

There seems to be a shift in the American Bahai community, towards increasing numbers of Bahais not choosing to enroll and take up the duties and privileges of enrolled membership. This posting touches on the evidence for this, and criticises an explanation put forward by Moojan Momen in a recent paper in Religion (Marginality and Apostasy in the Bahai community, in Religion, vol. 37, 2007)

From: Sen & Sonja <sen.sonja@casema.NL>
To: XX, tARIKH-LIST@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU
Subject: Marginality and Apostasy in the Bahai Community
Date sent: Sun, 09 Dec 2007 19:28:15 +0100

On 4 Dec 2007 at 14:35, XX wrote:

- > **Two questions:**
- > 1. What in your opinion may be going on besides "obsessive
- > hatred..." 2. How do you arrive at the conclusion that "...people
- > are leaving or not enrolling is quite large numbers, for such a
- > small community."

To answer the second question first: in its Ridvan 2007 Annual Message the USA NSA observes and compares:

"From 1980 to 1997, the Baha'i community nearly doubled in size (77,000 to 137,000, excluding Iranian immigrants), with significant increases in the rate of retention. The 50 percent drop in enrollments since 1997 means that enrollments are now at the same level they were in the 1960s, when the Baha'i community was a small fraction of its current size. The number of enrollments to date for this year is 872."

And further:

"This year, withdrawals (369) from Baha'i membership have risen 30 percent."

The latter figure has to be treated with caution, it could be a one-time spike due, for instance, to efforts to update the address lists. The discussion list "unenrolled Bahai" has 235 members today, and averages 160 messages per month, a significant minority of the Bahai discussion volume. As an exit support group, posters on the list will tend to be members who have recently withdrawn or been unenrolled, so I suppose that posting volume today reflects the volume of exits a few months previously, it is a current rather than cumulative

indicator. If I compare the message volume per month in 2007 and 2002, January to November, I see that in 7 months the volume in 2007 is more than it was in the corresponding month in 2002, and in 4 months less. That does not necessarily indicate a growing volume of people unenrolling, it could be largely explained by greater internet connection rates, and a relatively constant number of people unenrolling. But the evidence in any case is against any decline in the number of official withdrawals, and an increase is more likely. At the same time, enrollments have fallen, so of those who do enroll, more must be leaving again.

The more significant figure from the NSA's report is a 50% drop in enrollments from 1998 to 2006. Now this could be because the message of Baha'u'llah is no longer reaching people, that teaching activity has declined, that effective proclamation methods have been underfunded etc., leading to fewer conversion. Or it could be because the message is reaching people as before, but they are less likely to make their commitment formal by enrolling in the community. Or, most likely, it is a compound of both lower conversion and lower willingness of converts to join, in some ratio. There may be less conversions because less people are hearing the message: perhaps population aging is having an effect as YY says: when people grow older their concerns are different, and if the presentation of the message is not adjusted accordingly, less people will get to hear it. Of the conversions, less may enroll. As YY suggests, the climate in the US is not favouring religious enrollments in general. (For this reason, a third explanation, competition from a more successful religion, seem unlikely).

I think that the message of Baha'u'llah is sufficiently broad, and is presented in sufficient variety of ways, for us to suppose that the number of people "hearing" and converting has not declined enormously. The intensity of teaching work has probably not declined very much over the past 10 years, the absolute number of active members in the US Bahai community has not declined much, if at all, the means available for transmitting the message have increased. When I put that together with the similar phenomenon of formal withdrawal from the US Bahai community (rise in formal unenrollments despite falling enrollments, rising volume of discussion in unenrolled- Bahai), I have to conclude that more people in the US must be hearing the message and accepting it, but not enrolling, than was the case 10 years ago, or 20.

I have no expertise to say why this might be, but the NSA of the USA has an informed analysis which might explain both falling conversions and more converts who do not enroll.

In its 2007 Ridvan message again, it points first to the LSAs being sidelined: "feelings of disempowerment and mixed signals regarding roles and responsibilities are robbing the current Plan of the spiritual benefits that flow from the wholehearted participation of these divine institutions, and the many significant contributions these highly capable Assemblies could make .." (page 6)

The presentation of the Bahai community as having egalitarian, participatory and democratic ruling institutions has been one of its attractions, and a reason to enroll. As the unelected teaching institutes and their regional and national coordinators take over the roles of the local and national Assemblies, and as membership in these and the actual implementation of the work is increasingly reserved for people who have qualified by passing through the Ruhi books, the Bahai community looks increasingly like a traditional church structure, with experts appointed by higher experts, telling the congregation how it is. So if someone is a joiner and participant by nature, the Bahai message as embodied in the community has become less attractive, and for the "converts" as a whole, there is less reason to go on to become a member formally, since membership, with the assemblies, has lost some of its central significance.

Second, the NSA points to a narrower focus of activities, with Ruhi classes replacing firesides, neighbourhood classes replacing children's classes. This will presumably decrease how effectively the message is being communicated, but it might also reduce the proportion of converts who join the organisation. Some converts will find the new and narrower focus an attraction to membership, others will not see in the community those activities and social groups that would prompt them to join.

Third, "we have learned from experience that the proper use of media and other forms of proclamation can be invaluable tools for generating seekers." If media proclamation was indeed effective in communicating the message in the past, less proclamation would mean less people hearing the message - but not less converts enrolling.

Fourth, the NSA suggests that the presentation of the message is not being adapted to the audience: "hardly a word is spoken about who

seekers are, what they want, or how they experienced their contact with the Baha'i community. There is little institutional discussion about the many seekers who start one of the institute courses and do not return, ... cause us to miss important opportunities for learning how to meet the wide diversity of seekers' needs." (page 8) A little further on the NSA says there is a "need for flexibility and innovation" (page 10). "... receptive populations... cannot be expected to come to the Faith entirely on our terms." This would affect both aspects: less people will hear the message, but also, if seekers' needs are not known, the community will not be the kind of organisation which converts want to take the additional step of joining.

Fifth, the US community has been less engaged with "issues of broad social concern" and there has been less emphasis on " the Baha'i vision for social transformation " as compared to the engagement in "the period from 1980 to 1997, during which the Baha'i community nearly doubled in size." This would primarily affect the likelihood that converts become members: for an activist convert, if membership is not membership in an activist movement, what is its added value?

Your second question is

- > 1. What in your opinion may be going on besides "obsessive
- > hatred..."

Momen's paper supposes that some people become marginal (or become "apostates," but that is a judgment which is inappropriate and divisive, and which neither Momen or I am qualified to make, so I won't use it) for reasons that are to do with themselves. He simply overlooks the possibility that, in this two-way relationship, the majority (or "core") have any role in actively marginalising the people who become marginal. He doesn't mention the factor of a change of culture in the community, which is odd considering his other recent writing: instead the community is treated as a constant and the marginals are supposed to have moved away from it. He hardly mentions internal factions and political maneuvering within the community which, while we may all agree that they *should* not exist, should nevertheless be included as a factor in objectively describing what has actually happened. In short, the analysis is based on an "a priori" moral judgment that puts the agency and fault all on one side, and the presentation of facts is accordingly selective. A fuller and more just picture of what was going on would have to start from an

objective stance, and be conducted by someone qualified in the sociology and psychology of religion (which I am not) and familiar with US religious culture (which I am not), and would have to include not just some exit narratives but also interviews with various participants. It's beyond me

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