Chapter 9

THE RELIGIOUS CONSTRUCTION OF A GLOBAL IDENTITY

An Ethnographic Look at the Atlanta Bahá'í Community

MICHAEL MCMULLEN

The Bahá'í faith began in 1844 in Persia with the advent of the Bábí movement founded by Siyyid `Alí Muhammad (known as the Báb), who foretold the coming of a prophet who would fulfill all the promises of the world's religious traditions and inaugurate the long hoped-for Kingdom of God. In 1863, Mírzá Husayn `Alí, who became known as Bahá'u'lláh to Bahá'ís, declared himself to be that promised one. After suffering imprisonment and exile throughout the Middle East, Bahá'u'lláh died in 1892. The Bahá'í movement was then governed by Bahá'u'lláh's son, `Abdu'l-Bahá until 1921, followed by Bahá'u'lláh's great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, the "Guardian" of the Bahá'í faith until 1957. After Rabbani's death, the first Universal House of Justice was elected in 1963, which continues to govern the world's 5.5 million Bahá’ís from its global headquarters in Haifa, Israel.²

The World Congress of a Global Religion

During Thanksgiving week 1992, more than 27,000 Bahá'ís from 180 countries gathered in New York City to celebrate the Second Bahá'í World Congress. It marked the centennial anniversary of the death of the Bahá'í faith's prophet-founder and assembled the largest gathering
in the Bahá’í’s 153-year history. The events of the World Congress captured the symbols and rhetoric of the global community and world civilization envisioned in Bahá’í scripture.3

Upon entering the convention center, Bahá’ís filed past dozens of brightly colored, quilt-sized banners proclaiming verses from Bahá’í scripture and bearing symbols of cultures from around the globe. Once seated, many believers donned headset receivers that translated the proceedings in English into Spanish, French, Japanese, or Persian. On the front stage, four large projection screens surrounded the lectern.

According to many attendants, the first day’s procession of Bahá’í representatives of the races and nations of the world set the tone for the week and remained one of the Congress’ most meaningful rituals. As music played, each representative—arrayed in native or traditional dress—walked down the aisle to the center stage of the convention center. It took more than a half-hour for the ceremony, which concluded with a sustained standing ovation that celebrated the diversity of humanity and brought tears to the eyes of many in the crowd. In addition, prayers were read in a variety of languages at each session; using native instruments and songs, music was performed in Persian, Chinese, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, African, Indian, and African American gospel styles. The event culminated in live satellite broadcasts from the Bahá’í World Center in Haifa, Israel, and from Bahá’í centers in Western Samoa, Argentina, Romania, India, Russia, Kenya, Panama, Malaysia, and Australia.

During the four days of meetings, Bahá’ís experienced unity in diversity, a central Bahá’í spiritual principle, as the sounds, sights, and symbols of the World Congress reminded them of their common allegiance to Bahá’u’lláh. Worshipping in the presence of more than 27,000 fellow Bahá’ís from all walks of life reinforced their hope for a united planet. For one 43-year-old Bahá’í from Atlanta who attended the Congress, it strengthened his Bahá’í identity as one who celebrates unity in diversity:

I think it gave me a little real appreciation of the global perspective because I had never been to an international event before. I saw people from all over... I think it’s given me... a heightened awareness or appreciation for the changeable power in the faith, the power to actually change the world. That maybe comes from seeing folks from all over.

The display of diverse language, culture, and nationality illustrated for participants the vision of global unity and peace outlined in Bahá’í scripture. This global solidarity will come about, Bahá’ís feel, through adherence to a common ideology and recognition of a common global authority institutionalized at the local, national, and international levels of social life.

This chapter highlights the individual and collective rituals that link local Bahá’í community life with a globalized ideology and network of institutions. The World Congress gives a vivid example of how participation in a global ritual reinforces universal Bahá’í identity. But I argue that the practices of local community life function in this way as well, linking the local and global. Local practices particularize a universal identity. My study of the Atlanta Bahá’í community allows me to examine this linking of universal and particular religious identity.

Globalization and Identity

Roland Robertson has defined globalization as “both the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” (1992:8). Robertson sees globalization as the mechanism by which the world has become a single place—where political, economic, and cultural spheres of life are becoming more and more interdependent. However, the world is not a harmonious, integrated system in Robertson’s view. Historically, this process has been rife with conflict and reactionary movements, and it cannot be attributed to monocular forces like capitalist development (Robertson and Lechner 1985).

Issues of social identity are at the forefront in the cultural analysis of globalization processes. The evolution of the world into an increasingly interdependent system constrains societies and other collectivities to identify and legitimate themselves in relationship to the “global-human condition.” This identification involves the alteration, refraction, or invention of new social identities and a transformation of symbolic and ritual boundaries. Anthony Giddens has said that “transformations in self-identity and globalisation... are the two poles of the dialectic of the local and the global in conditions of high modernity” (1991:32). Particularistic identities are reinforced or transformed by universalizing processes that threaten the “plausibility” of a traditional world view, culture, or sense of individual or collective self. However, at the same time, globalization processes “universalize” and blend identities as travel, communication, and political and economic interactions bring people into regularized patterns of contact. This “particularization
of universalism” and “universalization of particularism” both constitute the globalization phenomenon (see Robertson 1992).

This chapter will focus on the processes whereby a “universalized” Bahá’í ideology gets “particularized” in a local setting. The Bahá’í faith is a unique religious movement responding to globalization processes by creating a worldwide religious identity for its adherents through both ideological and organizational means, systematically linking the practices of a local Bahá’í community with a world center and the ideological coherence and institutional coordination it fosters. An ethnographic study of such a movement reveals the ways in which local and global institutions are actively created, connected, and ordered. It also gives us a detailed account of how attempts at global identity formation become reinforced and lived in local community ritual. Robertson and Lechner (1985:112) point out: “There is of course no shortage of academically produced alternative images of future world order. There is, on the other hand, a paucity of academic discussion of rival images of world order among the movements of our time.” An ethnographic picture of a local Bahá’í community in Atlanta addresses this deficiency and represents one of the relatively unstudied religious responses to globalization processes.

Converting to a Global Faith

The overwhelming majority of Bahá’ís with whom I spoke emphasized two factors vital in their conversion. The first was the character of the Bahá’ís as a diverse group of religious people; and the second was their discontent with other organized religions. The two quotes below are typical of the themes that emerged in many interviews.

My main problem at that age was racism. And I tried to reconcile myself to it over the years, based on belief in Jesus and teachings of the other prophets, and [I knew] this was not of God, but it seemed it was getting stronger. Sometimes it looked like none of the prophets had ever showed up, in terms of the racism that was around. . . . But the main teaching that attracted me was that Bahá’u’l’Bah taught that the whole earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens. God hadn’t taught or created racism. It’s men who instituted that.

Catholicism as I knew it, and even . . . Catholic education as I had had, didn’t permit me to use my own mind and arrive at my own conclusions about a lot of things; and the other was the exclusivity of Christianity and Christ. . . . Anything else was not and could not have been God driven. And I couldn’t accept that.

The Bahá’í emphasis on unity in diversity and the rational and progressive beliefs of the faith drew many of the converts in the Atlanta community.

Unity in Diversity

Social principles that captured the attention of Bahá’í converts included commitment to the elimination of all prejudice, the equality of men and women, universal education, national disarmament, and a federated world government. To find a group with such racial, ethnic, and economic diversity was novel and intriguing for one convert:

There was such a wide range of people there. . . . There were old people, young people and different races and different economic classes and different parts of the country, the globe, and all that—and it looked so peculiar. . . . I remember that was really a shocking experience.

Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, the diversity of nearly all Bahá’í meetings was unusual among religious organizations that were then, and often are still, segregated by class and race (see Roof and McKinney 1987).

A Rational and Progressive Religion

Interviews confirmed not only the “pull” of the diversity within the Bahá’í community, but the “push” resulting from respondents’ disillusionment with their previous religious communities. The Bahá’í faith satisfied many converts’ search for a more logical, progressive religion. Others said that their church or synagogue could not give them satisfactory answers to their questions and that they could no longer participate in what they considered to be a hypocritical or secular institution. One woman said

I left the church (Presbyterian) when I was 13, and, the last Sunday that I went to church, I’d asked the minister after he did his real aggressive sermon, what would happen if a group of people on an island that never
heard of Christ, but they worshiped a rock, and as a consequence of this they treated each other well, and they loved each other and took care of each other. And he said they’d go to hell. And that’s when I left. So, it was a long time before I even thought about religion on a consistent basis again.

A man expressed the same sentiments concerning divisions among the religions:

It is the exclusivity of religions that I think has been the impetus for most of us to look at the Bahá’í faith. Some people appear not to be bothered by the exclusivity of Christianity, or Islam, or whatever, but I think that most of us who have accepted the faith, we really have found that bizarre—that only those of us in this [religious tradition] are “saved.”

Others found their prior religions lacking in spiritual depth or vitality. A psychologist said that he was disillusioned with his Jewish upbringing before he met his wife-to-be, a Bahá’í:

I was pretty much formally distanced from Judaism in a corporate sense.... I slowly developed a disillusionment around Jewish practice.... as we know it in the synagogues and Jewish cultural life.... It was without spirituality.... I was just feeling nothing there was drawing me that was truly meaningful in a core sense, and I just floated away.

One woman described how the Bahá’ís’ spiritual principle of the unity of science and religion brought her into the faith, thus resolving her personal struggle with religion. She related a formative experience in eighth grade, when she had discovered Darwin’s theory of evolution and identified strongly with his scientific quest. When she was finally introduced to the Bahá’í faith as an adult, she saw that for Bahá’ís an evolutionary principle was operating in spiritual matters as well as in biology. Science and religion fit together in harmony within a Bahá’í world view.

For these converts, the Bahá’í faith resolves what Berger (1967) called the problem of plausibility in a pluralistic, globalized world. Not only are various Christian denominations in competition with a secular world view, but, also as a result of globalization processes, Christian groups must now vie for ideological coherence and cohesiveness amid the world’s other religions. One response promotes dogmatism, or an insis-

tence on one true faith. Instead of declaring one religion valid for all time and the others anathema, the Bahá’í faith claims all are valid within a given historical framework or dispensation. This ideology—called “progressive revelation” in Bahá’í scripture—provides adherents with a world view that interprets religious history as a global, evolutionary, and teleological progression of individual and collective maturation revealed from the one God.

In general, Bahá’ís are disillusioned with organized religion, searching for a logical or rational religious faith that makes sense in a globalized, pluralistic world. They are also attracted by either the religious ideology or by the example of unity in diversity found in nearly all Bahá’í meetings. Both the ideology and ritual are critical aspects of Bahá’í identity, reflecting the global world view of this faith. The universal character of the Bahá’í faith provided its initial attraction for “seekers” dissatisfied with their current religious tradition and for the small number of converts with no previous religious affiliation. The unity in diversity required by Bahá’í scripture is manifest in the diversity of racial, income, and previous religious backgrounds from which the Atlanta Bahá’í community has been drawn.

Questionnaire data provide a general demographic profile of Atlanta’s Bahá’í community. The group is racially and ethnically diverse. While one-half of the community identify themselves as white, nearly one-fourth were black or African American, and 13 percent indicated “Persian” and “mixed/other,” respectively. On average, they are well-educated, middle-class professionals. Most are married to other Bahá’ís.

The vast majority of the community were not reared by Bahá’í parents; 70 percent are converts. Of those who converted, more than half of Atlanta’s Bahá’ís are from 12 different Protestant denominations: 16 percent of them were previously Baptist; and 11 percent, Methodist. And, more than 11 percent were originally Roman Catholics before declaring their faith in Bahá’u’lláh. Less than 4 percent converted from a Muslim background, and an equal proportion (2 percent) claim Jewish backgrounds or no religious upbringing. The remainder of respondents—approximately one percent—included Buddhists and Hindus. As occurs in most conversions, many Bahá’í converts first learned of the faith through personal relationships. Of those not growing up as Bahá’ís, the primary source of exposure to the Bahá’í faith was through friends who were themselves Bahá’ís; almost 40 percent of the respondents indicated this source. Twenty-four percent were introduced to the faith by
spouses or other family members; and another 14 percent discovered the faith through more impersonal relations with Bahá’ís (such as a colleague at work, a doctor, a teacher, or even the one woman who learned about the faith through her priest). These results substantiate the importance of interpersonal networks in the conversion process.

Community Observances of a Global Faith

As Geertz (1973) and Durkheim (1965) have noted, religious ritual symbolizes the unity and solidarity of a faith community. Bahá’í scripture discourages overly formalized and dogmatic rituals; their rituals are flexible. Bahá’í rituals reinforce the authority of their organizational system (called the “Administrative Order”) and link them to the global center of their faith. Bahá’í ritual particularizes the universal; a local community and its members live out a global ideology by following the laws of Bahá’í scripture. As a local community engages the universal, Bahá’í practices conform to the contours of the particular cultural topography. The basis for all Bahá’í practices comes from the Kitab-I-Aqdas or Most Holy Book. I will discuss collective observances first, and then personal devotional practices.

The organizational participation of the average Bahá’í is dictated by the rhythm of the Bahá’í calendar. The Bahá’í year is divided into 19 months of 19 days each (totaling 361), with the insertion of extra days (four in an ordinary year, five in a leap year) between the 18th and 19th months to adjust the calendar to the solar year. Each month is named after an “attribute of God”—virtues that Bahá’ís are supposed to acquire (mercy, knowledge, honor). On the first day of each Bahá’í month, Bahá’ís gather for a 19-Day Feast, which is the central worship experience in the Bahá’í faith.

As I arrived at the Atlanta Bahá’í Center for feast, I saw the sign to the right of the doorway proclaiming: “Atlanta Bahá’í Center, Built by Leroy Burns, Sr. as a place for all races to come together and worship.” The first floor is a large meeting room used for potluck dinners and children’s religious classes and is dominated by a six-foot photograph of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa. Along the stairway to the worship service are photos of interracial Bahá’í groups at picnics and classes. Other pictures of Bahá’í shrines in the Holy Land surrounding Haifa decorate the walls, as well as a painting of the Master—`Abdu’l-Bahá, the son of Bahá’u’lláh. Posters on the walls are decorated with popular Bahá’í phrases, such as “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” or “One Planet, One People, Please.”

A prayer read from a Bahá’í prayer book began the service, followed by five to seven members reading from the Writings that had been chosen by the host. Since this particular feast was the Feast of Bahá’ (Glory), all the readings revolved around the glory of God, of God’s creation, and of God’s kingdom imagined in the Bahá’í dispensation. Interspersed with the readings was a taped recording of a Persian song sung by Narges, a famous Iranian Bahá’í exile; an interpretive dance expressing the Bahá’í perspective on marriage and the equality of men and women; and a nominally Christian hymn—“Be Still My Soul”—with Bahá’u’lláh replacing references to Christ. Closing prayers were recited in Spanish, Persian, and English.

After devotions, the chair of the Local Spiritual Assembly (LSA), the local governing body of nine Bahá’ís elected annually from the community, led the worshipers in the administrative part of feast. The LSA secretary read the monthly correspondence from the National Spiritual Assembly (NSA), letters from other communities in the Atlanta area concerning inter-LSA collaboration on teaching and service projects, and a letter of encouragement from the Universal House of Justice (UHJ) to the younger Bahá’ís of Atlanta concerning an upcoming teaching project for the city’s youth.

In this particular month, the regular communication from the NSA included news of a recent execution of a Bahá’í in Iran and encouraged Bahá’ís to write their elected representatives in Washington, D.C., to support the most recent Senate resolution condemning the Iranian government’s treatment of its Bahá’í minority. A Persian member of the community stood and related a recent conversation with her parents who still could not secure a visa to the United States. She said that the anxiety in the beleaguered Teheran Bahá’í community had increased since the execution, but that their faith remained in Bahá’u’lláh.

A treasurer’s report updated the Bahá’ís on the financial health of the community and recounted the previous month’s contributions and expenditures. The treasurer pointed to the fund box and asked those attending for voluntary contributions. Various community members made announcements, including news of weekly Arabic classes at the Bahá’í Center for those who wanted to read Bahá’í scripture in its original language. A guest from South Africa who had been “pioneering” (living and working in another country to establish Bahá’í communities and teach people about the faith) gave a report on Bahá’í efforts to pro-
mote racial unity in the postapartheid society. Another Bahá’í related his experience on pilgrimage to Haifa and his meetings with Bahá’ís from all over the world and with members of the UHJ. Finally, the administrative portion of the feast ended with a group consultation on the deepenings (daily scripture reading) for 75 new declarants who converted as a result of a citywide teaching campaign.

After a closing prayer, the social part of the feast began with a light meal and fellowship. Discussions ranged from how the Atlanta Braves baseball team was doing, to global economic trends, to abstract ideas from Bahá’í theology. Police sirens and shouts from the pavement below punctuated the conversation. The Atlanta Bahá’í Center is located near the famed Sweet Auburn district of historic African American Atlanta, and the surrounding neighborhood has suffered from urban decay common in large cities. However, the Atlanta Bahá’í Center maintains itself as a sacred space in the midst of the extremes of urban poverty on the one hand, and African American cultural treasures, such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center and historic Wheat Street Baptist Church, on the other.

The flow of the feast allows all members of the local Bahá’í community to speak on relevant issues, exchange ideas, and communicate news. Recommendations that require official approval are referred to the LSA. Each feast represents a kind of town meeting, where Bahá’ís practice a form of spiritual democracy. The observance of the feasts, therefore, receives a high priority in Bahá’í communities. Every 19 days, the whole community participates in spiritual fellowship and democratic administration.

Feasts also stress the local/global link of Bahá’í faith. Most feasts occasion a letter from the NSA informing communities of decisions made by the NSA or of global activities of interest to the Bahá’í world. Several times a year, the United States’ NSA distributes a videocassette called the “Bahá’í Newsreel,” describing Bahá’í activity happening around the world as well as new developments at the World Center. These rituals of communication linking the global with the local via national institutions deliberately fortify and strengthen local Bahá’ís’ identity as members of a worldwide movement.

While the feast described above took place at the Atlanta Bahá’í Center, typically feasts are held in members’ homes when funds are not available to build or purchase a center. Although most communities attempt to rotate the responsibility for holding feasts among all community members, issues like non-Bahá’í spouses, who, like all non-Bahá’ís, may not attend, and the presence of children often require small communities to designate two or three homes as permanent feast sites. The host or hostess of the feast normally prepares refreshments and chooses readings from Bahá’í scripture. This decentralized character of ritual reinforces the democratic nature of Bahá’í collective observances. Every Bahá’í has the chance to personalize the devotional services in a faith with no clergy. Most feasts have no music during devotions; but during my 18 months of fieldwork, it had become a more prevalent part of worship in various locales.

Not only is the feast format (devotions, administration, socializing) flexible enough to incorporate the proclivities of the individual host or hostess, but it also accommodates the cultural diversity of the communities themselves. I encountered this diversity throughout my participant observation fieldwork. Each community took on a distinct character, influenced by its individual strengths and the cultures represented. The flavor of the feast changed with the community, as well. Because of housing segregation in Atlanta and because Bahá’í communities are organized geographically in parishlike structures, some communities have a dominant ethnic group. The feast, therefore, takes on characteristics of the dominant ethnic group. In Atlanta and the southern and southeastern metropolitan area where a large African American population resides, elements of the black church experience surfaced during feast. Feasts often incorporated gospel music (even singing nominally Christian songs like “How Great Thou Art,” or “Be Still My Soul”) and the practice of raising hands during prayer. Frequently, “Amen,” or “Ya Bahá’u’l-Abhá” (the Bahá’í equivalent of “Hallelujah”) could be heard during devotions, and individuals would “testify” during consultation to the miracles Bahá’u’l-llah had worked in their lives that month. Worship tended to be much more expressive than in the LSA jurisdictions dominated by white members.

Communities with a large Persian population predictably had more Arabic and Persian chanting, and a large array of Persian dishes enlivened the social portion of the feast. When older Persians not fluent in English attended, a second-generation son or daughter translated the NSA message (or read the duplicate copy provided in Persian) or interpreted the conversation during consultation. Persian believers who suffered persecution before and after the Iranian revolution of the late 1970s sometimes told stories about Iran and related news from relatives remaining in the country. For the non-Persians at the feast, these practices raised their awareness of the Bahá’í faith as a beleaguered movement.
not immune to difficult times in this country, as many expressed to me during interviews. The Persian influence in the Atlanta area increased the solidarity of the Bahá’í community. The stories of the “martyrs for the faith” gave Bahá’ís a glimpse of the internationality of their beliefs.

Historically, rich members have attended feast in the homes of the poor and vice versa; and blacks, Persians, and whites visited one another’s homes every 19 days. Although racial and ethnic tensions troubled the Atlanta community prior to the 1940s (primarily from Bahá’ís’ white neighbors who did not approve of “race mixing”), they are no longer an issue. People of all colors and social strata invariably greeted each other with hugs, mixed socially at the end of feast, and went out for meals together after meetings. The only hint of segregation came from elderly Persians, many of whom could not speak English and who, thus, tended to stick together.

The other major collective observances in the Bahá’í calendar are the Holy Days and special events that commemorate occasions in Bahá’í history. Holy Days take on one of two distinct moods: either festive and celebratory or reverent and somber. For example, the festival of Ayyám-i-Há, before the month of fasting, is a joyful occasion. It is celebrated much like a birthday party with cake and balloons and games for children. On the other hand, the Ascension of Bahá’u’lláh, commemorating his death on May 29, 1892, has a more subdued feel, evoking reverence and veneration and featuring a prayer vigil that starts at 3:00 in the morning. These and other communal rituals engage Bahá’ís in practices that affirm and strengthen their faith while constructing individual and community identities that are both global and local.

Personal Observances

Personal devotions also aid members in constructing religious identity. Most Bahá’ís engage in prayer, fasting, readings, and pilgrimages, as well as donating money to Bahá’í causes. Not only do personal observances reinforce boundaries between the believer and the nonbeliever, they also reinforce the global character of the Bahá’í religious orientation.

Prayer

Bahá’ís have hundreds of prayers written by the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and `Abdu’l-Bahá, which members use in private devotion and recite at Bahá’í gatherings. Although the completeness of an individual Bahá’í’s library may vary, nearly all Bahá’ís possess a prayer book. In fact, during my entire association with Bahá’ís, I cannot recall ever hearing a Bahá’í pray spontaneously in his or her own words. Although extemporaneous prayer is not strictly forbidden, Bahá’í is almost always turned to the prayers revealed by their three central figures.

Usually arranged by topics, prayers appear in prayer books under headings such as aid and assistance, family members, detachment, spiritual qualities, firmness in the Covenant, protection, steadfastness, or success in teaching. This arrangement has the effect of rationalizing and standardizing, in a Weberian sense, devotional practice within the Bahá’í faith.

Frequently, a Bahá’í at a meeting recites a healing prayer by Bahá’u’lláh for an ailing relative, or `Abdu’l-Bahá’s prayer for America asking God that this country “become glorious in spiritual degrees even as it has aspired to material degrees.” Bahá’u’lláh forbade the recitation of congregational prayer, as is done by Muslims five times a day, with the exception of the Prayer for the Dead, which is usually said at a funeral.

Otherwise, prayers are done individually or recited by one individual while others listen. There are also different forms of daily obligatory prayer, including some requiring genuflection. Some respondents told me that they found this practice somewhat difficult to get used to; nevertheless, daily prayer is part of the lives of most Atlanta Bahá’ís. My survey results indicated that 82 percent of Atlanta-area respondents pray at least once daily.

Reading the Writings

Bahá’ís are enjoined to read daily from Bahá’í scripture—a process known as deepening. Deepenings take place alone or in small groups. Deepenings are often referred to as Bahá’í Bible study, and those held on Sunday morning are often called Bahá’í Sunday school. At most group deepenings I attended, Bahá’ís sat in a circle and took turns reading from scripture—such as the writings of Bahá’u’lláh or `Abdu’l-Bahá. People gave their interpretation or understanding of a particular passage, and sometimes lively discussions ensued. Deepenings are the core of Bahá’í socialization—where Bahá’í ideology firmly establishes a global world view.
Pilgrimage

At the present time, the World Center in Haifa is the sole pilgrimage destination for Bahá’ís around the world. Bahá’ís sign up for a three- or nine-day visit; the wait is sometimes several months to several years. While on pilgrimage, Bahá’ís visit the Shrines of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb, the tomb of `Abdu’l-Bahá, and the grave of his sister, as well as the International Teaching Center, the archives building, and the Universal House of Justice. Pilgrims may meet with a House of Justice member after dinner for discussion or possibly a member of the International Teaching Center. Thirty percent of Atlanta Bahá’ís indicated that they have fulfilled this obligation of their faith.

Fund Contributions

Like members of other religious organizations, Bahá’ís are encouraged to contribute money to their faith. Various Bahá’í funds support local, national, and international levels of Bahá’í organization. Bahá’ís consider their projects—whether a health clinic in India or the House of Worship in Illinois—to be “gifts to the world.” It is thus a privilege reserved only for Bahá’ís; outsiders are not allowed to contribute.

Fasting

The Bahá’í devotional life also follows the scriptural obligations for the month of fasting, the month of ʿAlá’, comparable to March 2–21, and the last month in the Bahá’í year. Bahá’ís between the ages of 15 and 70 must observe the month of ʿAlá’. Fasting is similar in form to Muslim practice during Ramadan. Bahá’ís fast from sunup to sundown, refraining from eating, drinking, and smoking. There are some exemptions, however, for those who are traveling or pregnant.

The fast is a time of additional prayer and reflection for Atlanta Bahá’ís—although many say adhering to this spiritual discipline is difficult in a culture unaccustomed to the practice. Bahá’ís frequently gather to “break the fast” during the month of ʿAlá’, assembling at sunset for large meals in one another’s homes. In addition, predawn breakfasts reinforce a distinctive collective identity. Survey results indicate that more than half the respondents fully observed the 1994 fast, while another 20 percent partially observed it.

Personal devotional practices reinforce the Bahá’ís’ sense of global identity by bringing the faithful into contact with the authority that undergirds a universal ideology. Reading scripture or reciting prayers written by the founders personalizes the Bahá’í’s relationship to this authority. Giving material resources to local, national, and global funds helps Bahá’ís feel they are personally contributing to and sacrificing for a global institution-building project. Additionally, fulfilling pilgrimage requirements brings believers in contact with their World Center in all its symbolic grandeur. Thus, devotional practices are an essential element in creating a religious identity that is globally oriented.

Global Identity in Local Practice

The creation of a Bahá’í identity is fostered by two dialectical processes. The previous section focused on the particularization of the universal, as community members engage in collective and personal ritual that reinforces a world-embracing perspective. Geertz noted that ritual “shape[s] the spiritual consciousness of a people” (1973: 113). Not only does ritual establish local solidarity among a group of gathered believers, but Bahá’í ritualized activity also brings them into regular contact with higher levels of authority, thus “globalizing” their local identities. For example, in participating in the 19-Day Feast, Bahá’ís always receive communications from the national and global centers, helping the faithful to think globally. Messages of encouragement, advice, and hope periodically come directly from the Universal House of Justice—an institution held by Bahá’í writings to be infallible. The “Bahá’í Newsreels” reinforce the global compass of the individual’s faith, as believers see Bahá’ís from Bangkok and Lagos engaging in teaching efforts and administrative duties similar to those carried out in Atlanta. Ritual brings “unity in diversity” to life on a global scale.

The inductive character of Bahá’í identity develops as local activity becomes a metaphor for the universal mission of societal transformation and world order anticipated in Bahá’í scripture. Feasts also encourage Bahá’ís to “[en]act locally” certain key features of their ideology. The administrative portion of the feast gives individuals a chance to participate in community-wide consultation, itself a democratic element in Bahá’í worship. Every 19 days, Bahá’ís discuss issues of relevance to their collective lives, with direct access to LSA participants. This interchange ensures that local authorities hear community concerns. The
community supports local, as well as national and global, funds and projects.

The Bahá'í focus on racial unity and the “oneness of humanity” constitutes the ideological social principle at the heart of an emerging Bahá'í identity. Not only does the ideal of a united humanity undivided by racial or ethnic intolerance provide an initial attraction for converted Bahá'ís, but it constitutes much of the focus of Bahá'í activity. This focus is especially salient for Bahá'ís in Atlanta, who speak with dignity about their 85 years of affecting racial unity in a city known both for its institutionalized Jim Crow segregation and for the birthplace and headquarters of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Atlanta Bahá'ís promote racial unity not only within their community, but also as a general societal goal. Thus, advocating racial unity and promoting the Bahá'í faith go hand in hand.

The Bahá'ís with whom I spoke explicitly linked their efforts at racial unity within the community to their global ideology and identity. A commonality that emerged from informal discussions, participant observation, and interviews with Atlanta Bahá'ís emphasized their intentional connection of local practices and activity to their global vision of world order. Seeking a united planet through obedience to the laws and principles of Bahá'u'lláh began in one’s backyard; thus Bahá’ís embodied the popular phrase “think globally, act locally.”

Racial unity was a recurrent theme in several of the Bahá’í meetings at which I was a participant-observer. Bahá'ís often recounted stories from their faith as models for their own behavior. One common theme was the trip made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá throughout Europe and North America in 1911-1913. While in America, he traveled from New York to San Francisco, teaching the Bahá'í faith and preaching about the desperate need for Bahá'ís to practice racial unity among themselves. One popular anecdote relates how 'Abdu'l-Bahá upset protocol in racially segregated Washington, D.C., by inviting a young black lawyer, Louis Gregory, to sit in the seat of honor at a dinner of Washington's elite society. Gregory—a new Bahá'í—went on to become one of the most prominent teachers of the Bahá'í faith in the United States. Bahá'ís in Atlanta, especially African American Bahá'ís, look to him as an important role model for dealing with a racist culture, a culture where separatism is often considered more attractive than unity. Stories of Gregory's actions in difficult situations—including his interracial marriage and his deportment in the face of prejudice—inform African American Bahá'ís in a way that Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X cannot. The regular narration of such stories links the Bahá'ís' global ideology, their faith's founders, and the unique racial history of the American South.

A willingness to address and resist racism is one of the characteristics of the Bahá'í community that has most appealed to many of its converts and certainly is one of the most widely communicated themes of the Bahá'í message. For many non-Bahá'ís, the assumed inevitability of racial unity is the hallmark of Bahá'í utopianism—a sort of naive vision of the world shorn of its hard political realities. However, for Bahá'ís, the unity of humanity is already a spiritual reality prevailing since the advent of the Bahá'í dispensation, eventually to become a social reality through the work of the Bahá'ís.

One example of Atlanta Bahá'ís promotion of racial unity is their involvement with the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Bahá'í involvement in the MLK Center has grown over since the Bahá'ís marched as a group in the center's first parade in January 1986. Over the years, Bahá'ís have returned as one of many participants, entering a large float, comanifesting the television parade, and contributing two members to the federal holiday commission that oversees the national King holiday. In recent years, Bahá'ís have sponsored an interfaith prayer service at the King Center during King Week in January, and a former UHJ member and a NSA member have spoken at various King Center-sponsored events. Survey results revealed that Bahá'í participation in these events is very high (nearly three-fourths report attending a Bahá'í-sponsored event during King Week), and is equally supported by all ethnic groups within the faith. During the 1994 King Week parade, more than half of all participants (by my count) were Bahá'ís, who showed up on an unusually cold, rainy winter day to witness to their belief in racial unity.

In Atlanta, the efforts for racial unity most tangibly express how Bahá'ís “think globally, act locally.” But racial unity is just one theme in a global world view that Bahá'ís themselves refer to as “the Bahá'í perspective”—the adoption of which is critical in the crystallization of a Bahá'í identity. When issues in the news were discussed at Bahá'í meetings, I would frequently hear Bahá'ís say, “Well, the Bahá'í perspective on that is...” Many Bahá'ís referred to their perspective as if every member of the faith sees an issue in the same way. This presumed unanimity does not exist, as the often spirited discussions during deepenings make apparent. However, during my numerous conversations and interviews with Bahá'ís, an explicit Bahá'í perspective
emerged in the crucible of Bahá’í institutions. That perspective is, in a word, global.

Although some Bahá’ís come into the faith with a universal outlook, it is enriched and deepened through reading Bahá’í scripture and serving in Bahá’í institutions. One Bahá’i said that he definitely sees the Bahá’í perspective as being different from the Christianity of his childhood:

[Bahá’ís] are as concerned about Bahá’ís in China as we are in Europe, or anywhere—New Guinea—as we are those that are similar to us, in Europe or Australia... I don’t think Christians see Christians on the other side of the globe as part of their family. But I think Bahá’ís do.

He went on to talk about his global family

You become global in the sense that your family is scattered around the globe. That was one of the things that I remember when I first came into the faith, realizing that no matter what city I was in anywhere, that if there is a Bahá’í community there, I’ve got family. And I think that contributes to a closeness in the Bahá’í community.

The Bahá’í perspective not only includes concepts, such as “the human family” and “the oneness of humanity,” but it also highlights the universality of Bahá’ís’ homes and communities. Bahá’ís frequently repeat Bahá’u’lláh’s passage: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.” One man explained how his experience outside the United States had opened up his world: “As a Bahá’í [in Europe and Africa], the world had grown, I had embraced the world. The world was my home. Wherever I was, it was home; wherever I laid my head was home.”

Most Bahá’ís with whom I spoke agreed that the large Persian influx into the metro Atlanta Bahá’í community has added to and enriched their global perspective. One man said the following about the influence of Persian believers: “Yea, I think it’s changed the way we [Bahá’ís] view ourselves... how we see ourselves as a community, that we are an international community.” His wife added, “It also woke [Atlanta Bahá’ís] up to some degree, and made whole bunches of provincial folk realize it is an international religion.”

They went on to mention that the Persian community has also taught Atlanta Bahá’ís about their faith, as well as introduced new tensions.

Having access to Bahá’u’lláh’s writings in their original language long before the English translations, Persians were more educated on the nuances of the laws of fasting and the prescribed way of performing certain prayers, such as the obligatory prayers. Several respondents said that Persians also were more conscious of celebrating the Bahá’í holy days and festivals, which led to further incorporation of the Bahá’í calendar into non-Persian Bahá’ís’ identity.

It is not only those who grow up in America and convert to the faith who appreciate the Bahá’í faith’s globality. One Persian man, who with most of his family converted in Iran from Shi’ite Islam, also talked about the universality of the Bahá’í perspective. When asked to compare the faith in Iran and Atlanta, he said

Not really [any difference]. That is the beauty of the Bahá’í faith. Everybody does it the same. As I said, I was in Africa before I came here. The Bahá’í faith... made the whole concept of religion so unique, you just go to Africa, you see Bahá’ís. The only thing you don’t know about them is their name. When you find their name, then you have the same religion, the same beliefs, they are striving for the same oneness of mankind, and unity of mankind, and reduction of all prejudices. Basically surviving for the same thing, not like Christianity or Islam with all the sects.

Another Persian man expressed these sentiments concerning the globality of his faith:

If you want to know what means Bahá’í faith, you better leave your country, and go to another country. Then you will see really the power of Bahá’í faith... you will see regardless of your race, regardless of your nationality, regardless of your background, immediately you are home. Immediately you have friends. Friends who are better than your relatives, in some cases.

The Dialectic of the Local and the Global

This chapter has outlined the process by which a Bahá’í identity is socialized and lived. Bahá’ís develop their world view through the interaction of local and global institutions and by the practice of a specifically global ideology. Collective rituals following the Bahá’í calendar bring local Bahá’ís into frequent contact with institutional authority that teaches
adherents to be “world citizens” by manifesting a Bahá’í perspective and thus particularizing a universal faith. The organization of Local Spiritual Assemblies requires Bahá’ís to learn consultation and power sharing amid a diverse membership, thus “universalizing” the particular social arrangements of the community by practicing just and democratic administration.

Even personal devotional practices of the Bahá’í faith facilitate this universal-particular or global-local dialectic. Prayer, fasting, reading Bahá’í writings, and especially pilgrimage and financial contributions inspire Bahá’ís to work for the “oneness of humanity”—a core value in the Bahá’í faith—in their local community. When Bahá’ís meet collectively to deepen their faith, they are required to practice unity in diversity, since no one individual can dictate the meaning of scripture for another.

As a global religion, the Bahá’í faith is distinguished from the more studied, fundamentalist movements, in that it inculcates in its adherents a universalizing, rather than particularizing, ethos and world view. This world view is cultivated through various ideological and ritual mechanisms that link local community life to a global identity and social structure. Their beliefs include progressive revelation, a focus on racial unity, and the spiritual principle of unity in diversity. The center of community ritual—the 19-Day Feast—is a local act that reinforces the global expanse of the Bahá’í faith and repeatedly exposes community members to the authority of their universalizing movement and world view—“thinking globally.”

NOTES

1. The author would like to acknowledge the Faculty Research and Support fund grant # 111640 at the University of Houston–Clear Lake for assistance in preparing this chapter.

2. For further background on the history of the Bahá’í faith, see Hatcher and Martin 1985, Esselmont 1970. The 1992 Britannica Book of the Year declared that the Bahá’í faith had established significant communities in 205 countries, second only to Christianity in its geographic distribution. The World Christian Encyclopedia, published in 1982, estimated that the worldwide Bahá’í community grew by 3.65 percent since 1970—the fastest growing of the independent world religions.

3. My attendance at the World Congress began 18 months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork which included participant observation, in-depth interviews, archival research, and distribution of a questionnaire to nearly 500 members of the metropolitan Atlanta Bahá’í community.

4. While most converts were seekers who were dissatisfied with their previous religion, a small minority were pulled into the faith by the prophetic claims found in Bahá’í scripture (such as Bahá’u’lláh being the return of Christ, or the promised one of Islam, the Mahdí) rather than pushed by disaffection with their church, synagogue, or mosque.

5. More than 65 percent of the survey respondents indicated having a college diploma or higher level of education. Nearly 70 percent worked in white-collar or professional occupations.

6. Conversion to the Bahá’í faith parallels many features discussed in the sociology of religion conversion literature (see Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Phillips 1980). Empirical evidence indicates that social networks are the most crucial factor in pulling individuals into nontraditional religious movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). These relationships with trusted friends and family help potential converts to overcome the “foreignness” of the Bahá’í religion. The host of Islamic references, the unfamiliar Persian names, and the practice of ritual fasting and obligatory prayers all create boundaries that many converts found difficult to cross. At one point during my fieldwork, a recent convert became embarrassed when she stumbled over a Persian word while reading aloud. An elderly Persian woman reassured her that no matter how she pronounced, “God heard [speaker’s emphasis] you correctly.”

7. Duties of the host or hostess revolve among the active members of the community—allowing each member to shape the worship experience.

8. Since 1982, six resolutions have been passed by the U.S. Senate at the urging of the NSA.

9. Although survey data cannot address the issue of interracial friendship, I observed that interracial unity was not limited to official Bahá’í gatherings. I attended many informal Bahá’í gatherings where people of all ethnic backgrounds readily socialized. This was especially evident among Bahá’í youth, whose parents told me their kids had always had interracial playmates and these relationships continued into young adulthood.

10. Although Bahá’ís are to suspend work on the more important Holy Days, many Bahá’ís are unable or unwilling to take the day off. Survey results indicate that more than 60 percent of Bahá’í respondents attend Holy Days celebrations “most of the time” or “often.”

11. Almost 45 percent of survey respondents said that they regularly attended one of several advertised deepening events in the metropolitan Atlanta area.

12. International funds are monies used by the UHJ for social and economic development projects around the world such as schools, health clinics,
and similar services. One such fund supports construction projects at the World Center on Mount Carmel in Haifa. Nearly 92 percent of those I surveyed contributed to their local funds, while 70 percent had given to national funds in the last year.

13. Several Bahá’í deepenings that I attended revolved around the 1991 NSA publication, “The Vision of Race Unity: America’s Most Challenging Issue,” a 12-page pamphlet that outlines the “spiritual solution” to racism in this country and invites other to investigate the Bahá’í faith as a model for bringing about social change. Bahá’ís distributed the pamphlet widely to introduce nonbelievers to the faith and to teach them its ideology.

14. Robertson, along with most scholars, focuses on those movements that revitalize traditional identities (while modifying them for the modern context). He does, however, admit that: “The fundamentalist movements concerned with the revitalization of their own particular societies . . . are indeed attempting to bring back the tribal gods of society or community, while these movements which are more explicitly oriented to the global scene are attempting to vitalize and establish a universal God for a global community” (Robbins and Robertson 1987:48). This latter attempt accurately characterizes Bahá’ís efforts to universalize social and religious identity and establish the mechanisms that link a Bahá’í world view to a local community.

**References**


