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Marginality and apostasy in the Baha'i community

Moojan Momen

Abstract

During most of Baha'i history, there have been both marginal and apostate Baha'is. This article is about a group of articulate and well-educated marginal and apostate Baha'is who first appeared in the West about twenty-five years ago and who reached the peak of their activity in the last decade. The group's campaign against the Baha'i community brings to mind Max Scheler's description of the apostate as 'engaged in a continuous chain of acts of revenge against his own spiritual past'. Following a terminological, methodological and ethical discussion, this article examines the phenomenon and makes six points. (1) These apostates seek to reverse the status of the Baha'i Faith from that of an 'allegiant organisation' to that of a 'subversive' one, or a 'cult'. (2) The experiences of the apostates form a dark mirror image to those of the core members. (3) The Internet has been used extensively by these apostates to create a community of their own, thereby assisting the passage of many of them from marginality to apostasy. (4) This community has developed its own mythology, creed and salvation and has become what can perhaps be called an anti-religion. (5) Apostates have written papers and books that have been accepted by academic journals and presses. (6) If religious communities want to avoid facing attacks by apostates, it is necessary to act at an early stage of the process, as it is almost impossible to do anything later.

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In the last two decades there has been much literature on the subject of apostasy and marginality. This article focuses on apostasy and marginality in the Baha'i religion.¹ Following a brief discussion of some theoretical, methodological and ethical points, this article analyses a collection of sixty-six exit narratives, or statements made by those leaving the religion about why and how

E-mail address: momen@northhill.demon.co.uk.

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they left. The careers of twelve apostates are then described in detail. There follows an analysis of apostate narratives, mythology and issues. Finally, the special features of apostasy and marginality in the Baha'i community are outlined.

Some confusion has arisen out of different uses being made of the word 'apostasy'. In the 1980s the word was used to apply to those who left a religion, particularly the religion of their birth.² By the late 1990s, however, the word 'leavetaker' or 'defector' was being applied to anyone who simply left a religion. According to the sociologist David Bromley, the word 'apostate' now referred 'not to ordinary religious leavetakers ... but to that subset of leavetakers who are involved in contested exits and affiliate with an oppositional coalition' (Bromley, 1998b, p. 5). This narrower definition is the one used here.

This article is not the place to discuss at any length why people become apostates. But the findings of this article do fit well the description of *ressentiment*, a term that was taken from Nietzsche and was developed by the German social philosopher Max Scheler (1874–1928). Although Scheler's work has been criticised for elitism and excessive nationalism, his insights into human motivation and particularly into *ressentiment* remain penetrating and perceptive. In his introduction to Scheler's *Ressentiment*, the sociologist Lewis A. Coser has summarised Scheler's concept of *ressentiment* thus: '*Ressentiment* denotes an attitude which arises from a cumulative repression of feelings of hatred, revenge, envy and the like.... *Ressentiment* leads to a tendency to degrade, to "reduce" genuine values as well as their bearers. As distinct from rebellion, *ressentiment* does not lead to an affirmation of counter-values since *ressentiment*-imbued persons secretly crave the values they publicly denounce' (Coser, Introduction to Scheler, 1961, pp. 23–4). Applying the phenomenon of *ressentiment* to the apostate, Scheler writes:

An 'apostate' is not a man who once in his life radically changes his deepest religious, political, legal, or philosophical convictions—even when this change is not continuous, but involves a sudden rupture. Even after his conversion, the true 'apostate' is not primarily committed to the positive contents of his new belief and to the realization of its aims. He is motivated by the struggle against the old belief and lives only for its negation. The apostate does not affirm his new convictions for their own sake, he is engaged in a continuous chain of acts of revenge against his own spiritual past. In reality he remains a captive of this past, and the new faith is merely a handy frame of reference for negating and rejecting the old. As a religious type, the apostate is therefore at the opposite pole from the 'resurrected,' whose life is transformed by a new faith which is full of intrinsic meaning and value. (Scheler, 1961, pp. 66–7; see alternative translation in Coser, 1954, p. 250)

The term 'marginality' has also undergone a change in usage. In the 1980s, it was used for those who had become inactive in their religious community (see Albrecht et al., 1988). By the 1990s, however, those who were merely inactive members were now said to be 'peripheral members'. The term 'marginal members' was now reserved for those who were still members but who

² For example, throughout Bromley (1988a,1988b), apostasy is used in this way. Only Hall's last chapter in the book (Hall, 1988) uses 'apostasy' in its later meaning, and here Hall feels constrained to apply an adjective to clarify his meaning: 'conflictual apostasy'. Some sociologists, such as Hunsberger (1983), Brinkerhoff and Mackie (1993), and Sherkat and Wilson (1995), have limited their use of 'apostasy' to those who leave a religion to become nonreligious altogether rather than to attack the religion they have left or to join another religion.

were expressing dissatisfaction, attacking either the doctrines or the practices of the group or rallying disaffected individuals (see Barker, 1998, pp. 76–83). ‘Dissidents’ would be an equally good name and is probably more precise. Between the core member and the marginal there is, of course, a spectrum of positions, and it is not easy to define at what point one becomes a ‘marginal’. By contrast, the boundary between a marginal and an apostate is more clear-cut. At some point, a marginal individual either resigns membership or is expelled. If that person then intensifies attacks on the religion or its leadership, that person becomes an apostate.

Most recent research on apostates has concentrated on apostates from New Religious Movements (NRMs). Thanks to the levelling effect of the Internet, the phenomenon of apostasy has moved from being the concern of specialists in NRMs to being the concern of many other scholars of religious studies as well. Apostate sites are rapidly springing up for every religion, church or religious movement. Thus there are Muslim apostates, Christian apostates, Catholic apostates and so on. And so it is no longer a phenomenon confined to NRMs. Indeed, the phenomenon of apostasy has a long history. In Christianity most persons are familiar with examples ranging across the centuries from Julian the Apostate to Bertrand Russell, but often forget that figures such as St Augustine were themselves apostates, vehemently criticising their previous beliefs. Apostates have also occurred in modern times from Islam (Ibn Warraq) and Hinduism (Bhimrao Ambedkar).

While apostasy and marginality in the Baha’i community share many features with apostasy and marginality in other religions, the degree to which Baha’i apostates have used academic media to further their aims is unique. Even more distinctive is the attempt to depict the Baha’i community as a ‘cult’ – a ‘subversive group’, in Bromley’s terminology – at exactly the time that the Baha’is themselves are trying to position the community as a mainline religion, as an ‘allegiant group’ in Bromley’s terminology (see Bromley, 1998b). The degree to which an apostate mythology has been created, together with the degree to which the Internet has been used to create a virtual community of marginal and apostate Baha’is, is also notable.

The Baha’i community

The Baha’i Faith was founded in 1863 by Baha’u’llah (1817–92). It had been preceded by the Babi movement, founded in 1844 by the Bab (1819–50) in Iran. Official Baha’i sources estimate the number of Baha’is in the world as ‘more than 5.5 million’ (Baha’i World, 2006, p. 295). The *World Christian Database* (2007), which has continued the work of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, lists the total number of Baha’is as 7,684,618. This source lists Baha’is in 220 of 238 countries – a global spread second only to that of Christianity.

Throughout its history the Baha’i Faith has experienced a number of significant episodes of marginality and apostasy. Although it would be instructive to review the early episodes of apostasy in Iran in detail, they differ significantly from the episodes in the West in that the Baha’i Faith in Iran has always been in a state of high tension with society, thus falling into Bromley’s Type III category, a ‘subversive organisation’ (see Bromley, 1998c, pp. 23–5).

In the West the Baha’i community has been trying to establish itself as a mainline religion, or in Bromley’s terminology an ‘allegiant organisation’. Since the 1920s, the Baha’i community has been striving to achieve this allegiant status – for example, by seeking official recognition of Baha’i marriages and of exemption from attendance at work or school on Baha’i holy days, by

making legal incorporations of its local and national elected councils, and by obtaining charitable status.³ The Faith has been more successful in achieving status as an allegiant religion in some places than in others. In the United Kingdom the Baha'is are one of the religious communities routinely invited by the British Government to formal state occasions and government consultations. In Germany the situation has been worse, as will be explained.

In general, the Baha'i community has avoided the charge of 'cult', a charge to which many other religious groups were subjected at the height of the anti-cult hysteria of the 1970s and 1980s. The religion has various features that militate against this accusation. The morality it preaches is traditional. Converts are encouraged to maintain their ties with their families. Converts are not kept in any long-term communal residences. The outlook is not strongly dualistic: those who are not 'us' are not considered necessarily bad, and those who are 'us' are not always deemed good. Those who wish to leave can do so freely. There is a strong leadership, but it is largely vested in elected councils rather than in charismatic leaders. Individuals are free to hold their own theological opinions as long as they do not press them to the point of schism. In Bromley's typology, the Baha'i Faith has generally been regarded in the West as an allegiant organisation or, at most, a contestant organisation.

All groups create their own identity by creating meanings distinctive for the group. Groups create their own cosmos or culture. To be a member of a religion is to share its meanings, its hierarchy of values and its ordering of realities. For Baha'is, the meaning that is imposed upon the world consists of a belief that, in the present state of the world, the only salvation for humanity is to move on to the next stage of its social development, the unity of humankind and the emergence of a single global order: 'The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens' (Baha'u'llah, 1983, p. 250). For this order to emerge, an individual's source of identity has to change from a solely national, racial, religious or ethnic one to a global one. Hence the strong impulse in the Baha'i community towards unity. A religion that claims to be trying to unite the world cannot be effective or credible if it is not itself united.

The collective identity of the Baha'i community is based upon the idea that it is in possession of the most appropriate answers to the problems of society. These answers include a number of prerequisites to the establishment of a global society and world peace – for example, the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty, the elimination of prejudices through education, and the promotion of the social role of women. The creation of a democratic and egalitarian community is considered a model for the creation of a global society.

Most Baha'i practices are carried out in private, such as prayer, meditation and fasting. There are few public rituals. Baha'i communities get together every nineteen days for a meeting that has a spiritual part (usually prayers), a communal part (community news and consultation) and a social part (food and sometimes music or a presentation). Most Baha'i communities have other meetings, such as devotional meetings, children's classes, youth groups and study classes. There are no religious professionals or individuals in positions of power. Authority rests with elected councils at the local and national level.

Part of the process of creating a group identity is the creation of group boundaries. The political scientist George Schöpflin states that 'identity excludes and includes, otherwise it would not be an identity that could sustain itself. Exclusion, then is a necessary and unavoidable aspect

³ See the section *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* in successive volumes of the *Baha'i World*, 1980.

of human existence and it is not the fact of exclusion as such that is problematical, but the particular forms of it in particular situations' (Schöpflin, 2001). In general, the stronger the sense of group identity, the stronger the boundary distinguishing the group from society. In some 'New Age' movements, for example, the group boundaries may be very porous, so that individuals can enter and leave the group with little effort. These groups, however, have a nebulous group identity. By contrast, the Baha'i community has a strong collective identity and, consequently, has strong boundaries.

A number of features of the Baha'i Faith give it strong boundaries. The first is the existence of laws that Baha'is are obliged to obey. These laws are not nearly so pervasive as the Islamic Shari'ah or Judaic Halachah, but they do include such injunctions as daily prayers, fasting and abstinence from alcohol. These laws both create boundaries and strengthen group identity. The laws relating to the individual are not communally enforced. No one enforces the fast or daily prayer upon an individual. There are, however, a small number of laws with social implications that are enforced, such as the marriage and divorce laws. Coming up against the enforcement of these laws can lead persons to leave the Baha'i Faith, but most of those who depart thus do not become apostates. Rather, they usually assume the role of a leavetaker, sometimes even expressing regret for a failure to live according to the high moral standards of the group (see Bromley, 1998c, pp. 27–9).⁴

The second element of the Baha'i Faith that ensures strong boundaries is the concept of the Covenant. There is little in the way of a creed in the Baha'i Faith. All Baha'is are encouraged to read their scriptures for themselves and to come to their own understandings. What prevents the religion from fragmenting is the loyalty that each Baha'i is expected to have to the head of the religion, which since 1963 has been an internationally elected council called the Universal House of Justice. While all Baha'is can have their own views of their scriptures, no one is allowed to claim an authoritative understanding. The Universal House of Justice itself tends to refrain from making theological statements. It is mainly concerned with making strategic and organisational decisions. It may, however, make rulings where there are disputes among Baha'is, especially when there is the fear of schism. This loyalty to the centre of the religion is the doctrine of the Covenant, and for Baha'is the greatest spiritual crime is 'covenant-breaking', which means, attacking the head of the religion or seeking to create schism.

The third element that ensures strong boundaries is organisational. In the Baha'i community there are mechanisms that guard against individual Baha'is attacking the central institutions of the Baha'i Faith and creating schisms. Individuals are appointed in each community as 'Counsellors' and their 'Auxiliary Boards' and assistants. These appointees encourage the community to propagate the Baha'i Faith and to carry out the plans of action inaugurated by the Universal House of Justice. They also function to maintain unity in the Baha'i community – partly by keeping an eye out for those who may be acting in a manner to create disunity or schism in

⁴ An example of a leavetaker expressing regret for a failure to live according to the moral standards of the Baha'i community is that of an individual who was in a relationship with a woman whose husband was away. When the husband returned, the relationship was brought before the local elected council of the Baha'is, who instructed the woman to go back to her husband. As a result, the man left the Baha'i community but comments: 'I think that they [the Baha'is] have something very important. I still believe in the faith.... It took me about six months to leave, but I just couldn't live the way they wanted me to' (Jacobs, 1989, pp. 45–6).

the community. These wayward members are advised and warned on several occasions. If they persist, they may be subjected to sanctions, which range from removing their name from membership lists to declaring them ‘covenant-breakers’ – a state of excommunication. Baha’is are prohibited from contact with covenant-breakers. This extreme sanction has probably been used against no more than a handful of individuals in over two decades and against only the first of the apostates described below more than twenty-five years ago, although apostates imply that excommunication has happened frequently. A covenant-breaker can be reinstated, and reinstatement has occurred.

The stress on strong group boundaries has not always been the case. Under the second leader of the Baha’i Faith, ‘Abdu’l-Baha (head of the religion from 1892 to 1921), group boundaries were fairly porous, and even dual affiliations were permitted (Western Baha’is retained membership of their churches). It was in the 1920s and 1930s, as the administrative order of the Baha’i Faith was set up and as it became necessary to create membership criteria in order to draw up electoral rolls, that the boundaries became sharper and stronger (see [Smith, 1987](#), pp. 111, 122, 145–6). There are indications that the Universal House of Justice may now want to move the Baha’i community back towards a more open and inclusive kind of community, as will be discussed.

No worldwide statistics on the number of leavetakers from the Baha’i community have been published, but a 1999 report for the United States alone indicates that the number is of the same order as that for other religious groups (see [National Teaching Committee, 1999](#)). No exact figures for apostates are available, but an estimate would be that the number of active apostates in the West of the kind described in this article has probably not exceeded twenty-five at any one time, with possibly a hundred who are actively and publicly taking a dissident position as marginal Baha’is. This article will argue that the number of apostates has probably increased in the last quarter century because of the impact of the Internet.

Method

For this article, a collection was made of sixty-six exit narratives from three websites.⁵ From these narratives, twelve individuals were identified as apostates, in that they have gone beyond merely an exit statement to a prolonged campaign against the Baha’i community. Nine of these apostates had had identifiable careers as marginal Baha’is prior to their exit. Although I myself have met a few of these individuals, the accounts of them given below are largely taken from their published and online statements.

One of the problems encountered in producing this article is the question of identifying apostates by name. Some who have researched in this field have felt it necessary for ethical reasons to hide the identity of these individuals (see, for example, [Jacobs, 1989](#)). The individuals in the present study are all highly articulate, and most of the material has been gathered from their statements either in published work or on Internet e-mail lists and sites. By publishing work either in printed form or on their own websites with their names given, these individuals have effectively waived their right to anonymity. I have decided to name only these persons (since it would be

⁵ These were <http://www.fglaysher.com/bahaicensorsip/Ex.htm>; <http://meltingpot.fortunecity.com/andorra/514/>; and <http://www.bahai-faith.com> (all accessed between 18 and 25 June 2006).

impossible to cite their published work without naming them) and not to name those individuals whose e-mail correspondence alone is being used, who are named on another person's website or where they have used pseudonyms. This approach has been used by other researchers (see, for example, [Carter, 1998](#), pp. 221–37; [Johnson, 1998](#)).

Apostates 1980–96

During most of Baha'i history, there have been both marginal and apostate Baha'is. This article focuses on a particular kind of marginal and apostate Baha'i that first appeared in the West about twenty-five years ago and that peaked in the last decade. This group of twelve individuals is distinctive in that it is articulate and well educated. Six have published denunciations of the faith in articles and books in academic venues. The twelve are also distinct from other apostates in Baha'i history in that most of them are not trying to achieve leadership of the Baha'i community but rather are trying to undermine the present leadership.

Chronologically, the first person among this group was a Swiss ex-Baha'i named Francesco Ficicchia (b. 1946). He had been a Baha'i from 1971 to 1974, when he declared to his former fellow Baha'is that 'you will from now on have me as an embittered enemy who will fight you with all possible means at every opportunity' (quoted in [Schaefer et al., 2000](#), pp. 32–3). He then vacillated for some years, appearing at times to be about to rejoin the community. Eventually, in 1981, the Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, the central office of the Protestant Church in Germany for questions of ideology, published Ficicchia's book, which attacked the Baha'i Faith (see [Ficicchia, 1981](#)). His book was deemed an academic textbook on the Baha'i Faith. In a foreword to the book, Michael Midlenger describes the work as the 'first authentic and at the same time critical presentation' and calls it a 'comprehensive critical presentation' that could 'scarcely be surpassed' ([Ficicchia, 1981](#), p. 13). Despite the fact that Baha'is considered the work a 'distorting mirror' of their religion with 'almost everything' being 'twisted and disfigured beyond recognition' ([Schaefer et al., 2000](#), p. 1), the work was warmly welcomed in the German academic world and was reviewed approvingly by scholars of ethnology and Arabic studies such as [Henninger \(1983\)](#) and of religious studies such as [Klimkeit \(1984\)](#) and [Schumann \(1985\)](#). Ficicchia came to be regarded as the 'proven expert' on the faith ([Schaefer et al., 2000](#), p. 3, n. 7), and his book was called a 'standard work in the field of religious studies' ([Henninger, 1983](#)). The work soon found its way into encyclopaedias (see [Waldenfels, 1987](#)) and general academic works (see [Jäggi, 1987](#)). Ficicchia himself continues to publish attacks on the faith (see [Ficicchia, 2001](#), with bibliography).

Ficicchia's book harmed the standing of the Baha'i community in Germany. During the 1980s the anti-cult hysteria was at its peak throughout Europe and America, and Ficicchia painted a picture of the community as a typical 'cult' – this while the Baha'is were attempting to establish themselves as a mainstream, or allegiant, community. At first, they decided to ignore Ficicchia's book, thinking that rebuttals would only draw attention to it. After a time, however, they began to see its effect on their relations with government officials (see [Schaefer et al., 2000](#), p. 7 n. 27). The atmosphere created by the book was partly responsible for an adverse decision in the German courts over the registration of the bylaws of a local Baha'i council because those bylaws were deemed to contravene German law. Only in 1991 did the Federal Constitutional Court in

Germany overturn this decision and declare the right of the Baha'i community to be legally recognised in the shape ordained in the scriptures of the Baha'i Faith. The Court stated that the faith was a recognised religion, as confirmed by its inherent character, by public knowledge and by the testimony of scholars of comparative religion (see *Baha'i World*, 1993, pp. 160–1). Only belatedly in 1995, did Baha'is publish a detailed rebuttal of Ficicchia's work, accusing him of plagiarism, disinformation and distortion (see *Schaefer et al.*, 2000).

Concurrently with Ficicchia in Germany, a British apostate, Denis MacEoin, began to write academic articles attacking the Baha'i Faith. He had been a Baha'i from about 1966 to about 1980. He had lectured at Baha'i conferences and at summer schools and had written in support of his religion. He departed after clashes with the Baha'i administration. His first apostate articles (see *MacEoin* 1982, 1983) were published in, of all places, *Religion!* At the time MacEoin was a lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Newcastle (see *MacEoin*, 1982). This article was rebutted by two Baha'i scholars, (see *Afnan and Hatcher* (1985)). MacEoin's (1986a) reply prompted a further round of exchanges (see *Afnan and Hatcher*, 1986; *MacEoin*, 1986b). MacEoin later published an article claiming that there was a 'crisis in Babi and Baha'i studies' (see *MacEoin*, 1990). By this time MacEoin no longer held a university position. This last article was occasioned by a critical review of one of MacEoin's articles by Juan R.I. Cole, who at the time was a Baha'i but who later took much the same position as MacEoin. This article also led to a further interchange (see *Cole*, 1991; *MacEoin*, 1991). Using academic media, MacEoin like Ficicchia, attacks the Baha'i administration. He, too, has also attempted to paint the Baha'i Faith as 'fulfilling most of the criteria for a cult movement'. Having presented the persecution of Baha'is in Iran as similar to the anti-cult movement in the West, he declares that 'anti-cult agitation serves as a device to define, quarantine and possibly eliminate deviance that threatens to disrupt social order' and opines that when the West wakes up to the reality of the Baha'i Faith, it will also treat the Baha'is as a 'cult' (*MacEoin*, 1989, pp. 24–7). His attacks continue (see *MacEoin*, 2005).

The move from core to marginality

While both Ficicchia and MacEoin were marginal Baha'is before becoming apostates, they were not part of an organised marginal group. The sociologist Eileen Barker has observed that marginal members find it difficult to contact and network with other marginals (see *Barker*, 1998, p. 85). This isolation has been particularly true of the Baha'i community, which until recent years has tended to have a deliberate policy of dispersing itself in order to spread the religion, so that the community has been thinly spread. Therefore marginal individuals have in the past had difficulty meeting one another and forming networks. But this situation changed with the advent of the Internet.

The creation in October 1994 of a university-based Internet list called Talisman, created by a US Baha'i university professor 'AA', started a change. The list was set up as a forum for academic debate but soon became precisely the network of 'core members, peripheral members, ex-members and non-members' that Barker describes as necessary for the spread of dissident views and for the formulation of the position of marginals vis-à-vis core members (see *Barker*, 1998, pp. 85–6). Scheler expresses this idea more forcefully, writing that 'the spiritual venom of *ressentiment* is extremely contagious' (*Scheler*, 1961, p. 48). Through this medium the marginals have been able

to create a community of dissent, to build ‘plausibility structures’⁶ that support their positions, and to engage in debates that have gradually moved many of them to more extreme positions and eventually to apostasy.

The discussions on *Talisman* were sometimes heated, with core members opposing positions put forward by marginals and ex-Baha’is on the list. There is some evidence that the extreme positions put forward by some of the list participants were causing disquiet to the Counsellors and their Auxiliary Boards, who are charged with guarding against schism in the Baha’i community, and that they privately contacted Cole and some other list members in the autumn of 1995.⁷ The discussions on *Talisman* might have gone on indefinitely but for an episode that occurred on 7 February 1996. Unknown to the majority of the participants on *Talisman*, a group of marginal Baha’is had set up a separate secret e-mail list called *Majnun*. On 7 February, ‘AA’ accidentally put on the *Talisman* list a posting intended for the *Majnun* list. What made the posting noteworthy was that its content revealed that the discussion on *Majnun* was centred on finding a ‘winning strategy’ for the marginal Baha’is.⁸ In most religious groups this goal might not have been significant, but the functioning of the Baha’i community strictly forbids the formation of parties and sects, especially those with a partisan political aim.

The revelation of the existence of a secret group with perceived political aims spurred the Counsellors and their Auxiliary Boards to act in what for them was a new situation. They appear to have decided to ask one of their members, who had himself participated on *Talisman*, to meet face-to-face with a number of the marginal Baha’is whose comments on *Talisman* had caused most concern. One of the marginal Baha’is so approached took the statements made to him as a threat to declare him a ‘covenant-breaker’. He decided to tender his resignation from the Baha’i Faith in May 1996. This individual was Juan Cole, a professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Michigan. He had been a Baha’i for twenty-five years, during which time he had travelled to the Middle East and West Africa to propagate the religion and had written in support of his religion. On the *Talisman* list, however, he had voiced concerns about certain aspects of the Baha’i administration and had moved from being a core member to becoming a marginal one. In the fallout from the *Talisman* episode and Cole’s resignation, there were a few further resignations of marginal Baha’is over the next few years.

The apostates 1996–2006

Sociologist James Beckford has noted that what in retrospect is clearly seen as an exit is often a prolonged, ill-defined and complex process involving vacillation and negotiation. Those in the midst of it are often not even conscious that they are engaged in leaving their religious community (see Beckford, 1978, pp. 109–14). As with numerous other religious groups, the majority of those leaving the Baha’i community become what Bromley calls ‘leavetakers’, exiting the religion with

⁶ By ‘plausibility structures’ the sociologist Peter Berger means the social base – here the Internet conversations of a group of individuals – that constructs and maintains a particular reality – here the apostate belief system – that makes that reality seem plausible and objective. See Berger (1969), p. 45.

⁷ Robert Stockman, personal correspondence, 26 September 2006.

⁸ <http://www.angelfire.com/space/talisman/T96feb2.htm> (accessed on 28 July 2006).

mixed feelings but soon completely detaching themselves from their former religion.⁹ Of the sixty-six individuals who were identified in the survey as ex-Baha'is, thirty-eight give the year of their departure. Of these thirty-eight, twenty-six (68%) departed in the period 1996–2002, which was the peak of the post-Talisman upheaval (eleven were before and one after). It should not be surmised, however, that all of these twenty-six left because of the Talisman episode. In reading their accounts, many seem to have been unaware of the episode. Rather, it would seem that a more general phenomenon was occurring, whereby, through the medium of the Internet, marginal Baha'is were realising that there were others who held their opinions, so that they could build for themselves plausibility structures that sustained them for a time. The Internet also enabled some of them to come into contact with ex-Baha'is and with opponents of the Baha'i Faith, thereby encouraging them to leave the religion altogether.

Most of these sixty-six individuals would be described as leavetakers. They went on to other religions or to no religion. Ten individuals identified as apostates – they have engaged in a sustained campaign against the main Baha'i community – have been active during and since the Talisman episode. Two of these, K. Paul Johnson and William Garlington, are Americans who had, like Ficicchia and MacEoin, already left the Baha'i community before 1996. Johnson, a librarian, had been a Baha'i for five years (1969–74) and could be called a serial apostate since he then became a theosophist and subsequently wrote a book 'debunking' Blavatsky (see Johnson, 1994). He has now moved on to Edgar Cayce's Association for Research and Enlightenment. He was active on the Talisman list as an ex-Baha'i, attacking core Baha'i beliefs and publishing an article about the Talisman episode in *Gnosis* magazine (see Johnson, 1997).

Garlington, a schoolteacher, had been a Baha'i from the 1960s to the 1980s, during which time he completed a PhD thesis on the Baha'i community in India and taught at schools in Australia and USA. He subsequently became a Christian and participated on e-mail lists. Only recently has he become an outright apostate. He has written *The Baha'i Faith in America*, published by Praeger (2005). Of the 113 pages in the book devoted to American Baha'i history, one chapter of sixteen pages (i.e., 14%) claims to be about the 'priorities and issues' affecting the American Baha'i community but instead details the major points that have been discussed by marginals and apostates on the Internet, and these points are entirely different from the priorities and issues of the core members. By contrast, the building of the Baha'i House of Worship in Wilmette near Chicago, a project that was a central concern of the American Baha'i community for some fifty years, receives fewer than two pages of attention (see Garlington, 2005).

None of these four who left the Baha'i Faith before 1996 considers himself a Baha'i any longer. Of the eight who have become apostates after the Talisman episode of 1996, three have moved away from the Baha'i Faith completely. One, Eric Stetson, an American, was a Baha'i for four years (1998–2002). By 2001, he had become a marginal Baha'i, declaring that he had doubts about the authoritarian nature of the Baha'i administration. By the end of that year he was claiming prophethood for himself and was setting up a website (www.bahai-faith.com). There, in early 2002, he published *The Book of Restoration*, with nineteen points for the reformation of the Baha'i Faith. He also announced the setting up of the Alliance for the Reform of the Baha'i Faith,

⁹ I include as leavetakers rather than apostates those who post a single exit statement on the Internet that gives the reason for their departure but are not subsequently involved in a campaign of recrimination. Some exit statements even evince warm feelings for the religion they have left.

a group that appears never to have come into existence. Later in the same year he became a Christian, founding his own sect, called Christian Universalism. He then altered his website, dedicating it to discrediting the Baha'i Faith and converting Baha'is to Christianity (see Stetson, 2006, 2001).

Another apostate, 'BB', was born into an Iranian Baha'i family resident in Australia and had a marginal career on *Talisman* before resigning membership of the Baha'i community in 1996. He declared that he still believed in Baha'u'llah but did not accept the leadership of the Universal House of Justice. He then became involved in Sufism, but next announced a messianic claim for himself and became a Babi – a member of the religion that preceded the Baha'i Faith in Iran. There are still a few persons who regard themselves as Babis and as followers of Azal (1832–1912), who claimed to be the true successor of the Bab and who opposed Baha'u'llah. But these Azalis would probably be somewhat bemused by BB's idiosyncratic mix of Neo-Platonism, Kabbala and Sufism. Currently, he is inhabiting various marginal Baha'i e-mail lists and Usenet groups and issuing vitriolic denunciations of the Baha'i Faith, which he terms an 'evil cult'. At present, he seems to be against Baha'i core members, marginals and fellow apostates alike.

While all of the apostates described have attacked the Baha'i Faith from a liberal viewpoint, there has been at least one Baha'i apostate who has attacked the religion from the conservative viewpoint. 'CC' was an American Mormon who converted to the Baha'i Faith briefly in 1996 and then converted back to Mormonism. He requested reinstatement to the Baha'i Faith in 1998 but then withdrew his request and declared himself an 'Independent Christian' in 2004. Since 1996, CC has been vociferously criticising the Baha'i leadership on Usenet groups, mainly for its supposedly liberal stance on abortion.¹⁰

The remaining five apostates are in many ways the most interesting, for they have maintained some form of Baha'i identity even outside the Baha'i community. The first of these is Juan Cole, who, upon his resignation from the Baha'i Faith in 1996, declared that he was a Universalist-Unitarian. When AA closed down the *Talisman* list in 1996, Cole immediately set up a substitute list on his university's server. In 1998, he included a number of apostate issues in the text of an academic book on Baha'u'llah that he had written (see Cole, 1998a, pp. 183–4, 196–7). In 1999, however, he stated that he did, after all, believe in Baha'u'llah but would not re-enrol in the Baha'i community. He thus became one of those who often call themselves 'unenrolled Baha'is'. He has gone on to an apostate career which has included the setting up of a website in which there is much material attacking the Baha'i institutions and the publication of three articles in academic journals expanding on his views.

In the first of these articles, Cole's prime aim seems to be to find ways of portraying the Baha'i community as the kind of 'cult' demonised in the 1970–80s. Although the Baha'i Faith practices no social isolation of new converts, Cole nevertheless portrays membership in the Baha'i community as socially isolating and depicts the Baha'i administration as dictatorial and controlling – the standard accusations made against 'subversive' religious movements (see Cole, 1998b).

¹⁰ His story is actually complex: see <http://www.fglaysheer.com/bahaicensorship/Ex5.htm>, <http://www.utlm.org/newsletters/no79.htm>, and http://www.utlm.org/onlineresources/letters_to_the_editor/2004/2004june.htm (accessed on 25 October 2006). The Baha'i Faith prohibits abortion when the purpose is merely to prevent the birth of an unwanted child but recognises that other considerations may be involved and thereby leaves the decision to the conscience of the individuals concerned. 'CC' evidently thinks that this alternative provision is being interpreted too loosely.

In his second academic article, Cole turns to the other favoured accusations made against ‘cults’, that of financial irregularities, and also touches on the additional favoured accusation of sexual improprieties (see [Cole, 2000](#)). This article again deals with the theme of authoritarian control by the elected Baha’i institutions, as does the third article, which seeks to demonstrate a fundamentalist take-over of the American Baha’i community in the 1990s. Cole here uses Weberian categories to argue that the Baha’i community has moved away from ‘church-like’ behaviour towards ‘sect-like’ tendencies (see [Cole, 2002](#)). Cole has also set up an e-mail list, H-Bahai (as part of the H-Net network of academic lists), which is represented as an academic, moderated e-mail list. However, by using marginal and apostate moderators and by expelling or censoring the posts of core members, he has made this list a medium for marginals and apostates. The traffic on the list has dwindled to a trickle, with most apostates and marginals preferring the freer, less academic environment of other lists and with core Baha’is setting up their own academic lists.¹¹

The second of these five apostates who have maintained some sort of Baha’i identity is Frederick Glaysher, an American, who was a Baha’i for some twenty-five years, writing for Baha’i magazines and teaching at community colleges. He gradually became a marginal member after personal clashes with Iranian Baha’is in his community. He does not appear to have participated on the Talisman list but came to prominence as a marginal Baha’i when, following the rejection of some of his postings to the moderated Usenet group `soc.religion.bahai`, he started `alt.religion.bahai`. In 1997, he launched a campaign to set up another unmoderated group, `talk.religion.bahai`. Yet having succeeded in setting this up, he has largely withdrawn from active participation in it and merely ‘spams’ the group with repeated formula e-mails decrying Baha’i ‘censorship’. He appears to have been dropped from Baha’i membership lists in 1996, when he sent an acerbic letter demanding to be removed from the mailing lists and threatening to sue if contacted. Yet he continued to insist that he was a full member of the Baha’i community – at least until October 2004, when he set up his own Baha’i group, the Reform Bahai Faith. There do not seem to have been many members of this group, and Glaysher himself announced that he was withdrawing ‘from being central to its development, looking to a Convocation in 2006 to resolve this and other issues’. Since the Convocation itself was cancelled, this group may no longer exist, if in fact it ever functioned (see [Glaysher, 2004, 2005](#)). Since 1998, Glaysher has run a website where he has accumulated more than 600 pages of marginal and apostate material (see [Glaysher, 1998](#)).

Several researchers have noted the tendency among apostates to move from fact to fantasy, reworking the facts about the group that they have left so as to confirm their own vision of it (see, for example [Johnson, 1998](#)). Glaysher exemplifies this phenomenon. He comes out from time to time with what can only be called blitzkriegs of e-mails that make claims which range from the unlikely to the bizarre. He asserts that the Universal House of Justice ordered the assassination in 1982 of a leading American Baha’i who had in fact been a victim of street crime, and he claims that the Baha’i community conspired with the British Baha’i scientist Dr David Kelly to get the

¹¹ The website associated with H-Bahai has much material, mostly contributed by core Baha’is, that is of academic value, but that material is mixed with other material clearly intended to advance the apostate view, material mostly contributed by Cole.

British and American governments to go to war with Iraq in 2003 in order to regain access to Baha'i holy places.¹²

'DD' is a Northern Ireland Baha'i who resigned his membership in 2002 after thirteen years as a Baha'i and after several years as a marginal Baha'i on talk.religion.bahai. Since his resignation, he has continued to participate on that Usenet group, becoming ever more extreme in his attacks on the Baha'i faith.

Alison Marshall was a member of the New Zealand Baha'i community for twenty years (1980–2000). In 1994, she and her husband, Steve, joined the Talisman discussions. Alison herself developed a special interest in the question of women on the Universal House of Justice.¹³ It appears to have been her persistent pursuit of this question and her challenging the authority of the Universal House of Justice that led the House in 2000 to decide that 'on the basis of an established pattern of statements by you and behaviour and attitude on your part over the past two or three years, you cannot properly be considered as meeting the requirements of membership in the Baha'i community' (Marshall, 2005b). As sociologist James Richardson and psychologists Jans van der Lans and Frans Derks have observed, expelling a member from a non-communal group is difficult to achieve if the member does not co-operate and can result in negative publicity (see Richardson et al., 1986, p. 105). Marshall then became a 'whistle-blower' (see Bromley, 1998c, pp. 31–5), initiating unsuccessful actions against the Baha'i community through the New Zealand Office of the Privacy Commissioner and the New Zealand High Court. Since then, she has become a *cause celebre* among apostate Baha'is, and her expulsion is regularly cited as an example of authoritarianism. She herself has done much to publicise her grievances, and she has set up a website that appears to be a site introducing Baha'u'llah but that also contains much apostate material (see Marshall, 2005a). Her husband remains a marginal Baha'i, although his own attacks on the Baha'i institutions have been even more bitter than hers. He runs his own website, which is also a portal to marginal and apostate material (see Marshall, 2004).

The last person to be considered in detail is Karen Bacquet, who was a Baha'i for fourteen years until her resignation in 1999. She is somewhat atypical in that there appears to have been no period in which she was a marginal Baha'i prior to her exit. Although she states that she had had doubts mainly over the functioning of the Baha'i institutions, the exclusion of women from the Universal House of Justice and the poor quality of community life in the small town where she lived, she had been an active core Baha'i. Since exiting, she has run a web discussion list for apostates on beliefnet.com called 'Unenrolled Baha'is' as well as a website that presents her apostate positions (see Bacquet, n.d.). She has also written articles in *Cultic Studies Journal*, a publication of the American Family Foundation (later the International Cultic Studies

¹² See <http://www.fglaysher.com/bahaicensorsip/uhj12-10-99.htm> and <http://www.fglaysher.com/bahaicensorsip/Kelly.htm> (both accessed on 25 June 2006). It is not clear what accusation Glaysher is making, but in any case he has overlooked the fact that Kelly's actions were *against* a reading of the intelligence data that led to war. Glaysher has fallen out with many of the other apostates and marginals: see, for example, <http://www.fglaysher.com/bahaicensorsip/hate16.htm> (accessed on 25 October 2006).

¹³ Women are eligible to be elected or appointed to all Baha'i institutions except the Universal House of Justice. This exclusion is an anomaly in a religion that advocates the equality of women and men as one of its main teachings, and it has caused a 'crisis of faith' for some, especially as no reason is given in the Baha'i scriptures beyond an assurance that the reason will become clear in due course.

Association), an anti-cult group (see Bacquet, 2001), and another in *Nova Religio*, an academic journal devoted to ‘alternative and emergent religions’ (see Bacquet, 2006).

Deciding who should or should not be classified as an apostate is, of course, subjective, and there are a number of other individuals that some may have added to the list. One Australian woman, ‘EE’, was born into a Baha’i family and then converted to Islam. She has set up a website that, like Alison Marshall’s, appears at first to be supportive of the Baha’i Faith but that turns out to be advocating rejection (see www.bahai-religion.org, accessed on 26 June 2006). These websites are intended both to alert anyone who may be investigating the Baha’i Faith to what the website’s creator regards as the hidden dark side of the Baha’i Faith and also perhaps to lure some core members of the Baha’i community to marginality. There are also two individuals, a Canadian Baha’i and a New Zealand Baha’i living in the Netherlands, who have both, like Marshall, been declared not to be Baha’is because of their persistent challenges to the Universal House of Justice. But these two do not share the *ressentiment* described by Scheler, and so have not been included in the list.

Although he is also not listed in the three websites surveyed, Kai Borrmann should be mentioned because he has also published in an academic medium. The German Borrmann was a Baha’i for some months in 1997–98. In 2005, he published a German translation of the *Kitab Aqdas*, the most important work of Baha’u’llah. The author has a poor grasp of Arabic, is unfamiliar with Baha’i terminology, and has consulted little of the relevant secondary literature, including the German translation of the *Kitab Aqdas* brought out by the German Baha’i community in 2000. The chapter titles are flippant and are intended to be derisive of the Baha’is — for example, ‘Animal Farm’ and ‘Abracadabra’. One is therefore surprised to find that this book is the publication of a doctoral thesis gained from the University of Freiburg and is published in an academic series (see Borrmann, 2005).

The apostates described here, whatever their differences, share an obsessive hatred of their former religious community. Their obsession illustrates Scheler’s concept of *ressentiment*, as described by the sociologist John Hall: ‘a form of envious rage that seeks either to discredit or to emulate the object of its affect, and sometimes, to do both’ (Hall, 1988, p. 237). True to Scheler’s characterisation, these apostates are ‘engaged in a continuous chain of acts of revenge against [their] own spiritual past’.

Although these apostate groups and the very similar ‘covenant-breaker’ groups, as they are known by core Baha’is, are often referred to as sects or splinter groups of the Baha’i Faith, this characterisation is in a sense incorrect. These groups are not developing their own distinctive beliefs and practices. They exist only to attack the main Baha’i community. In Scheler’s terms, they are not living in their new faith community but are engaged only in a series of acts against their former community. Their new community exists only as a ‘point of reference’ from which to attack the former community. Because they exist only to vent their hatred of the core Baha’i Faith, previous generations of ‘covenant-breakers’ have barely survived the death of their founder members (see Cohen, 1972).

Opposition and dissidence will always arise in a large enough group, and sometimes the anger of the dissident can be constructive. Martin Luther could channel his opposition into an alternative pathway that others could follow. But if he had restricted himself to railing against the Roman Catholic Church, he would have been no more than a footnote to church history. *Ressentiment* is not a basis for a long-term community.

Apostate narratives

Bromley's description of apostates gives a large role to oppositional coalitions — anti-cult groups — who assist apostates to leave, help them construct their narratives and usually also help them forge their subsequent apostate careers (see Bromley, 1998b, pp. 36–8). In the case of the Baha'i apostates, it can be seen that, thanks to the Internet, they have formed their own oppositional group to give one another support, to create plausibility structures and to encourage others to leave the Faith. On Internet e-mail lists, marginals and apostates 'progressively negotiate a version of reality that make sense to them and that can be inter-subjectively confirmed by other significant actors' (Beckford, 1978, p. 111). Here 'atrocious tales' (Bromley et al., 1979) could be told, and exits could be negotiated. Talisman and its successor e-mail groups acted as a 're-evaluation' medium, by which those departing could compile 'justificatory and excusatory accounts' to account for their initial joining, their remaining and their eventual departure (see Richardson et al., 1986, pp. 106, 110). The accounts have many features that are comparable with those renouncing any group to which they have been committed. The flavour of these accounts is well summed up, by Arthur Koestler's reflection on his departure from the Communist Party: 'As a rule, our memory romanticizes the past. But when one has renounced a creed, ... the opposite mechanism sets to work. In the light of that later knowledge, the original experience loses its innocence, becomes tainted and rancid in recollection.... Irony, anger and shame keep intruding' (Koestler et al., 1950, pp. 63–4).

Most apostate narratives follow a certain structural framework that has been called a 'captivity narrative'. Facts are often reworked to fit the expected narrative (see, for example, Johnson, 1998). As Baha'is move to the margins of the religion in the Internet age, they come into the circle of the marginal, apostate and ex-Baha'i community. They seek to create exit narrative that meets the expectations of this community (see Bromley, 1998c, p. 37). It is therefore not surprising that these narratives look increasingly alike as the marginal and apostate networks become more established, with individuals declaring that they have now realised that the real reason they were unhappy with the Baha'i community was the standard apostate issues rather than any reason they had originally given for exiting.¹⁴

The captivity narrative must explain why, if the Baha'i community is as terrible as apostates are now saying it is, they remained in it. In the narratives of those joining communal NRMs, physical and psychological isolation and restraint are the reasons often given — hence the term 'captivity narratives'. Since this explanation is not plausible in the case of the Baha'i community, one reason often offered is that the convert was kept in ignorance of the true teachings or workings of the Baha'i community (see, for example, Bacquet, 1999). But because a plea of ignorance would be implausible and embarrassing to those apostates who are well educated and apostatised after decades of membership, the accounts tend to claim that the Baha'i community became the terrible movement that it now is only *after* they had joined it (see, for example, Cole, 2002).

¹⁴ See, for example, Glaysher's early disaffection, which appears to centre on his dissatisfaction with Iranian Baha'is and on his conviction that Baha'is are not living up to the high standards of the Baha'i teachings: see his 'Letters from the American Desert: 1989–1994' at <http://www.fglaysher.com/bahaicensors/ship/LettersAmD1989-1994.htm>. His later statements focus on the core apostate themes of the authoritarian nature of the Baha'i administration and the lack of freedom in the Baha'i community: see <http://www.fglaysher.com/bahaicensors/ship/technique.htm>.

Apostate mythology

Reading the Internet postings and websites, one finds that through the telling and retelling of stories, some factual and some exaggerated or reworked, an apostate mythology has developed. Individuals from before the Talisman episode have been made into heroes, and a spiritual past has been created to strengthen the apostate's present plausibility structure.

Some of this apostate mythology goes back as long ago as the 1920s and 1930s and tells stories of persons like Ruth White and Ahmad Sohrab, both of whom clashed with the Baha'i leadership and were expelled. These episodes are largely factual, but nonfactual myths have also arisen, as in the story of Fazel Mazandarani. He was an Iranian Baha'i scholar who wrote a history of the Baha'i Faith, the first part of which was published in the early 1940s. As Juan Cole reworks the story, Mazandarani was reprimanded for contradicting official Baha'i history; he was made to sign a prepared confession, his book was withdrawn from circulation; the publication of further volumes of the history was prohibited, and he was silenced for the rest of his life (see Cole, 1998c). In fact, none of these five incidents happened,¹⁵ but the myth does support Cole's personal plausibility structure as an academic who is in conflict with the Baha'i authorities.

Just as heroes have to be created to populate apostate mythology, so, too, do anti-heroes. In the Mazandarani myth from Cole, the role of anti-hero is given to Mr Ali-Akbar Furutan, who was the secretary of the elected national council of the Baha'is of Iran at that time and who is portrayed as tyrannical and is called an 'Inquisitor' and a 'bigot' (see Cole, 1998c). Yet most core Baha'is remember him as a kindly man who was always very humorous. Iranian Muslims remember him as the person who in the 1940s gave talks on Iranian national radio about raising children, in which he introduced the idea to Iranians that it was wrong to beat children (see Rafati, 2005).

Apart from these events from the past, a series of episodes from the more recent American Baha'i past has become an almost universal part of many apostates' recounting of their spiritual world. A Baha'i study class which ran in the 1970s in Los Angeles and which, according to the apostate account, was suppressed by the national Baha'i institutions, whereas in fact it continued for years after the institutional intervention. *Dialogue*, a Baha'i magazine published in Los Angeles, was prevented in 1988 from publishing an article that was deemed to be trying to influence voting.¹⁶ These are among the episodes that are told and retold in apostate e-mails and on apostate websites and indeed have now become so firmly a part of the apostate mythology that they no longer need to be recounted in full. A single word or phrase is sufficient to invoke their mythological presence.

Apostate issues

The issues raised by the apostates are well characterised by Scheler: 'The formal structure of *ressentiment* expression is always the same: A is affirmed, valued, and praised not for its own

¹⁵ See Momen (1999, 2002) and e-mail correspondence with Iraj Ayman, who was a student of Fazel Mazandarani, 27 June 2006.

¹⁶ The Baha'i electoral process allows no candidates, no party platforms and no electioneering. Instead, electors are asked to reflect on the capacities and spiritual qualities of those eligible for election.

intrinsic quality, but with the unverballed intention of denying, devaluating, and denigrating B. A is “played off” against B’ (Scheler, 1961, p. 68).

The issues raised by the apostates and marginals have tended to converge¹⁷:

1. The authority of the Baha’i institutions and individual freedom: Many of the apostates left the religion or were expelled after a clash with the institutions of the Baha’i Faith, and so it is not surprising that they frequently accuse the Baha’i institutions of being ‘authoritarian’ and ‘dictatorial’. Core members are accused either of being fundamentalists or of being mindless followers of the dictates of the Universal House of Justice. Other issues that regularly appear are the Baha’i doctrine of the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice, which is ridiculed, and the assertion that free enquiry and scholarship are discouraged and even suppressed by the Baha’i community. Since many of the marginals and apostates are also engaged in writing about the Baha’i Faith, the requirement to submit writings to pre-publication review is an issue that is frequently raised. The exclusion of women from the Universal House of Justice also regularly appears (see, especially, Bacquet, 2006).
2. Baha’i community life: Many of the apostates record clashes with Baha’is of different cultural backgrounds, in particular Iranians. They state that they felt pressured to take part in Baha’i propagation activities. They complain that the pressure to propagate the religion causes the quality of community life to be neglected. Leavetakers who have gone on to become Christians comment that they felt that the lack of a priesthood in the Baha’i community meant that there was not sufficient pastoral care in times of crisis.
3. Baha’i teachings: A number of Baha’i teachings are frequently attacked by the apostate websites. One of these is the negative attitude towards homosexuality expressed in the authoritative Baha’i texts. Most apostates think that this position is outdated. The other major area criticised, especially by those apostates who have gone on to other religions, is the teaching that all religion has come to humanity from one divine source and thus is one in its spiritual and ethical aspects. Therefore any differences that occur come either from the social teachings that are adapted to the different circumstances in which each religion appeared or from rituals and dogmas added after the time of the founder. This teaching is said to be contradicted by the evidence of the wide disparities in the doctrines of the different religions.

The path to apostasy

The experiences described by the marginals and apostates occur precisely because of their marginality, which is thus less effect than cause. As they express dissident ideas in their public statements, marginal Baha’is increasingly come up against the institutions of the Baha’i Faith – the elected and more particularly the appointed ones charged with keeping an eye out for potential schism. The more marginal that members become, the more that they are confronted by these institutions in their guardian role. A vicious circle arises: marginal Baha’is trigger the intervention of the Baha’i institutions, which leads to repressed hostility and rancour, the expression of which

¹⁷ Except where noted, otherwise, the data for this section are taken from the three websites listed in footnote 5 as well as from the individual apostate and marginal sites noted previously.

triggers yet more severe intervention by the Baha'i institutions. The experience of the core members is however that the elected institutions of the Baha'i Faith help to facilitate the activity of the Baha'is, to guide in personal and community matters, and to provide communication among the global Baha'i community. The Counsellors and their Auxiliary Boards and assistants are experienced as giving encouragement and personal advice.

By the time that marginal Baha'is have moved to apostate status, their accounts become even darker. A religion that for the core members has peace and unity as a central teaching and that engages in consultative decision-making for its administrative procedures becomes, in the apostate accounts, a fiercely aggressive religion in which petty dictators rule and a global theocracy is the goal. Thus the experience of the marginals and apostates is the exact opposite – a dark mirror – of that of the core members.

The sociologist Stuart Wright has pointed out a parallel between exiting a religion and getting divorced (see Wright, 1991). When one bears in mind Scheler's description of the apostate as one who 'is engaged in a continuous chain of acts of revenge against his own spiritual past' and who 'remains a captive of this past, and the new faith is merely a handy frame of reference for negating and rejecting the old', one is reminded of rancorous divorces. For most couples, accusations and recriminations can take up to five years to get over. But some former spouses cannot let go. Even after a decade or more, they cannot get over the rage, depression and vindictiveness they feel. According to the psychologists Florence Kaslow and Lita Schwartz, two groups of former spouses tend to fall into this second category: those with personal psychopathology and those who have become deeply distressed during the process of separation (see Schwartz and Kaslow, 1997, pp. 80–1, 229–30). If one uses this parallel for divorce, it is noteworthy that many of those who become apostates have already had a considerable career as marginal Baha'is, as is not usually the case with the Baha'i leavetakers. It may therefore be that the period of time spent as a marginal Baha'i, with the attendant problems encountered with the Baha'i institutions, creates the conditions of distress and *ressentiment* that spell future apostasy.

The effects of apostasy

These ongoing apostate attacks on the Baha'i Faith have had an effect on the way that the Baha'i Faith is viewed by outsiders. They have appeared in a textbook on the Baha'i Faith by Margit Warburg, who is professor of the sociology of religion in Copenhagen (see Warburg, 2003, pp. 66–8). Some neutral websites, such as www.religioustolerance.org, which is run by the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, have adopted the apostate positions on many issues. What occurred in Germany has been described.

What impact do apostate groups have on the religion that they leave? Since conflict is viewed negatively by Baha'is, the pathway of contention chosen by apostates is unlikely to be effective. Yet the changes that have been occurring in the Baha'i world can be seen to be in the direction suggested by some apostates. In the last decade the Universal House of Justice has encouraged Baha'is to reach out and become more open in inviting others to their meetings, particularly to a set of 'core activities' – study circles, devotionals, youth groups and children's classes. It has encouraged the development of a 'community of interest' for those who are not fully committed members (see Universal House of Justice, 2005, p. 51). There has been a move to decrease hierarchical power structures in the Baha'i community by moving the locus for most decision-making

to groups of Baha'is at district level.¹⁸ Still, these changes have probably not arisen in reaction to the apostates. Rather, they accord with the Baha'i teachings. Moreover, the preliminary work on most of these changes was carried out in South America in the 1970s and was rolled out in stages to the rest of the world from the early 1990s, before the Talisman episode had occurred.

Conclusion

In the last three decades, there has been a group of individuals who, although it has had no great status within the Baha'i community and their numbers are small, has, partly by reason of being articulate and well-educated and partly by virtue of the Internet, been able to create an effective platform of opposition to the Baha'i community. This article has been a study of these individuals as they have moved from being core to being marginal members and eventually to apostates. There can, of course, be no single privileged vantage point from which to view this complex process of marginality, leavetaking and apostasy, but the present study has suggested a number of interesting points that would warrant further study:

1. The majority of the apostates have tried to turn the status of the Baha'i Faith from that of an 'allegiant organisation' to that of a 'subversive' one, or a 'cult'. The issues that the apostates raise and the reworking of their exit narratives mirror the accusations often made against 'cults' by the media at the height of the anti-cult hysteria in the 1970s and 1980s and by anti-cult groups ever since. The apostates have accused the Baha'i institutions of being authoritarian and repressive, have characterised the Baha'i community as a socially isolating environment, and have described core Baha'is as either fundamentalists or as slavish and mindless followers of the leadership. In some countries, such as Germany, the apostates have been partly successful in influencing the public perception of the Baha'i community.
2. The experience of persons moving from the centre to marginality and on to apostasy can be the opposite of that of those who remain within the core of the movement. It is thus important to recognise that when Baha'i apostates give descriptions of tyranny and authoritarianism, they are referring to exactly the same institutions and individuals that core members experience as providing encouragement and guidance.
3. The use of the Internet by these apostates has been both extensive and crucial. Contact with fellow ex-Baha'is has helped them create plausibility structures to make sense of their rejection of the faith. The Internet has enabled them to reach others who might join their cause. Some apostates have set up websites that appear to serve core Baha'is but that in fact gradually expose the reader to apostate material. Some have even tried, unsuccessfully, to use the Internet to set up organised splinter groups of the Baha'i Faith.
4. By drawing on figures from Baha'i history, some factual and some considerably reworked, the apostates have created an apostate mythology, with its own heroes and anti-heroes. This mythology, when combined with the apostate issues, which form something of a creed that is

¹⁸ Where previously plans of action were drawn up at the world headquarters and mandated to the national and local institutions, now plans of action are drawn up at the local level, in cycles of action loosely based on a framework suggested by the world headquarters. See, for example, [International Teaching Centre \(2003\)](#), section 4.1, p. 17.

regularly recited; the ‘captivity narratives’ are the equivalent of salvation or conversion stories; and the medium of the Internet, creating a community, amounts almost to the creation of a religion of its own. One could call it an ‘implicit religion’ (see Bailey, 1983). But since this ‘religion’ has no independent life and exists only to oppose, it would perhaps be more accurate to call it an anti-religion.

5. Although in fact only one of the apostates currently holds an academic post, apostates have been very successful in their use of the academic media to present their views. Several have published books and articles in respectable venues.
6. The analysis presented in this article shows that the road that leads to apostasy is usually a long one. Clashes with the central authorities in the religion over positions, actions or strategies lead to the build up of *ressentiment*, which is expressed in ways that, in the Baha’i community at least, leads to further clashes. Frustration leads to marginality and in turn to rejection of the religion. The accumulated hostility can then lead to apostasy. By the time that *ressentiment* has built up, there is little that the central authorities of a religion can do, since, as Scheler has pointed out, ‘It is peculiar to “*ressentiment* criticism” that it does not seriously desire that its demands be fulfilled. It does not want to cure the evil: the evil is merely a pretext for criticism’ (Scheler, 1961, p. 51). If religious movements want to avoid apostasy, they must act at an early stage in this process.

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Dr Moojan Momen, by profession a medical doctor, is an independent scholar with a special interest in the study of the Baha'i Faith and Shi'i Islam. He has written *Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (Yale University Press, 1985); *The Babi and Baha'i Faiths 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (George Ronald, 1982) and *The Phenomenon of Religion* (OneWorld, 1999). He is a Baha'i.