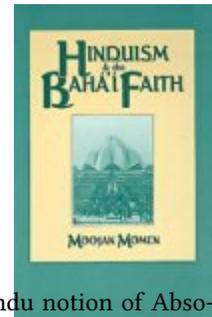


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Moojan Momen. *Hinduism and the Baha'i Faith*. London: George Ronald, 1990. xii + 84 pp.
\$7.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-85398-299-9.

Reviewed by William N. Garlington (Independent scholar)
Published on H-Bahai (July, 2000)



In the final chapter of *The World's Religions* Huston Smith asks the question as to how the varieties of human cultural experience that we call the world religions can be patterned. He proceeds to outline several alternative answers, among which is the view that "...holds that the religions are all basically alike. Differences are acknowledged but, according to this second view, they are incidental in comparison to the great enduring truths on which the religions unite" (385). It is in the spirit of this approach that Moojan Momen's short book, *Hinduism and the Baha'i Faith* (which is clearly intended as an aid to attracting Hindu converts, and not an academic inquiry) is written. But whereas certain advocates of inclusivism may derive their conclusions from philosophical or anthropological analysis, the source for Dr. Momen's position is a religious doctrine: namely the belief held in the Baha'i Faith that the great religious traditions of the world come from the same source. In Baha'i terminology this doctrine is referred to as the Oneness of Religion or "progressive revelation."

Hinduism and the Baha'i Faith can be divided into three essential sections: 1) a comparison of Hindu and Baha'i metaphysical and ethical concepts; 2) a brief description of Baha'i social teachings, ritual, and community structure; and 3) a short history of the Baha'i Faith. As it is the first of these sections that is most compelling from a religious studies perspective, this review will focus on its contents.

The basic structure that Dr. Momen applies to his comparative analysis involves taking a specific Hindu doctrine and its Baha'i counterpart, giving a brief summary of both concepts, which includes supporting quotations from selected Hindu and Baha'i texts, and then drawing out the essential conclusions. In this fashion,

he compares, among others, the Hindu notion of Absolute Reality (Brahman) with the Baha'i concept of God; the Hindu concept of avatar with the Baha'i doctrine of manifestation; the Hindu principle of dharma with Baha'i teachings on divine and social law; the Hindu paths of liberation (karma, jnana and bhakti yoga) with Baha'i approaches to salvation; and the Hindu belief in a future avatar (Kalki) with Baha'i claims to eschatological fulfillment. To elaborate on but one example, Dr. Momen informs the reader that while in Hindu scriptures it is claimed that the essence of Brahman can never be known or understood by human beings, it is also maintained that this same Brahman periodically reveals itself during periods of decline to special individuals (avatars). Reference is then made to the ten Vaishnavite avatars and the Bhagavad Gita.

In a similar fashion Dr. Momen cites Baha'u'llah as having stated that while God, or the unknown Essence of Reality, is beyond human comprehension, "the Source of Infinite Grace has caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple [manifestations] and to be made manifest unto all men that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being and tell of the subtleties of His Imperishable Essence" (p. 7).

The strength of Dr. Momen's approach is that it allows him to draw out large generalities for comparison and thus fortify his essential belief in the commonality of the spirit of truth found in both religions. There are drawbacks to this approach, however, and they must be mentioned. The first is that specific differences within the larger conceptual framework are often passed over as insignificant. To give an example from the manifestation/avatar comparison, within Hinduism avatars are

not generally seen as founders of new religions. (Indeed only three of the nine are historical persons, the others being mythical beings.) Rather they are commonly depicted as examples of Vishnu incarnating himself for the purpose of combating a specific evil, usually in the form of a demon. Even the Buddha, who is among the traditional nine avatars, is not seen by Hindus (when they deal with him at all) as having formulated a new religion. Furthermore, all of the avatars are of Indian origin. There is no mention of the Semitic prophets to which Baha'is give great prominence.

The second limitation to Dr. Momen's approach is his selective use of Hindu texts. Given the vast range of Hindu religious literature, selection will always be a problem for anyone involved in comparative analysis, for this range allows the writer to find examples of just about anything and then conclude that these examples are representative of Hinduism. To be fair to Dr. Momen, he recognizes from the beginning that Hinduism "is not merely a religion; it is a collection of religious traditions," (p. ix) and that: "It is hard to find any concepts or doctrines about which all the strands of Hinduism are agreed." (p. ix) Still, he often uses texts as if he had forgotten this admission, quoting from one source to support a specific point and then leaving that text when the support for another argument is not evident. For instance, The Upanishads are cited to show that Hinduism has an understanding of God that is highly abstract and transcendent, but these texts are looked past when it comes to the idea of reincarnation [more about this doctrine shortly]. Yet despite these shortcomings, the fact that there are many overarching similarities between certain Hindu and Baha'i doctrines, gives Dr. Momen's comparisons a certain degree of legitimacy. It is when the comparisons are not so easily found that more serious difficulties arise.

Three aspects of Hindu tradition that do not compare well with Baha'i teachings are idol worship, caste [jati], and reincarnation. Accordingly, when dealing with these examples Dr. Momen introduces non-comparative categories into his analysis. For the sake of this review I will call these categories "evolutionary" and "degenerative" respectively.

An "evolutionary" critique argues that certain religious institutions and ideas which were valid during an earlier period of cultural development are no longer feasible or desirable. Historical progress has rendered them either outmoded or dysfunctional. Such a critique is employed by Dr. Momen when he discusses idol worship

and caste. Concerning the former he writes:

Baha'is believe that this is the day when mankind has reached its maturity. All of humanity should be educated. As a result of this education and this maturity mankind no longer needs to use idols as a way of helping to form ideas of God. (p.11)

Although this view is softened by comparing idol worship in Hinduism to the names of God in Baha'i, the attempt to correlate divine imminence as exemplified in Hindu iconography with the abstract Word falls flat and fails. Regarding the institution of caste we find:

The laws and rules of jati were once very important as they acted to stabilize society and thus ensured prosperity and progress for all. But the Baha'i Faith teaches that society is always changing. So what was once a factor that was a benefit to society may, at a later stage, become a block to the further progress of that society. Today, we see this happening in India. The system of jati . . . has now become a major factor holding back the progress and development of India. (p. 22)

One danger of an evolutionary critique is that it can easily slide into a type of triumphalism whereby one religion views itself as modern, and therefore superior to another less-evolved religion. Dr. Momen attempts to protect himself from this shift by claiming support for his position from both traditional texts and reformers from within the Hindu tradition. Thus he cites the Laws of Manu as supportive of an evolutionary dharma (p. 23) and quotes such "modern" Hindus as Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, and Ramakrishna on the evils of caste (p. 22). While a tack of this nature can soften potential triumphalism, it is open to the charge of selectivity. Moreover, by failing to take into account context and nuance, it can at times be misleading. Such is the case regarding the above mentioned reformers. To take just one example, because Dr. Momen does not make a distinction between varna (class) and jati (caste), Gandhi's quoted statement ["Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is harmful to both spiritual growth and national growth" (p. 22)] can lead an uninformed reader to conclude that the Mahatma was opposed to occupational restriction based on birth, or that he favored the elimination of marriage and commensal boundaries based on social groups. As J. T. F. Jordens has pointed out in *Gandhi's Religion: A Homespun Shawl*, Gandhi considered the traditional four divisions of society [Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra] fundamental to social order and under the eternal law of heredity. (p. 98) In this vein he viewed the restrictions on interdining and intermarriage as benefi-

cial. What he opposed was the fragmentation over the centuries of these four groups into numerous sub-groups [jati] and the ritual abuses associated with such fragmentation. Specifically, he saw untouchability as a blight brought about by caste ideals of ritual purity. Consequently to suggest that Gandhi's position was akin to Baha'i social norms is unwarranted.

In addition to an evolutionary analysis, Dr. Momen also makes use of a "degenerative" critique which posits that specific religious institutions or ideas were not part and parcel of the original tradition but were later additions or accumulations associated with decline or the lack of understanding. This approach is used most forcefully in conjunction with Hindu and Baha'i eschatological claims, but it is also hinted at in the brief evaluation of reincarnation where the author begins by stating that it is not a concept found in the earliest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas (p. 31). The statement is immediately followed by references to "modern" Hindu thinkers and movements who rejected the idea. Consequently, while both a claim to reincarnation's illogical nature and an explanation of the Baha'i doctrine of the return of qualities are also introduced, they are presented within a degenerative framework.

As stated above, the approach is more evident in Dr. Momen's discussion of Hindu prophecies. He begins this section by claiming that Hindus are awaiting the coming of the Kalki Avatar (10th avatar). Two long passages from the Bhagavata Purana are then presented which describe the Kali Yuga, or period of decline, often associated with this eschatological figure. These passages highlight the degraded accumulations that parade in the name of religion during the dark age. To support an identification of the Kali Yuga with the contemporary situation, Dr. Momen then quotes the modern sage Swami Vivekananda to the effect that no greater darkness has ever enveloped India (p. 35). The section concludes with the claim that Baha'is believe Baha'u'llah to be the Kalki Avatar who will usher in the return to righteousness associated with the Golden Age (Kṛta Yuga).

Coming from outside the evaluated tradition, the degenerative critique also has the potential for being seen as a form of triumphalism. Here superiority is derived from the assumption implied in the critique that it represents pure, undegenerative religion. As mentioned ear-

lier, even the use of internal texts is not a guarantee of protection against such a charge. In addition, there are two structurally oriented problems with the approach that demand our attention. First, degenerative critiques often lack consistency. Although the doctrine of reincarnation may not be found in the Vedas, neither is a well-developed monotheism or the doctrine of avatars. Second, critiques of this nature are prone to misappropriating the aims of the protests found in traditional texts by dialectically projecting back on to those texts, if only by implication, the content of their own developmental positions. Thus, while it is true that one can find degenerative critiques in certain passages of the Puranas, it is to the rigidly class structured and purity oriented ideals of Puranic Hinduism, and not the more "liberal" attitudes of the Baha'i social teachings, that they speak. The return of the Kṛta Yuga will be a return to pristine Hinduism as seen at that time. I would imagine that the Puranic commentators would have been aghast at the thought of the mixing of castes or the equality of men and women!

At the beginning of *Hinduism and the Baha'i Faith* Dr. Momen announces that Baha'is do not believe that the Baha'i Faith has come to supplant Hinduism. Rather one of its aims is to take the tradition on to a further stage of its development. (xi) To the extent that his book has opened up an arena for both current and future dialogue between the Hindu and Baha'i traditions, it must be measured a success. Moreover, its attempts to find a common ground of religious truths shared by the traditions can only help in this enterprise. Where differences are noted and critiqued, it can only be hoped that such analyses will produce among its readers (of whatever religious or secular affiliation) what Huston Smith has termed the wisdom of listening. Without listening, the world is left with a myriad of loud assertions, and even louder counter assertions, to which the fundamentalisms of our time – including certain strains of militant Hindutva and of theocratic Bahá'ism – readily attest. In Smith's own words: "Those who listen work for peace, a peace built not on ecclesiastical hegemonies but on understanding and mutual concern" (p. 390).

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-bahai>

Citation: William N. Garlington. Review of Momen, Moojan, *Hinduism and the Baha'i Faith*. H-Bahai, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4352>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.