategy of holding public meetings in hotels, rather than having living room firesides, provided the most appropriate, and usually the only, means for propagating the new faith. (The term "fireside" was coined in the early 1930s to refer to informal discussions usually in one's home with the purpose of acquainting 'seekers' or non-Bahá'ís with the Bahá'í Faith.) Without ties of marriage, and sometimes trained in a technical occupation that gave them geographical mobility, women became the primary means by which the Bahá'í Faith spread across Canada.

What accounts for the attraction of women to new religious movements in general, and the Bahá'í Faith in particular? McGuire (1992, 126–9) sees some new religious movements as a "vehicle for the assertion of alternative religious roles for women." She significantly suggests that in their formative years, religious movements "of nonprivileged classes have typically allotted equality to women" (McGuire 1992, 126). Their relatively low position in the traditional religions and the opportunity to become leaders in new movements are the main reasons (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 413–4) that women join these movements. Unlike the findings on the evolution of new religious movements which seem to signal a return to "traditional, hierarchical, or bureaucratic forms of authority" (McGuire 1992, 128), the Bahá'í community has explicitly affirmed in its own sacred literature its teachings on the equality of women and men as evidenced in the active participation of women as Bahá'í teachers and administrators. There were, sometimes, practices in the Bahá'í community that seem to undermine that participation, such as the traditional assignment of women and men to particular committees. For instance,

local committees that dealt with children's classes had a higher proportion of women than, let us say, a finance committee which consisted primarily of men. Nonetheless, these practices never overshadowed the overall place and recognition of women as speakers, Bahá'í teachers, pioneers, and the like. The participation of many single women in Bahá'í communities highlights another facet of religious singleness: the general absence of children.

Sociologists have recorded the difficult transition from first to later generations in a social movement's membership (Ellwood 1985, 15), underscoring the need to socialize children. The early (pre-1927)<sup>7</sup> Canadian Bahá'í community was clearly a community of adults; the "ideal" household of parents and children—who were *all* Bahá'ís—existed only in a few circumstances. The pattern of childlessness persisted after 1927, although children became more in evidence in the mid-1930s. I estimate that only 25% to 40% of the children remained Bahá'ís after reaching the age of fifteen. This was not sufficient to supply the next generation of adherents with marriage partners, especially when one considered that the number of other Bahá'ís for these children was either non-existent or negligible.

The Bahá'í community was thus a childless one, both in fact (with a few exceptions) and in orientation. Events were organized around adults, and married couples with children tended to isolate the children from the Bahá'í community. The presence of a disproportionate number of single women heightened the sense of childlessness. As it was also not uncommon to find couples with only one Bahá'í partner, we have a sense of religious 'singleness'. It was a subculture of public meetings and, in the case of a Bahá'í couple, living room firesides—all oriented towards adults.

The geographical distribution of Canadian Bahá'ís between 1898 and 1948 also contributed to their religious singleness. Especially after 1937, when Shoghi Effendi urged the small band of Canadian Bahá'ís to move to those provincial capitals which, as yet, had no Bahá'ís, many an individual believer did find her- or himself alone and remote from her or his originating, home community. True, she or he had already become acquainted with religious singleness even in the home, urban community—there were too few Bahá'ís to permit otherwise. But moving into a different part of the country, more usually alone than with someone else, underscored the feeling of religious singleness.

Even those who did not find themselves setting off alone to distant places in Canada, did reinforce their religious singleness by exercising a life-style that seemed deviant. There was already a penchant of several people, either before they joined the Bahá'í community or after enrolling, to be activists in the field of technology, or in social reform.<sup>9</sup> A number

of other Bahá'ís were actively in the forefront of racial amity work, such as those in Montreal and Halifax, while others made a deliberate decision to protect the assets of Japanese Canadians during war-time internment. Other adherents were forerunners of "health fads" and the fight against fluoridation and were thus known to take up causes that were controversial or far ahead of their time, or that at least provoked thought in the general population. Consider also, for example, the decision to join a religion with an esoteric-sounding name or to pull up stakes and move to a remote part of the country to advance "the Cause." Bahá'í membership thus increased or reinforced, and not decreased, certain unpopular or deviant life-styles; these life-styles provided a modicum of a sense of community—something that later Bahá'ís would remember or retell with obvious affection.

While initially the Bahá'í community attracted members of the upper class, it successively moved to attract people of the managerial class and, eventually, those with lower-middle-class occupations. While in 1921 some 46% of the Bahá'ís were either upper- or managerial-class, in 1947 the figure dropped to 18%. In the case of the lower-middle-class and lower-class origins, in 1921, 48% of Bahá'ís came from this background, increasing to 75% in 1947 (van den Hoonaard 1996). It is important to remember that throughout this shift in class membership the dominant Protestant flavor of Bahá'í communities still prevailed. There were few cultural differences in the changing class composition of Bahá'í membership, for what dominated the Bahá'í community was the Protestant temperament and tone of the orientation of the community: individualistic, organizationally focused, and with an emphasis on teaching the so-called "twelve principles" of the Bahá'í Faith (rather than, let us say, the station of Bahá'u'lláh as the Revelator).

The Protestant composition of Bahá'í membership was deeply intertwined with other factors of religious outlook and class. Under these circumstances, the Bahá'í community had a 'Protestant accent' which not only reinforced religious singleness but also made it more difficult for members of other ethnic groups to join. In 1921, 89% of the Bahá'ís came from a Protestant background, while in 1947 it was 75%—only a slight reduction. While in 1921 only 4% of the Bahá'ís came from a Catholic background, they had increased to 12% in 1947 (van den Hoonaard 1996).

Catholic or francophone adherents, before 1948, must have found the lack of ritual and congregational prayer, the large number of single people and couples without children, and the absence of family and social ties an odd landscape. Such a social panorama lacked the familiar landmarks that could guide the behavior and thought of Bahá'ís who did

not come from a liberal Protestant background.<sup>10</sup> The Bahá'í community also seemed to have attracted, in particular, the 'creative' class, consisting of artists and the like—another factor that fostered a religious singleness that might not have occurred if recruitment involved a wider spectrum of people.

**Recruitment strategies.** A new faith, in its early phase, tends to draw recruits from very narrow strata or from small, homogeneous categories of citizens. This is largely because "recruitment takes place primarily through development of new social bonds linking members with prospective recruits or through activation of existing interpersonal bonds..." (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 398). With its emphasis on individuality and personal responsibility, and its proclivity towards organized modern life, Protestantism provided the organizational basis for Bahá'í expansion. Notably, the use of fireside meetings in the living room and public meetings in hotels allowed the Bahá'í community to attract both those who favored home life and those who preferred a neutral setting to teach and hear about the new religion. As a religion of the living room and hotels, the Bahá'í community must have also offered a new and challenging experience for members of various ethnic backgrounds. For the early Bahá'ís (pre-1927) the new religion did not, as yet, wrap itself completely around the social self. The Bahá'ís had limited social knowledge of each other: along with Bahá'í membership they maintained extensive ties to other circles, often keeping them deliberately separate from the Bahá'í community. Moreover, the Bahá'í community did not as yet pervade all aspects of private and social life.

It was only when the Bahá'í community began attracting Jewish members in Montreal in 1921 that the manner of propagation underwent change. Bahá'ís of Jewish heritage were among the first to respond with clarity and understanding to Shoghi Effendi's vision of the Bahá'í Faith as one that encompasses a world order. The Jewish contribution transformed a community that was inner-directed to one that became open to the world. The vigor and erudition of those of Jewish descent resulted in new orientation of the Bahá'í teaching work and in literary contributions to the Bahá'í community.<sup>11</sup>

There were other important shifts in Bahá'í propagation as the work to spread the new religion shifted in the 1930s from the use of specialized individuals to do this work, to the use of local communities and of believers in general. Special mention should be made of the contribution of Bahá'ís who, as businessmen, were in a position to undertake extensive travels and lecture tours. Moreover, while previously new believers were strongly oriented towards the personality of their specialized teachers, the new conditions (i.e., when more Bahá'ís were involved with the



teaching work) produced believers who were encouraged to become oriented towards the Bahá'í *Writings*, rather than towards their teachers.

***Membership and commitment.*** One of the most intriguing questions associated with transplanting non-Western new religious movements to Western settings revolves around the genuineness of new, Western converts. "Can those," asks Gelberg (1991, 150), "in the new location who embrace the transplanted tradition truly embrace it?" One of the empirical indicators is commitment—a commitment expressed in length of membership in the new movement.

Research on new religious movements shows that the average participant associates intensely for a while and then drops out (Bird and Reimer 1982; Wallis 1984, 42). Some, like Mickler, claim that the main problem of a new religious movement is not the high turnover rate, but members who opt out of active participation while remaining nominal members (Mickler 1991, 191).

The Bahá'í community offers a different picture from other movements with a high turnover rate (Judah 1974, 81, quoted by Wallis 1984, 42). Between 1898 and 1948, the Bahá'í Faith, as a missionizing religion, managed to attract over 550 people—all Canadians, three-quarters of whom remained Bahá'ís for the rest of their lives. Moreover, the proportion of those who stayed Bahá'ís for the rest of their life increased between 1911 and 1948. In 1911, only 31% of Bahá'ís would always remain committed members for the rest of their lives, while in 1948, it had risen to 74% (van den Hoonaard 1996). The stress placed on developing local governing councils and a community structure that involved more aspects of the individual may partly account for such membership commitment. Moreover, the Bahá'í Community in Canada until 1948 did not have a high rate of people who dropped out after being in the movement for a short period of time. Margit Warburg of the University of Copenhagen reports similar findings for the Danish Bahá'í community (personal communication, 2 June 1993).

But how long did 'non-lifers' remain in the Bahá'í community? Although the proportion of non-lifers decreased, to just over a quarter of all Bahá'ís, so did the average length of their membership. In 1921, a non-lifer would remain in the Bahá'í Faith for 14.2 years, while by 1948, the average number of years had decreased by almost half to 7.7 years. There is no ready explanation for this observation. Perhaps stricter membership criteria and more emphasis on maintaining a 'Bahá'í life' (implying a more rigorous individual and collective code of conduct) made it less likely for less committed members to stay on as long as was previously the case. There is some evidence that the intensification of the religious element in new movements (such as is the case with Transcendental

Meditation) can cause a decline in the number of new members (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 302).

The life-long membership commitments meant that the Bahá'í community did not have to devise ways to deal with problems arising out of a high membership turnover. Some sociologists (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977) recognize the fact that it is very important for movements to secure resources to continue their work. The Bahá'í approach to such matters, as we have demonstrated, is rather different, because the Bahá'í community retained its committed members and funds could be received only from Bahá'ís on a voluntary basis.

Given the religious singleness of the early Bahá'ís in Canada, the length of Bahá'í membership as an expression of commitment was remarkable. Such commitment was particularly unusual because the Bahá'í subculture had boundaries that were soft and not clearly defined.

### Culture and Ideology

**Cultural adaptation.** While Theosophy, Methodism, and Rosicrucianism constituted the source religious outlook of many of the Bahá'ís before the 1920s, it is clear that liberal Protestantism was the principal anvil upon which the Bahá'í community was initially forged. With the rise of the social gospel movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century, a number of early Bahá'í members worked with different personal agendas within the Bahá'í movement.

For early Bahá'ís, it was a matter of highlighting those Bahá'í teachings that would speak to the larger cultural frame. Since the attraction to a new faith is "greater among the unchurched and among members of the most secularized and 'liberal' denominations" (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 399), the particular emphasis of Bahá'í teachings (and methods) had to speak to the secular heart and mind. As a consequence, the early Bahá'ís mixed the attraction of liberal biblical interpretations, the principle of the equality of men and women, the emphasis on universal peace and the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth with their own crusading spirit which may have been derived from the prevailing conditions of society at large.

A particularly noteworthy facet of what the early Bahá'ís emphasized relates to the importance our culture attaches to the idea of the "individual." They selected the following Bahá'í teachings as a set of principles which emphasized individuality: the need for individuals to seek truth *independently* of others, to assume *individual* responsibility for their own spiritual development, and to spread the Bahá'í teachings on a *personal* basis.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Wyman (1985, 103) offers a contemporary illustration of the meaning of conversion to the Bahá'í Faith. She found that conver-

sion is about individual and personal growth—not dissimilar to the larger American discourse about religious conversion.

Wyman's cultural analysis (1985) of the Bahá'í Faith shows how religious discourse can be appropriated for other purposes. In the American context, Bahá'í discourse is used as a tool for defining the self and is about individualized psychology, and not about religious truth (Wyman 1985, 103). Other researchers have noted similar processes of cultural framing of the Bahá'í message (e.g., Smith 1987, 145). In a more general context (van den Hoonaard 1984), the orientation of Bahá'ís towards the larger society can take one of several forms, involving an "embryonic," "integrative," "oasis," or "composite" view. Bahá'ís see the world, respectively, as a place where the Bahá'í community is an embryo of the future society, where the Bahá'í community and the world are converging, where the Bahá'í community is a refuge from a declining civilization, or where the needs of the Bahá'í community and those of the wider society are intertwined. (On this note, it is interesting to observe that Wyman's study [1985] seems to ignore the various worldviews of the Bahá'ís.)

*Bahá'í subculture.* The structure of community and organization bears directly upon a new religious group's ability to draw and retain new members. Some scholars, like Beckford (1975, 83), have found that if a movement fosters an "intensive form of community," rather than mass-movement strategies, it is more likely to attract potential recruits, especially when a new faith is seen as a haven or refuge. The dilemma of Bahá'í communities consisted of the difficulty of developing a Bahá'í subculture with permeable and relatively soft boundaries in the wider society. Slow growth may have been a consequence of this difficulty.

Archer, in her study of a contemporary, southern United States Bahá'í community (1977, 239), offers the thoughtful observation that the Bahá'í community's inability to attract many members reflects "the group's inability to create rewards that compete with the secular world's." According to her, the Bahá'í dilemma is to make its "intellectual and sacred rewards...attractive to people who want instrumental rewards" (Archer 1977, 239). Such "competitive awareness" exposes a Bahá'í to the "attractions" of both worlds, in contrast to Christian sects that maintain their identity in relative isolation from the larger society. Their (i.e., Christian sects') moral rejection of society disallows competitive awareness, but permits the rapid emergence of a distinctive subculture. But how did the Bahá'í community in the period surveyed allow competitive awareness, and what was its impact on Bahá'í identity and culture?

Ralph Turner's work on norm emergence or cultural construction in the early age of a social movement is particularly relevant here (Turner

and Killian 1987, 35–51). The Bahá'í community subculture appeared to be both fragile and variable. At last, during the 1930s and 1940s, when the Bahá'í community took a more definite form and a blueprint of Bahá'í life began to emerge, we find changes in the fragile subculture. Oriented initially towards individualism, this subculture did not emphasize knowledge of fellow Bahá'ís outside their role as participating believers—Bahá'ís knew little about each other. As well, there were few, if any, study classes held about Bahá'í community, administration, and organization, which would provide them with the necessary knowledge to develop and maintain a subculture.

While the Bahá'í sacred writings prescribed a religious moral code, this prescription depended mainly on the ability of Bahá'ís to form a community with an administrative framework to set the boundaries of the community. The earliest adherents were sometimes quite unaware of what Bahá'í scriptures said about the need to maintain such a code—too few scriptures had been translated into English—and the believers generally followed the societal standards. Without a definite Bahá'í community to which they could attach themselves, the earliest Bahá'ís saw themselves as “morally normative” (Kent 1993). It was much later, in the 1930s, after Shoghi Effendi had translated additional Bahá'í writings, that a distinct moral code came into being. As a rule, then, as the Bahá'í community grew, moral codes of behavior became stricter.

Before 1927 there were differences between the old and new Bahá'ís. Such differences were particularly apparent in the mid-1920s when Bahá'ís were being transformed into an organized community, rather than a mere collection of individuals who were likely to cast the Bahá'í teachings in Christianized terms. The newer Bahá'ís tended to be more worldly and were administratively zealous. Some Christianized elements did, however, persist even among this latter group, who continued to hold weekly Sunday meetings, rather than attaching more importance to the Nineteen-Day Feast, a distinct Bahá'í social invention and institution. When members began to realize though that the Bahá'í Faith also included an administrative system, differences between old and new believers became even more heightened.

In the Bahá'í case, there were several factors that disallowed the potential source of the above-mentioned difficulties. First, the relatively small size of communities made it virtually impossible not to elect new members, whether youthful or not. However small the Bahá'í communities, there was still an elected, local governing council (in the case of nine or more adherents), or a locally elected group (in the case of eight or fewer members) which during the first half of the century precluded limiting membership on these bodies to old timers: there were simply not

enough adherents in any given Bahá'í community who could have not been elected. Second, the permanently vested authority of their Founder, Bahá'u'lláh, as a Prophet, precluded any consideration of a Bahá'í claiming to possess a new revelation. Even the Head of the new faith, Shoghi Effendi, did not or could not make such a claim. Third, numerous references in the Bahá'í sacred writings clearly specify that one cannot disassociate the Bahá'í organizational structure from the Bahá'í Faith itself (see, e.g., Shoghi Effendi 1974, 143–57).

Nevertheless, the question of open boundaries, the slow development of a Bahá'í culture, and the attendant slow membership growth might well have created a “crisis of confidence” which awaits most new religious movements as members of the founding generation reached the end of their lives. Without major successes in its early days, there was the danger that the early Bahá'ís might “lose hope and turn the movement inward—adopt a new rhetoric that de-emphasizes growth and conversion” (Rodney Stark, cited by Mickler 1991, 188). The satisfaction of membership might have constituted a major problem in no-growth groups which seemed largely to have been sustained “by participation in a small exclusivist closed circle, turned away from the world, and engaged in unpublicized meetings designated for those attached to that closed circle” (O'Toole 1975, 170).<sup>13</sup> Such a crisis seemed inevitable as Bahá'ís were more likely to remain longer in their religion than is the case for other new religious movements.

A number of countervailing forces prevailed in the fledgling Bahá'í community. First, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, gave the Bahá'ís in Canada a teaching plan which included the establishment of at least one governing council (spiritual assembly) in each of the provinces in Canada. It was a systematic approach that pulled Bahá'ís beyond the familiar confines of their own local community, whether secular or religious. Second, Shoghi Effendi's own prolific store of letters, about 22,000 of them (Universal House of Justice 1973, 28), repeatedly focussed the vision of the Bahá'ís on the needs of the wider society. Third, as the Bahá'í message unequivocally focussed on the redemption of *society*, rather than individual salvation, the Bahá'í outlook was already, from its earliest conception, directed towards the larger society (see, e.g., Heller and Mahmoudi 1991). Fourth, the idea of service to society is a strong current in the Bahá'í message, both implicit and explicit (see, e.g., Buck 1990). The spirit of service is seen as the source of both personal and collective development.

*Permeable boundaries and ideology.* In discussing the “deep-rooted sources of popular sentiment” concerning new religious groups in another country, namely Britain, Beckford found that wider cultural val-

ues and social arrangements decide where the boundary should be set between the new group and the society (Beckford 1982, 286). He also found that such decisions are about the cultural view that the individual is basically rational and free. In other words, as long as new religious groups do not involve "brainwashing," "self-harm," "external control," "infantilization," "drift," "fanaticism," "instability," or "family indifference," society's tolerance of those groups is high (Beckford 1982, 288-98).

As Archer (1977, 221) noted, contemporary Bahá'ís are committed to an approach which "involves internalized values and development of mechanisms that will maintain those values without the support of a closed social environment." There were specific organizational mechanisms, however, that supported a life-style appropriate to a group ideology, which Bahá'ís could follow without leaving the larger cultural environment (e.g., Archer 1980). Other present-day observers have, in fact, commented on the "invisibility" of the Bahá'í community in that regard (Ruff 1974). Their observations underscore a persistent theme in the maintenance of the Bahá'í subculture in Western society, namely the existence of soft and permeable boundaries, while following a distinctive value system.

How did the Bahá'í subculture reflect soft boundaries and what shape did the Bahá'í value system take? Bahá'ís saw the wider society neither as a place to turn away from nor as a place to be spiritually feared. Their community did not morally reject society, but, rather, promoted the active engagement of its followers in that society, more so than, for example, the Vedantists who demonstrated a "quietist, non-interventionist and generally accommodative" attitude towards the wider society (Whitworth and Shiels 1982, 167).

The Bahá'í community in the Western world also discouraged breaks with society (as in the illustrated example of the discouraging of plans to create, near Montreal, a separate Bahá'í village and economy). Many Bahá'ís, until the mid-1930s, continued church membership, and individual Bahá'ís were inspired to implement Bahá'í teachings outside the Bahá'í community, rather than forging these teachings exclusively within the community. This ideological position differs considerably from what O'Toole found in his study (1975) of a non-Western political sect, which expected its members to place themselves completely at the disposal of the group. As a consequence, the group attempted to isolate the member from familial and other personal ties outside the political cult. The use of a distinctive, esoteric, and "sacred" language reinforced their exalted, exclusive position as a moral elite (O'Toole 1975, 166-8).

Moreover, lacking a clergy, there were no people assigned to mark

boundaries in the Bahá'í community. Lacking a system of elders, membership on local governing councils (i.e., Spiritual Assemblies) was fluid—voting was democratic, and in secret, and no special privileges or powers seemed to derive from such membership. Moreover, Spiritual Assembly agendas were generally outward looking, with roughly one-third devoted to each of internal administration, Bahá'í community, and concerns with the wider society. Nevertheless, the presence of administratively zealous Bahá'ís reinforced the process of marking social boundaries.

Finally, as members of a young, missionizing religion, there was no inclination among the Bahá'ís to gather in one place, but rather to spread out over many places in Canada, with however few people. Even though contemporary Bahá'í communities have become more fully developed, Bahá'ís “do not separate themselves geographically nor do they reject participation within selective patterns of the surrounding culture” (Archer 1977, 216). Still, within these soft boundaries the Bahá'í community began to develop a distinctive system of values. As we already noted, the Bahá'ís began to emphasize the strict moral code that was increasingly being perceived as the core of the Bahá'í sacred writings and ‘Bahá'í life’ which would mark them as different people in their daily life.

The culture of the Bahá'í community increasingly began using other cultural markers derived from the greater availability of Bahá'í sacred writings. As noted by Archer (1977, 223), Bahá'ís depended on language and a distinct Bahá'í calendar. Donating to the Bahá'í Fund was another way of marking a boundary and creating a Bahá'í identity as, from the early 1920s, only Bahá'ís were (and still are) allowed to contribute to the Bahá'í Fund (Warburg 1993, 29). Finally, the Nineteen-Day Feast represented another boundary between the Bahá'í community and the wider society because only Bahá'ís were (and still are) permitted to attend these monthly Bahá'í gatherings.

The slow and gradual emergence of a distinctive Bahá'í subculture was the consequence of not having a closed social environment. Thus, we may infer that slow growth was the price of permeable boundaries between the Bahá'í community and the wider society.

**Societal reaction.** To what extent was mainstream society prepared to reject or accept the Bahá'í movement? Any missionizing community is confronted by the problems of anonymity and of social legitimacy. New religious movements in North America are more likely to pursue ways to make them less invisible, while movements in Europe see the attainment of social legitimacy as their goal. As Mickler shows (1991, 192–3), new religious movements must attain public visibility; to survive, they must escape anonymity.

The Bahá'ís in Canada did not, during 1898–1948, exist in a state of high tension with the wider society.<sup>14</sup> Still, variables such as size of the movement and the influence of such events as war, and political and social conditions, can shape reactions to a movement beyond its control. For example, the years of World War II created a hostile environment in Canada for new ideas and unfamiliar messages and people. The existence of such a hostile environment coincided with Bahá'í plans to expand their religion to major centres across Canada. For Bahá'ís, it meant that the opportunities for expansion were constrained, and it was often difficult to keep Bahá'í communities viable.

Nevertheless, there seemed to have been other aspects of the War Years that played a critical part in the development of the Canadian Bahá'í community. World War II forced the Canadian Bahá'í community, through Canadian currency laws, to assume control over its own development and education. The issue of non-combattant status also rose to the fore during this period, creating a deeper understanding of where Bahá'ís stood with reference to war and politics.

In retrospect, the Bahá'í community of Canada before 1948 seems to have had no direct impact on Canada's religious, social, or political structures. Between 1898 and 1948, some 555 Bahá'ís lived in 84 locales across Canada. In 59 of these (70%), there were no immediate and visible consequences of the Bahá'í teaching activity. In another fifteen locales (18%), teaching efforts resulted in the establishment of a Bahá'í community, however weak, and in ten others (12%) Bahá'ís formed enduring and relatively strong communities. This study replicates the findings of other transplanted religious movements in the Bahá'í community's reliance on women to spread the Bahá'í Faith, in its mainly childless orientation, and in its urban character. In contrast, a lowering class membership and the Bahá'í community's reinforcement of an unpopular lifestyle does not echo the findings about other new religions.

What is new, however, is the degree to which the early Bahá'í subculture and propagation accentuate the Protestant mainspring of its early adherents. Along with its ethos as generally a childless community and its dispersed nature, the primarily Protestant accent of the Bahá'í community reinforced religious singleness. Lacking a clergy and formal buildings of worship, this religion of the living room and hotel embodied a community with soft boundaries. Such permeable boundaries did not prevent its developing a system of distinctive values consisting of a Bahá'í administrative structure and a stricter moral code. It is this openness that allowed members to maintain life-long commitments to the new faith.

No findings about the social and cultural adaptation of new religious movements in host societies are complete without recognizing the inter-



national dimensions that provide the larger context of such movements. The theme of religious singleness should not blind us from recognizing the important role that the international scope of new religious movements play in their adaptation to Western (and non-Western) settings.

### **The International Context of Contemporary Non-Western Religions**

A study of the Canadian Bahá'í community reinforces the vital importance of considering minority religions as an expression of their international scope. Such an approach implies an extensive reconsideration of the study of unconventional religions, or cults,<sup>15</sup> which can occur by importation from another society. As some scholars have already indicated, a religious group can be a "cult in one society while being a conventional faith in another—Hinduism is a cult in the United States and Christianity is a cult in India" (Finke and Stark 1992, 295). While focusing only on the character of an unconventional religion in a local setting, we may fail to see that its international ramifications are what count: we would be mistaken to believe that the relevance of the presence of a local 'chapter' of such a religion in, let us say, Flin Flon, Manitoba, is determined by its small size, rather than its importance as an outpost of a vast, expanding international religious organization.

Most importantly, however, the contemporary study of new religious movements requires us to extend our boundaries to take in non-Christian movements, and to do so in an international context. Robbins and Robertson (1991, 320), in discussing the ideological context of the "scientific study of religion," suggest that such an approach was articulated in an era of relative religious non-controversiality, whereby non-Christian religions were "assumed to be connected with a marginal bohemian intelligentsia." In their view, such an approach continues to pervade the scientific study of religion. A further hindrance, according to Melton (1991, 5), is the fact that studies of new religious movements inadvertently created the impression that the "new religions were nothing more than a more or less interesting product of the social upheavals of the 1960s." The slow growth of new religions, moreover, reinforced that impression.

The current spread of new religious movements into small communities across the globe, as frontiers of internationally coordinated plans and programs, should alert us to the importance of studying the process by which new religious movements become grafted to their host societies. The need to look at them from an international perspective makes it imperative to 'delocalize' our understanding of new religious movements. It is the advent of rapid travel and instant international communication, not the perception that the viability of movements should be measured by their local strength, that provides us with the *bona fide* context for the study of these new religious movements.<sup>16</sup>

## Endnotes

1. For general histories of the Bahá'í Faith, see Hatcher and Martin (1984) and Smith (1987).
2. A 'Spiritual Assembly' is the Bahá'í local governing council. It consists of nine members, elected annually, by secret ballot, from among the adult believers, to govern the administrative affairs of the respective Bahá'í community. Nominations and electioneering are strictly prohibited. A national spiritual assembly governs the affairs of a country's Bahá'í community.
3. The Bahá'í Writings prohibit Bahá'ís from taking part in partisan politics, but encourage them individually to exercise their full civic rights and duties, such as voting, etc.
4. For a survey of the literature that does exist on this, see van den Hoonaard 1996; likewise, see the same work for a more extensive account of methodological issues in transplant studies.
5. In recent years, however, a number of studies on Bahá'í communities elsewhere in the world have added to the growing field of Bahá'í studies. The Bahá'í movement has been examined in India, the United States, New Zealand, and Denmark (for sources, see van den Hoonaard 1996). As for the Canadian Bahá'í community, memoirs have either not yet been written by Canadian Bahá'ís, or are just now being put on paper. While there are two major doctoral studies underway, there are only several unpublished regional and national histories, often relying on secondary sources (again, for sources see van den Hoonaard 1996). This dearth is reinforced by the scattered and unorganized nature of the National Bahá'í Archives in Canada.
6. It is not unusual to have as much as a 75% female membership in new religious movements, although successful movements appear not to over-recruit females (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 416). The under-recruitment of males, Stark and Bainbridge found (1985, 416), leads to a situation where much conversion will be necessary just for replacement, let alone growth. As well, as long as women have less status than men, the movement will also "suffer lower status, and fail to penetrate into the social mainstream" (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 417). Stark and Bainbridge's infelicitous choice of words when they speak of women who "enjoy [emphasis mine] less status than men" (1985, 417) partially underscores the difficulty of removing unconscious biases and figures of speech, despite good intentions.
7. "Early" in this article refers to the pre-1927 period in the Canadian Bahá'í community when Bahá'í membership criteria were not yet well defined.
8. The loss of Bahá'í documents and vital papers through this process of attrition is of primary consequence for researchers.
9. In technology, I cite the example Paul Dealy, who at the turn of the century invented a means to dispose of ashes from train steam engines. In social reform, I cite the examples of Honoré Jaxon (the former secretary of Louis Riel) and Dr.

Rose Henderson (a prominent educator and social worker in the first third of the twentieth century). May Maxwell should also be cited, although, unlike these other two, she remained a Bahá'í for the full length of her life and was active on the front of removing racism and in the promotion of social measures in the field of education, poverty, and health.

10. Wyman offers us the view, based on her anthropological study of an American Bahá'í community, that contemporary Bahá'ís regard their religion in the same manner as the dominant main-stream culture: religion is property of individuals; it does not exist outside them (Wyman 1985, 167). Some religionists would disagree with Wyman's assessment (see, e.g., Quinn 1995).

11. Deborah K. van den Hoonaard is currently (1996) collecting materials for a study on the Jewish experience in the Bahá'í community.

12. Such an emphasis on individualism, however, differs in the Bahá'í religion from Wallis' conception of "epistemological individualism" (Wallis 1975, 41) which "leaves the determination of what constitutes acceptable doctrine in the hands of the member." Moreover, the idea of the *Covenant* is a pervasive one for Bahá'ís which leaves the determination of doctrinal matters vested in the hands of Abdu'l-Bahá or his designated successor, Shoghi Effendi. The idea of members determining doctrine is quite foreign to Bahá'ís.

13. O'Toole's comments are insightful: "Members would gain satisfaction from disguising failure: small, in-house meetings which resulted in a handful of attendees (mostly members); emphasis on the 'energy and diligence' of those spreading the word (rather than the results); a stress on the 'potential' effect of a particular action. Even activities were destined to fail: the targeting of anonymous audiences in parking lots with traditionalistic, uneconomical, and unpromising leaflets, and the calculated avoidance of strategic targets. Political sects seem primarily concerned with keeping the *status quo*, despite their claims to strive for growth" (1975, 170).

14. For a discussion on this aspect of wider societal relationships, see Stark and Bainbridge (1985) and Johnson (1977).

15. Finke and Stark (1992, 295) use the term 'cult' in a technical rather than pejorative sense. While a sect represents conventional faith, a cult is an "unconventional religion." See also Stark and Bainbridge (1985, 489).

16. This paper is based on sections of the author's book, *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898-1948* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, forthcoming 1996), and is a revision of the one presented on my behalf by Dr. Anne Pearson at the Annual Meetings of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Montreal, June 1995. I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a research grant in support of my research and the Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme for its subvention.

## Works Cited

- Archer, Mary. 1977. *Global community: A case study of the Houston Bahá'ís*. M.A. Thesis. Department of Sociology. University of Houston.
- . 1980. Organizational dynamics of commitment in ideological groups: Case of the Bahá'ís. Paper Presented at the 55th meeting of the Southwestern Sociological Association. Houston.
- Beckford, James A. 1975. Two contrasting types of sectarian organization. In *Sectarianism: Analysis of religious and non-religious sects*. Ed. Roy Wallis. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- . 1982. Beyond the pale: Cults, culture and conflict. In *New religious movements: A perspective for understanding society*. Ed. Eileen Barker. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Bird, Frederick, and William Reimer. 1983. Participation rates in new religious and para-religious movements. In *Of gods and men*. Ed. Eileen Barker. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Brym, Robert, and William Shaffir, eds. 1993. *The Jews in Canada*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Buck, Christopher. 1991. Bahá'u'lláh as 'World Reformer'. *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 3 (4):23–70.
- Coser, Lewis A., Steven L. Nock, Patricia A. Steffan and Buford Rhea. 1987. *Introduction to sociology*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Coward, Harold, and Leslie Kawamura, eds. 1978. *Religion and ethnicity*. Calgary, AB, and Waterloo, ON: Institute for the Humanities and Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Crysdale, Stewart, and Les Wheatcroft, eds. 1976. *Religion in Canadian society*. Toronto: Macmillan.
- Ellwood, Robert S., Jr. 1985. Introduction. In *New religious movements in the United States and Canada: A critical assessment and annotated bibliography*. Comp. Diane Choquette. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Fallding, Harold. 1978. Mainline protestantism in Canada and the United States: An overview. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 3 (2):141–60.
- Finke, Roger and Rodney Stark. 1992. *The churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and losers in our religious economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Gelberg, Steven J. 1991. The call of the Lotus-Eyes Lord: The fate of Krishna consciousness in the West. In *When prophets die: The postcharismatic fate of new religious movements*. Ed. Timothy Miller. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Hatcher, William S., and Douglas Martin. 1984. *The Bahá'í faith: The emerging global religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

- Heller, Wendy, and Hoda Mahmoudi. 1991. Altruism and extensivity in the Bahá'í religion. *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 4 (4):45-57.
- Hiller, Harry. 1978. Continentalism and the third force in religion. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 3:183-207.
- Jacobs, Janet L. 1991. Gender and power in new religious movements: A feminist discourse on the scientific study of religion. *Religion* 21:345-56.
- Johnson, Benton. 1977. Sociological theory and religious truth. *Sociological Analysis* 38 (4):368-88.
- Kent, Stephen A. 1993. New religious movements. In *The sociology of religion in Canada: A Canadian focus*. Ed. W. E. Hewitt. Toronto: Butterworths.
- McCarthy, J.D., and Mayer Zald. 1977. Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (May):1212-39.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 1992. *Religion: The social context*. 3d ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Melton, J. Gordon. 1991. Introduction: When prophets die: The succession crisis in new religions. In *When prophets die: The postcharismatic fate of new religious movements*. Ed. Timothy Miller. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Mickler, Michael L. 1991. When the prophet is yet living: A case study of the Unification Church. In *When prophets die: The postcharismatic fate of new religious movements*. Ed. Timothy Miller. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Mullins, Mark. 1989. *Religious minorities in Canada: A sociological study of the Japanese experience*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- O'Toole, Roger. 1975. Sectarianism in politics: Case studies of Maoists and De Leonists. In *Sectarianism: Analysis of religious and non-religious sects*. Ed. Roy Wallis. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Quinn, Wendy. 1995. The subject replies: A response to the study on American Bahá'í discourse and social networks. Unpublished. Department of Clinical Psychology, Antioch New England Graduate School.
- Robbins, Thomas, and Roland Robertson. 1991. Studying religion today: Controversiality and 'objectivity' in the sociology of religion. *Religion* 21:319-37.
- Ruff, Ivan Julian. 1974. Bahá'í—the invisible community. *New Society* 29 (Sept. 12):665-8.
- Schoenfeld, Stuart. 1978. The Jewish religion in North America: Canadian and American comparisons. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 3 (2):209-31.
- Shoghi Effendi. 1974. *World order of Bahá'u'lláh*. 2d rev. ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Smith, Peter. 1987. *The Báb and Bahá'í religions: From messianic Shi'ism to a world religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stark, Rodney, and William Sims Bainbridge. 1985. *The future of religion: Secular-*

- ization, revival, and cult formation. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stockman, Robert H. 1985. *The Bahá'í faith in America: Origins, 1892–1900*, Vol. 1. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- . 1995. *The Bahá'í faith in America, 1900–1912*, Vol. 2. Oxford: Georg Ronald.
- Turner, Ralph H., and Lewis M. Killian. 1987. *Collective behavior*. 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Universal House of Justice. 1973. *The seven-year plan: 1979–1986*. Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre Publications.
- van den Hoonaard, W. C. 1984. World views and the shape of communities. *World Order* 18 (3):35–41.
- . 1996 *The origins of the Bahá'í community of Canada, 1898–1948*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press (forthcoming).
- Wallis, Roy. The cult and its transformation. In *Sectarianism: Analysis of religious and non-religious sects*. Ed. Roy Wallis. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- . 1984. *The elementary forms of the new religious life*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Walsh, H. H. 1963. A Canadian christian tradition. In *The churches and the Canadian experience: A faith and order study of the christian tradition*. Ed. John Webster Grant. Toronto: Ryerson.
- Westhues, Kenneth. 1976. Religious organization in Canada and the United States. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 17:206–25.
- Whitworth, John, and Martin Shiels. 1982. From across the black water: Two imported varieties of Hinduism. In *New religious movements: A perspective for understanding society*. Ed. Eileen Barker. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Wyman, June R. 1985. Becoming a Bahá'í: Discourse and social networks in an American religious movement. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University, Department of Anthropology.