

Religious Pluralism and New Religious Movements – Example of Bahá'í Religious Community

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1. Historical Oversight of Bahá'í Faith

Development of Bahá'í faith started in the city Shiraz on southwestern part of Iran. In year 1844 young merchant Mirza Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819-1859) gathered a group of disciples and proclaimed himself to be Báb ("doors" to the Hidden Imam of Shi'a). There were eighteen disciples, all of them Shi'i Muslims, which Báb called "Letters of the Living". Bab claimed that he will fulfill many Islamic prophecies and that the meaning of his existence and his main mission was annunciation of "He whom God shall make manifest", the prophet which will lead mankind to an era of peace and whose name will be Bahá'u'lláh. Soon afterward begun the repression of Iranian state towards Bahá'í movement. In less than a year after Báb's proclamation started a lawsuit for one of Báb's emissary. He was convicted for heresy and apostasy and was sentenced to death. In 1848 teaching of Báb was proclaimed by its followers as new religion. This has provoked Shah to send 6000 troops and canon batteries against of 500 Babis which have hidden near Caspian in the shrine Shaykh Tabarsí. In May 1849 starved Bábis surrender believing to the given promise that they will stay alive but Shah did not keep his promise and massacred them (Momen, 2005). Prosecutions continued on north and south of Iran and culminated in 1850 when Iranian Prime Minister ordered execution of imprisoned Báb to stop the spreading of Bahá'í. After Báb's death movement fragmented. One group followed Mirza Yahya Nuri known as Sobh-e Azal ("Morning of Eternity"). This fragmentation caused returning of one part of Bábis into mainstream Shi'ism. Followers of Sobh-e Azal formed a religious group known as Azalis. It is estimated that this group is dying out (Berry, 2004).

1866 Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri, older half brother of Sobh-e Azal, had proclaimed himself for Man-yuzhiruhu'llah – "He whom God shall make manifest", the successor of Báb. According to Báb's teaching his successor will be Bahá'u'lláh (Glory of God). Bahá'u'lláh was pursued and exiled several times from Teheran to Baghdad, from Baghdad to Istanbul and finally stopped on north of Haifa (nowadays Izrael) where Otoman governor abolished Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment. During his prison time Bahá'u'lláh wrote over 15 thousand texts among which is Kítáb-i-Agdas (The Most Holy Book). Bahá'í's believe that Bahá'u'lláh is fulfilled expectance of God's annunciation for all religions in the world – that Bahá'u'lláh is fifth incarnation of

Buddha, reincarnation of Krishna, Messiah for Jews, and returned Christ for Christians.

Bahá'u'lláh's successor was his son Abbas Effendi known as Abdu'l-Baha'. Abdu'l-Baha' preached across Africa, Europe and North America and proclaimed Bahá'u'lláh's message of unity and social justice to church congregations, peace associations, syndicate, scholars, journalists, government officials.

After Abdu'l-Baha' death, his grandson Shoghi Effendi gain a lawsuit at British Court in 1922 and inherited the right of leadership of Bahá'í religion. Afterwards Bahá'í founded their world center in Haifa.

Today Bahá'í's live and have their organizations in 221 countries all over the world. It is estimated that there is over 7 million followers of Bahá'í faith in over 1820 different ethnic groups (Barret et al., 2001).

2. Organizational Structure of Bahá'í Religion

After the death of Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í's spread all over the world and in accordance with his scriptures founded central body – Universal House of Justice. This body was elected by national administrative bodies from all over the world. Organizational structure of this religion reclines on the system of local, national and international administration.

Leading body is Universal House of Justice which is consisted of 9 members. Members are elected every 5 years by National Spiritual Councils from all over the world. Universal House of Justice as central body in the organizational structure is sited in Haifa, Israel. This body has the right to make decisions about the matters that are not embraced in the Holy Scriptures. Its authority derives from the Holy Scriptures and the authority is infallible and presents institutional founding of Gods kingdom (Marinović Bobinac, Marinović Jerolimov et al. 2008 – *in print*).

In 1868 Universal House of Justice establishes Continental Counselors whose main goal was enabling future performance of specific functions of preservation and expansion of action that “Hand of the Cause of God” had. “Hand of the Cause of God” was a group of Bahá'í believers to whom this title was appointed from Bahá'u'lláh, Abdu'l-Baha' or Shoghi Effendi. There were 50 of them in the history of Bahá'í religion. Continental Counselors function is to protect and promote Bahá'í faith. There are 81 Counselor world wide and they are appointed for 5 years in that body. Nine more Counselors are settled in Haifa in International Teaching centre of Bahá'í which is the body that coordinates Counselors world wide (Esslemont, 1998).

National Spiritual Assemblies is an administrative body composed of 9 members elected every year in each country. Members have to be full age, that means older than 21 year of age.

Local Spiritual Assemblies are also administrative bodies composed of 9 full aged members elected every year.

National Spiritual Assembly and Local Spiritual Assembly are engaged in issues important for development and well being of community (either local or national).

Members elected in these bodies are secretly chosen and do not omit any campaign because they consider to have a great honor to be chosen in these bodies.

Bahá'ís believe that this organizational system has its purpose. It is believed that organizational structure of Bahá'ís ensures real and permanent unity within people of different races, classes, interests, characteristics and inherited beliefs. This administrative structure by its significance presents a scientific approach to cooperation and in its application provides better and higher type of morality which amplitude encompasses whole world (Esselmont, 1998.).

In Bahá'í religion there is no professional clergy. At the beginning of the development of Bahá'í religion there was a significant number of believers who were uneducated and because of that professional clergy existed, but as the educational structure of believers had its upward growth, organizational structure changed and professional clergy vanished.

3. Theological Teaching of Bahá'í Faith

Bahá'í religion is monotheistic religion. In Bahá'í religion it is believed that God in time to time sends his prophets and messengers on earth so that they would communicate with human race. These prophets and messengers were Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad. Last two that God sent were Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Each of these prophets and messengers reveals himself in certain social, historical and cultural context. All of them continue the teachings of precedent prophet in the purpose to soar people in "new spiritual heights and bringing moral and social teachings designed for a particular age" (Hunt, S. J., 2003:123).

This belief emanates three fundamental principles which encompass believing and ideology of Bahá'í movement: unity of God, unity of faith and unity of mankind. Theological principle of unity of God refers to transcendent God as the only God and as a creator and keeper of life in total. From this principle arises central ideological concept of progressive revelation. From the Bahá'í vision of global unity, ensues the belief that all world religions are just evolutionary cycles in God's plan of unification of the world. Therefore Bahá'ís believe that truths of all religion are the same but that the differences come out of social laws which are different because of historical needs for new moral and social codex so that mankind could be unified.

From this principle comes out belief that God has created all humans and that the goal is to unify humans in one family. Bahá'ís believe that this is the highest level of social evolution on earth.

4. Social and Individual Issues in Bahá'í Religion

Bahá'í faith teaches that the first condition of social life is the ability of individuals to discern good from evil, truth from lie and to view the world in right proportions. Human selfishness is the main cause of social catastrophes and the biggest barrier for

social progress. So the main goal for Bahá'í believer is to submit personal interests to mankind.

Bahá'ís believe that the political organizations have to correspond to the organizational structure of Bahá'í community – governance through local, national and international organizations. Politicians must never rule violently and with oppression. They have to obey all laws strictly and the main goal of their governance has to be human security, welfare, wealth and peace. People who are governed have to live in accordance to the law and have to be loyal to righteous government. Political leaders have to be chosen only if they are suitable for that position and it must not be determined by their socio-economic status (Esselmont, 1998).

Concerning economical issues Bahá'í faith teaches that the most important thing is to establish economical relationship between wealthy classes and needy classes in way that wealth, as well as poverty has to be restricted. Mechanism for realization of this relation is the principle of financial subsidiarity in a way that all the incomes that are exceeding necessary costs have to be subjected to taxes. One of most important instructions that Bahá'u'lláh gave is that people have to be useful through their work and that they must not spend their time in idleness and leisure.

Abdu'l-Baha' continuing Bahá'u'lláh teachings spoke about slavery. There should not be any slavery, meaning not just slavery concerning assets but as well as industrial slavery. It is important for workers and capitalists to establish dialog and cooperation otherwise it could lead to conflicts and wars (McElwee Miller, 1974).

In Bahá'í religion a great significance is given to relations between men and women. They have to have equal rights. Women have to benefit from the same rights and privileges, the same access to education and the same possibilities. Founding for this equal relation is universal education. They believe that when women will gain adequate and equal participation in social action, great progress will occur in health, art, peace and respect of life of individual.

For Bahá'í religion education is important social condition, believing that when universal education will be achieved, paradise will occur on earth. Along with education, art is exceptional aspect of social action and Bahá'í believe that people which are in pursue of science and art are in service to mankind and by that serving to God.

In Bahá'í community it is forbidden to consume alcohol and narcotics. All food can be consumed, although they believe that fruits and vegetables will be the only food that will be consumed in the future. Teachings of Bahá'í faith promote moderate way of living due to the ascetic one.

Marriage in Bahá'í religion is monogamous and the wedding ceremony is simplistic – bride and groom in the presence of two witnesses give their vows saying: "We will all, verily, abide by the will of God". Divorce in Bahá'í community is allowed, but with the knowledge of Spiritual Assemblies in way that partners have to wait one year to test the possibility of saving the marriage.

Because of the belief in the harmony of religion and science, Bahá'í faith extremely supports medicine and therefore emphasizes medicine as one of the most noble

professions, but for them it is unacceptable to separate physical from spiritual. Illness has to be treated both – physically and spiritually, although it is all in God's hand.

Regarding the issue of abortion, Bahá'í religion is not strictly determined and there is no strict rules of forbiddance of abortion. They believe that the beginning of life is in the moment of conception and therefore majority of Bahá'ís would not do it (Kourosh and Hosoda, 2007).

According to Bahá'í law it is allowed to donate organs, but it is important that the body is buried and not cremated. Body of the deceased must not be transferred more than one hour from the place of death. It has to be washed and wrapped up in silk or cotton and lay down in coffin made of crystal, rock or solid wood. The coffin with the body must be positioned towards the holiest place – Bahji near Akká in Israel (the place where Bahá'u'lláh died and where his body was buried) (Marinović Bobinac, Marinović Jerolimov et al. 2008 – *in print*).

Bahá'í organization in the world cooperates with United Nations believing that the goal of the UN is unifying the world. Bahá'í International Community as a non-governmental organization of members of Bahá'í faith has a consultative status with UN in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNESCO). During the years Bahá'í International Community established working relations with the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (<http://www.un.org>.)

5. Bahá'í Community as New religious Movement in Croatia¹

Concerning religious situation in Croatia during communism, besides the general negative attitude towards religions and churches, two periods could be differentiated. First one was a period of secularization which lasted until the end of 70's and the beginning of 80's of the last century. Second period was revitalization period from 80's until now. It is clear that this change is influenced by the collapse of communism (Zrinščak, 2006). According to empirical data from the end of the 80's and the beginning of 90's of the last century, the change of position of religious communities in society is traced by the significant increase of traditional religiosity (Aračić, Črpić, Nikodem, 2003.; Cifrić, 2000; Črpić, Zrinščak, 2005; Marinović Bobinac, 2005; Marinović Jerolimov, 1999, 2000, 2005). Although this increase is not present at the same level in all dimensions of religiosity its scope is documented between 30–40%. According to Census in 2001 confessional structure in Croatia was: 87,83% of Roman Catholic Church, 4,42% of Orthodox Church, 2,99% of agnostics and undeclared, 2,22% of not religious, 1,28% of Islamic Religious Community, 0,54%

¹ In this phase of research interviews with members of Local Spiritual Assemblies of Bahá'í community are being conductet, so the information about Bahá'í community in Croatia and some of the general information about Bahá'í religion are gathered from the interviews with leaders.

of Greek Catholic Church, 0,14% of Jehova's Witness, 0,11% of other religions, 0,09% of other protestant churches, 0,08% of Evangelic Church, 0,07% of Adventist Church, 0,04% of Baptist Church, 0,01 Jewish Religious Community, 0,01% Christ's Pentecostal Church and 0,58% of unknown. Unlike the West, revitalization of religion in Croatia does not follow trends of disengaging religion from political society, processes of individualization, detraditionalization and decollectivization in decision making and trend in the increase of religions *a la carte*, that is religious *bricolage*. In Croatia the opposite trends exist: revitalization of religion (which is, widely said, occurring as reaggregation around ecclesiastical institutions), retraditionalization and retotalisation (Vrcan, 2001). Besides the general increase of traditional church religiosity some researches pointed to young, urban and higher educated people as more opened to the different forms of alternative religiosity (Črpić, Jukić, 1998; Marinović Jerolimov, 2006).

The term new religious movements (NRM's) often implies communities which have flourished after The World War II, although some of them existed even in the nineteenth and at the beginning of twentieth century or much earlier (so called old and new sects) (Melton, 2007; Stark, 1979; Bainbridge, 1997; Barker, 1997). Nevertheless, some of NRM's have their sources in the cultures of East but arrive in these areas from the Western cultures and societies where open hostility towards them exists. It is important to notice that general conclusions and remarks about NRM's must not be derived, but in the same time differences (synchronic and diachronic) within the movements must not be neglected (Barker, 1997). With historically existing presence of various religions, religious landscape in Central and Eastern Europe has started to pluralize with the increase of new types of religiosity and spirituality.

In 1928 American journalist Martha Root² came to Croatia and made a contact with one of the most famous political figures in Croatian political history – Stjepan Radić. This was the first time that Bahá'í religion was publicly mentioned in Croatia. During the seventies there were some people who declared themselves to be Bahá'ís, but organized functioning of Bahá'í movement started in the nineties. Missionaries from England and Italy came to Croatia to spread the Bahá'í faith. They started to gather people in Zagreb and Pula. In the beginning Bahá'í community was registered as a non-governmental organization. In 2002 Croatian parliament enact The Law of the legal position of religious communities. In accordance to that law all religious communities that were registered as NGO's up to that date could register as religious community and consume all rights proscribed by the law. In Croatia there are 42 registered religious communities. Bahá'í community in Croatia is satisfied with The Law of the legal position of religious communities and did not have any legal problems during the process of registration. The fact that they had registered as NGO helped them to determine their legal position as a religious community, although the

² Martha Louise Root (1872-1939) was traveling teacher of Bahá'í faith and posthumously named a "Hand of Cause" by Shoghi Effendi.

law imposes the criterion of at least 500 members to register. If Bahá'í community by any chance did not register as NGO it would be impossible to gain legal position provided by the law.

According to the Bahá'í census in 2006 there is approximately 150 followers (see table 1). They are gathered in Zagreb, Rijeka, Pula, Pazin and Velika Gorica. Bahá'í community in Croatia did not organize National Spiritual Assemblies, only Local Spiritual Assemblies in Zagreb and Pula. They assume that in the near future it will be possible to organize National Spiritual Assemblies. In comparison to other countries of former Yugoslavia, Croatian Bahá'í community with its organization and actions has developed furthest. Community financing is allowed only by voluntary contributions and the amounts of the contributions as well as contributors are not revealed. It is not accepted to take any financial contributions outside of the community.

Table 1. Number of adherents of Bahá'í religion in some countries (source: Barrett, D. et al. (2001). *World Christian Encyclopedia*. New York: Oxford University Press.)

Countries/ Years	Croatia	Slovenia	Bulgaria	Czech Rep.	Italy	Slovakia	Poland	Romania	Eastern Europe	World
1990	-	100	600	820	5.000	400	450	1.700	19.310	5,676,287
2000	150*	297	657	950	5.681	667	504	1.843	21.811	7.111.661

*this data is from census conducted by Bahá'í organization in Croatia.

Activities of Bahá'í community in Croatia are dominantly oriented towards the needs of community. They have made programs of religious education for children and adults, educate members to study holy scripts from other religions, prayer meetings, spiritual courses for children and adults, public lectures and publishing. Croatian Bahá'í community cooperates with other Bahá'í communities in other countries, especially in the region (organization of summer schools). With the Universal House of Justice cooperate when there are some new publishing projects.

Center of Bahá'í community in Croatia is in Zagreb in one small house in which believers gather and practice their religion. They are satisfied with this house, although they do not have the possibility to organize public lectures in their center.³

³ Researching Bahá'í community in Croatia I will continue my work on the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb within the project *Minor religious communities as the actors of religious change in Croatian society* (principal investigator Ankica Marinović Bobinac, Ph.D.). In the next phase I will conduct survey among members (with questionnaire) and participant observation hoping to gain information that will help me: to explore relations within community per se (hierarchical relation between leaders and members, relation between members, fluctuation of members); to explore specificity of community in relation to profane surroundings; to explore beliefs, practice of believers, activities and values of community;

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