

Motif Research: Peter Berger and the Bahá'í Faith¹

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At the beginning of his academic career the American sociologist Peter Berger undertook the first sociological study of the Bahá'í Faith, seeking to describe two fundamental transformations it had undergone in its short but eventful history—the transformation from a millenarian movement within *Shí'a* Islam into an independent religion with a world-wide following, and the routinization of charismatic leadership into largely rational-legal forms. To aid in his description of these transformations Berger identified two underlying 'motifs': messianic and gnostic themes whose development in the course of Bahá'í history he outlined.

In the present paper I shall argue that Berger's approach provides a useful aid to the study of religious or other historical movements, but that at a theoretical level the motif concept needs to be defined more rigorously. As a detailed illustration of motif research I will comment on Berger's work on [the] Bahá'í [Faith] and advance my own characterizations of the motifs relevant to an understanding of its history. I am not concerned with offering a comprehensive discussion of Berger's work *qua* history, nor with commenting on the broader theoretical concerns raised by Berger's work.²

Motif research

The concept of 'motif' is derived from the 'Lund School' of Swedish theology, especially the work of Anders Nygren (1953) and Gustav Aulen (1948), and 'refers to a specific pattern or

gestalt of religious experience that can be traced in a historical development'. (Berger: 1954b: 478)³ The motif is an abstraction from reality, based on religious content, rather than theological analysis; theology itself being seen as the attempt to articulate the motif intellectually. As used by Berger the concept is no longer confined to the Christian tradition but is seen as useful in the analysis of any historical process. Historical study of a religion enables the researcher to identify the dominant motif or motifs, and once this fundamental pattern is understood, he is able to understand the totality of the religious experience under study and to distinguish between its central and ephemeral aspects. Furthermore, changes in motifs over time can be used in the attempt to relate changes in religious content with changes in the social structure of a religious movement (Berger: 1954a: 156-9; 1954b:477-9; 1957: 93; 1958: 44).

At a theoretical level, Berger inadequately distinguishes his own position from that of Nygren and the Lundensians, for whilst not stated by Berger, there are two important differences between the type of motif identified by Nygren and those Berger himself identifies. Nygren's 'fundamental' motifs are essentially the answers to fundamental, that is ultimate, questions (1953: 41-3), and, as the most fundamental question of all is seen as the relationship between man and God, the fundamental motifs of the various historical religions are defined in terms of that relationship. The three principal relationships are thus: *agape*, in which 'unmotivated' divine love is regarded as leading to man's receipt of undeserved grace; *eros*, the (Hellenistic) human longing to reach the level of the divine; and *nomos*, the Judaic concern with law (1972: 374-7). In contrast to Nygren's obviously theological concerns, Berger's motifs whilst theologically derived, are of greater sociological import and in his 'typology' of motifs as applied to the American religious scene are directly related to various attitudes towards the world.⁴ Berger's concern is with the 'fundamental' pattern of religious experience in a particular historical development, not with the answers to fundamental questions.

The second difference lies in the degree to which the motif is held to describe what is essential in a religion. Each religion has an 'organic distinctiveness', a particular 'basic idea' or 'driving power' which gives its character to the religion as a whole. (Ferre 1967: 69; Nygren 1953: 35) When Nygren describes *Agape* as being the fundamental motif of Christianity, he seems to be describing what he regards as the 'essence' of Christianity, in contrast to the unwelcomed intrusions of *Eros* and *Nomos*. Berger's position in comparison

is somewhat ambivalent. In practice he adopts a flexibility of approach, dealing with various 'dominant' motifs in a fairly pragmatic manner without seeming to assume that any one should be equated with the 'essence' of a particular religion. At the same time, Berger's theoretical position seems to approach that of the Lundensians when he writes that an understanding of the fundamental gestalt enables 'the totality of the religious experience being investigated' to be made clear (1954b: 478).

If the concept of the motif is to have a wider sociological usefulness it must have a clearer theoretical base than that provided by Berger and one which is less theologically determined than that provided by the Lundensians. A suitable base would be that kind of ideal-type which Weber termed the 'idea' (Weber 1949: 95-7; Burger 1976: 132-3). In contrast to the Lundensians' intent to describe the 'essence' of a religion, motif research as Weberian ideal typification, would be concerned only to provide an unambiguous means of description of what was significant, given specific research purposes. Their status would be that of mental constructs, descriptions of constructed configurations designed to be of heuristic value, rather than accounts of historical reality as such. Whilst a motif may be fundamental to a researcher's understanding of a religion, it is not possible to claim that it is fundamental to the religion itself in any absolute sense.⁵

Motif research can well provide a useful approach to the discussion of sect typologizing. Whilst the construction of sub-typologies of sects, best exemplified by Bryan Wilson's numerous works (see especially 1959, 1963 and 1969), has provided an invaluable frame of reference for much research into the nature of sectarianism, it suffers from certain limitations inherent in the process of typologizing itself. Chief amongst these limitations is the failure of almost any typology designed to produce a series of distinct categories rather than a continuum, to adequately allow for all examples. If, as would seem likely in this instance, the residual category of 'exceptions' includes a significant number of cases, then the usefulness of the typology is weakened.⁶ Again, a typology generally possesses a certain static quality which may make the incidence of historical change within a particular religious movement difficult to accommodate within its conceptual framework.⁷ Also, the definition of all categories in terms of some single variable such as 'response to the world', whilst it provides a ready means of comparison between groups, may also mask more complex patterns of linkage and differentiation between groups in terms of other variables.⁸

Finally, concentration on variations between forms of sect, as ‘deviant responses to the world’, may distract attention from the similarities which exist between many ‘sects’ and more ‘respectable’ religious groups.⁹

On all of these grounds we may argue for the value of motif research as an appropriate means of description and basis for analysis in the case of those religious movements which have enjoyed some measure of historical continuity. A particular movement may be characterized by several motifs; their relative importance and interaction may be traced over time; the particular characterizing features of a movement can be fully developed and its similarities and relationships to other religious groups and to the wider society can be studied. The motif concept can be flexible in application, and is able to be characterized at different degrees of specificity depending on the research purposes involved: at a maximum for a case study, minimally for a cross-cultural comparison. Motif research provides a descriptive tool on which sociological analysis can be based. In the extended example which occupies the remainder of these pages the motif concept is used both to clarify a complex historical process and to provide a base for a discussion of the routinization of charisma.

Peter Berger and the Bahá’í Faith

In his analysis of Bábí-Bahá’í history, Berger makes use of Max Weber’s concept of the routinization of charisma.¹⁰ For Weber, legitimate authority could be based on one, or more likely a combination of several of three ‘ideal-types’ of authority: rational-legal; traditional; and charismatic. Charismatic authority is that authority based on devotion to the ‘charismatic individual’ who is treated by his followers as being endowed with exceptional, superhuman or supernatural powers and qualities. Legitimacy is derived from spiritual endowment rather than tradition or legally established rules and procedures. Charismatic authority provides a more radical warrant for innovation than either of the other two ideal types. However, by this very fact of its origination as something ‘out of the everyday’ and by its association with the charismatic individual, charismatic authority is precarious and ‘in its pure form ... may be said to exist only in the process of origination’ (Weber 1947: 364). Therefore, particularly with the death of the charismatic individual, there occurs a process of transformation by which the followers return to a more everyday existence—charisma becomes routinized (*Veralltäglichung des Charisma*) and traditional

and/or rational-legal forms of legitimation become important (Weber 1947: 358–73).

Berger linked this process of the routinization of charisma to a particular characterization of ‘church’ and ‘sect’ based on specifically religious criteria, ‘the inner meaning of the religious phenomena concerned’. The ‘sect’ is a form of religious sociation based on the belief that ‘the spirit is immediately present’ requiring no mediation and setting the sect off from the outside world as an ‘island formation’;¹¹ whilst the ‘church’ is ‘a religious grouping’ based on the belief that ‘the spirit is remote’, and therefore requires to be mediated by the church (151–2/473–4).¹² These two forms of religious sociation are neither mutually exclusive structures nor static types, for not only is the sect liable to assume the characteristics of the church with the passing of time, but the ‘church’ itself may well include sectarian forms, *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, which it may channel and contain (for example, Roman Catholic monasticism) or which may break out, setting in motion ‘the explosive dynamic of sectarianism’ (154–5/475–7; see also Berger 1958). The process of routinization of charisma by which the sect becomes a church, is a transformation from the situation in which ‘... religious pressures predominate over social, to one in which ... the pressures predominate in the other direction, from the social to the religious; the church makes its peace with the world and is invaded by the latter’s social realities, norms, [and] institutions’ (157/480). The institutionally unformalized sect, whose members in the face of ‘the immediate presence of the spirit ... form a compact unified group’ becomes a formalized group united by legalistic rather than religious bonds (168/480–1). In the sect, strong organization, when it does occur, is ‘usually motivated by the sect’s mission in the world’, whereas in the church it becomes a necessary means of group cohesion, in Weber’s terms, ‘the charismatic authority, which was based on its inherent power alone, is replaced by a legal authority that brings to bear upon its followers an organised system of law and force’ (168/480–1). For Berger, it is the retreat of the spirit rather than mere change in organizational forms which is the crucial characteristic of the routinization of charisma: the history of the Bahá’í Faith providing a ‘clear and instructive’ example (1954b:476).

In Berger’s analysis, the Bábí Faith, out of which the Bahá’í Faith later emerged, drew its particular content from the deeply rooted chiliastic and gnostic motifs subtly combined in Persian Shi’ism in the doctrine of the Hidden Imam who would eventually return as Imam Mahdí. The belief that the Imam would eventually come produced the ‘urgent expectation

of imminent eschatological events', whilst the belief that he was somehow already present in the world, but hidden, imbued the present with eschatological import. Of these two, it was messianic expectation which gave to the Bábí Faith its particular driving power. Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad, the Báb (1819–1850), was at first understood (in 1844) to be claiming to be the *báb* (gate), the direct intermediary of the Hidden Imam. For the mass of his followers this was a messianic proclamation signifying the near advent of the Imam Mahdí himself. After the conference of Badasht (1848) when some of the Báb's chief disciples proclaimed both the abolition of the Islamic *Shari'a* (law) and the start of a new divine dispensation, and communicated to the mass of their fellow-believers the Báb's higher claim to be the Mahdí, eschatological expectation reached fever pitch, the motif 'The Lord is nigh' became 'The Lord has come'. Politically, the claim of Mahdihood was a statement of theocratic authority and there followed (1848–1850) an armed struggle to establish a theocratic state ending with the execution of the Báb (1850) and the quelling of the centres of disturbance. The gnostic motif linked Bábí doctrine to that of previous heresies such as the Ismá'ílís and the Ḥurúfís, as well as Shi'ism itself. From this gnostic corpus was derived the concept of revelation by which each prophet mirrored the light emanating from the Primal Will (*logos*) of God and each prophet in progression established a fuller reflection of the macrocosm of the Primal Will in the microcosm of the world; and the belief that the structure of the universe was to be understood according to the science of numerology. The Báb's final claim to be the *Nuqṭa*, the point of revelation, was also drawn from this corpus.

The Bábí doctrine of primary importance for subsequent events was that of *Man Yuḏhiruhu Alláh* (He whom God will make manifest) which enabled the messianic motif to be projected into the future 'with all of its chiliastic fervour'. Thus Mírzá Ḥusayn 'Alí, Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892) by claiming to be *Man Yuḏhiruhu Alláh* represented the motif with all its force and was able to win the allegiance of most of the surviving Bábís, to whom he appeared as a second messiah in a messianic age. By contrast, his half-brother Mírzá Yaḥyá, Ṣubḥ-i-Azal, the Báb's designated successor, because he lacked charismatic appeal and represented a weakening of the motif, was only able to retain the allegiance of a minority of the Bábís. The combination of a doctrine emphasizing the messianic motif and a new charismatic leader resulted in the process of routinization of charisma being postponed, Ṣubḥ-i-Azal representing a 'premature' routinization. Whilst retaining the Bábí concept of revelation, albeit in less mystical form,

Bábí doctrine underwent major transformations under Bahá'u'lláh's leadership: with the prohibition of violence the project to establish a new theocracy by force of arms was abandoned; in its place, the peaceful establishment of a worldwide kingdom of God with democratic elements became the focus of action; Western ideas of liberalism and internationalism became absorbed as the more esoteric of the gnostic elements were eliminated in a secularization of goals—thus while the gnostic motif was weakened, the messianic motif was brought under control 'in an ethico-religious programme of peace and world well-being' (1957:100).

The situation following Bahá'u'lláh's death (1892) was remarkably similar to the leadership situation which developed after the Báb's martyrdom, in that, of the two claimants for the leadership of the movement, it was the one who represented the messianic motif more strongly who gained the support of the majority of the Bahá'ís. That Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá 'Abbás (1844–1921) had been designated his successor in his will was in effect secondary in importance to the fact that sociologically 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a charismatic leader who continued the messianic motif more strongly than did his half-brother Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí, who as Ṣubḥ-i-Azal before him, represented a premature routinization for which the Bahá'ís were not ready. A new aspect of the messianic motif developed amongst the early Western Bahá'ís (1894 onwards) who came to regard 'Abdu'l-Bahá as Christ returned and related Bahá'í teachings to the Christian messianic tradition. During 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leadership the messianic motif became further secularized as greater stress was put on Western ideas of progress and legalistic social humanism and reform. The gnostic motif survived as a general aura of sanctity surrounding 'Abdu'l-Bahá's person.

The death of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921 left the way open for the final routinization and its apparently inevitable result of the institution of legal-rational forms of ecclesiastical organisation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá appointed his eldest grandson, Shogi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), 'Guardian' of the Faith, a function which was associated with charisma of office rather than personal charisma, as emphasized by Shogi Effendi's own relative 'distance' from the Bahá'ís as compared with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Nevertheless 'Abdu'l-Bahá's aura of saintliness came to rest on the Guardian as he became the focus of the religious aspirations of the Bahá'ís. Berger described the institution of the Guardianship with its secondary bodies as being clearly conceived as an ecclesiastical form of safeguard for the future of the movement for the post-revelational period (1957:105). The Bahá'í ecclesiastical forms combined

elements of democracy and authoritarianism which led to stresses within the movement. The traditional theocratic ideal might be combined with Western democratic aspirations but it was certainly not subordinate to them. The transition, whereby 'legalism replaced chiliasm at the religious heart of the movement' (1954a: 166) which had started during 'Abdu'l-Baha's leadership and reached its full development under Shogi Effendi, was also demonstrated by the activities of the 'pioneers' whose missionary activities were responsible for a great increase in the geographical spread of the Faith during this period. Their missionary enthusiasm was directed to the establishment of the Bahá'í new world order; their activities controlled by the Spiritual Assemblies and the new centres quickly integrated into the organizational structure. Thus whilst expansion was interpreted in terms of the messianic motif, it was in vastly different form from the chiliastic frenzy of the Bábís in their attempts to establish a theocracy.

The main line of argument is that the process of the routinization of charisma has eventually produced a transformation of the dominant messianic motif into a legalistic form concerned with the establishment of a future world order rather than the immediacy of a divine revelation. The great strength of this motif however has delayed the process of routinization by enabling two successive charismatic leaders to continue the messianic motif in something of its original strength. Specifically the lack of success experienced by the two rivals to Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leadership is to be attributed to their weaker presentation of the messianic motif and the Bábís/Bahá'ís' opposition to moves towards 'premature routinization'. Only when the messianic motif had become weaker and the emergence of 'ecclesiastical forms' developed did routinization finally take place and the 'sect' develop into a 'church'. As a subsidiary process, the gnostic motif, originally so strong in Bábí doctrine and experience, became progressively weaker, finally only remaining as an aura of sanctity surrounding the leaders. In part this development was a result of the changes in the messianic motif with which the gnostic motif was strongly linked in the context of Persian Shi'ism, but more generally it was the result of the progressive 'Westernization' of Bahá'í belief as not only the leaders and their Persian followers became more aware of Western ideas, but also the need arose to present the Faith to a Western audience.

Recharacterised motifs

In an historical case study such as the present one, it is important that such motifs as are presented should be adequate to the task in hand. Specifically they should be relatively unambiguous; closely reflect 'historical reality'; and adequately cover the complexities of the particular instance. On these grounds Berger's two motifs, his messianic and gnostic themes, fail. Both neglect to take account of important aspects of the Islamic background which are crucial to an understanding of Bábí-Bahá'í history; both seem to be inadequate in the description of modern Bahá'í history; and the gnostic motif remains vague. Before commenting on Bábí-Bahá'í history it will be necessary to make a digression into Islamic esotericism in order to more adequately characterize the ideas associated with Berger's gnostic motif.

Berger's messianic motif, 'the Lord is coming', is linked in his typology of motifs to the legalistic motif (the conquest of the world in the name of a 'new order') as a co-sub-type of prophetic sectarianism.¹³ Whilst he allows for the combination of these two motifs in a particular religious movement, as for example in Seventh Day Adventism (1954b: 479), Berger seems to assume that normally they will only occur in either separate types of sect or at least different stages in the development of the same sect. This certainly appears to be the assumption underlying his treatment of Bahá'í history when he argues that the messianic motif increasingly assumed legalistic forms as charisma became routinized, so that eventually 'legalism replaced chiliasm at the religious heart of the movement' (1954a:166).

However, what Berger terms messianic expectation consists of two distinct elements: concern with the coming of a messiah and concern with the establishment of a millennium. That these two are frequently conflated in the expectations of millenarian groups does not mean that they need always be so, the differences between Christian pre- and post-millennialism being a case in point (see Sandeen, 1970:4-5). Specifically in the case of the Bahá'í Faith, the 'messiah' figure is regarded as having already come and passed on from this world, whilst the 'millennium' is placed firmly in the future as a goal to be attained.¹⁴ Furthermore, implicit in Berger's treatment of the messianic motif is the assumption that the form, 'the Lord has come' is simply an intensification of the earlier messianic expectation. This is too simplistic and overlooks the complexity of the prophetic role, for an individual who is regarded by his followers as a prophet may fulfil various roles simultaneously, being a charismatic leader who legitimates

a break with the established order as well as the establisher of a new order and the creator of a new *Wéltanschauung*; for his followers he may be lawgiver, teacher, ideologue, exemplar, thaumaturge and the focus of piety.¹⁵ Whilst the nature of his authority is essentially charismatic, that is perceived as supernatural and ‘out of the everyday’, this does not mean that he will not concern himself with mundane matters, indeed in the case of those religions, such as Judaism, Islam, or Bahá’í, in which the idea of a divinely-revealed law is important, this is seen as a vital part of the prophet’s task. Thus the nature of the prophet’s message is important as well as the mere fact of his prophecy.

Berger’s gnostic motif, whilst intriguing, remains somewhat elusive in character.¹⁶ The concept is applied wide-rangingly so as to include not only the messianic secret, but also many aspects of Sabian [Arabic *Ṣābi’*, plural *Ṣābi’ún*] theology and the ‘mysterious authority’ of the Báb’ and Bahá’í leaders. It is unclear whether it is knowledge of some ‘hidden secret’, or simply the use of ideas from the ‘gnostic corpus’ which is the essential characteristic of the motif. If the concept is going to have any real usefulness it needs to be much more clearly characterized, otherwise it might be easier to dismiss it altogether and simply state that Bábí messianism was coloured with gnostic ideas which were largely absent in later Bahá’í doctrine; the ‘aura of mystery’ that surrounded the leaders merely being a reflection of the charismatic status ascribed to them.

A more adequate characterization based on the central themes of Islamic esotericism can provide a clearer and less ambiguous concept.¹⁷ Briefly, amidst the marked diversity of Islamic esotericism, I would identify three closely related central themes, which may be termed ‘esoteric’, ‘gnostic’ and ‘polar’. By *esoteric* is meant the belief common to many *Shí’a* and *Ṣúfí* groups that the Qur’án and ḥadīth (traditions) are to be understood at two levels: their *ẓāhir* (exoteric) and *bāṭin* (esoteric) meanings. Broadly speaking there have been three responses to this belief: the rejection of the *bāṭiní* interpretation altogether by the ‘orthodox’ Sunnis and ‘legalistic’ *Shí’ís*; the acceptance of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* as being of joint importance by the ‘moderate’ *Shí’ís* and *Ṣúfís*; and the downgrading or even rejection of *ẓāhir* by ‘extremist’ *Ṣúfí* and *Shí’a* groups. Only in this latter case has Islamic esotericism been associated with antinomianism. Associated with the belief that scriptural references have an inner *bāṭiní* meaning is the doctrine most fully developed by the ‘extremist’ groups and those influenced by them, that the *bāṭin* must be guarded by the elite and kept secret from the uninitiated. Syncretism, metaphysical speculation, and the

distinctive Shia doctrine of *taqiyya* (dissimulation) by which the Shí'í is encouraged to conceal his true belief if by so doing he may avoid danger, concealing true belief within an outer profession of faith, are all related to this acceptance of *báṭin*.

The term *gnostic* as used here essentially follows the usage employed by the Colloquium of Messina (Bianchi, 1970: xxvi), in that the primary stress is on *gnosis* as a soteriology based on esoteric knowledge. This, rather than any '*gnostic corpus*' which it is possible to identify, constitutes the key element of gnosis. The gnostic corpus, a common pool of ideas which are found in various forms and combinations in various gnostic groups (including Islamic groups and classical Gnosticism) includes: the belief that the first emanation from the remote Divine Essence was the Primal Will, or Intelligence, from which in turn emanate the lesser forces and demiurges concerned with the creation and development of man; elaborate cosmologies combining mythology, scientific speculation, angelology and numerology; the interpretation of history in ahistorical terms; the cabbalistic use of words and numbers; a tendency towards syncretism, especially the incorporation of elements from Hermeticism and other ancient lore, and from Neo-Platonist philosophy; an interest in alchemy, astrology and thaumaturgy; and a tendency towards secrecy and caution motivated partly by the desire to guard esoteric beliefs and partly by the reality of persecution. Again it is worth distinguishing 'extreme' and 'moderate' Islamic esotericism: the former borrowing heavily from this corpus and the latter borrowing far more selectively. In Islam, persecution of extremist gnostic groups such as the Ismá'ílís—for reasons not simply doctrinal¹⁸—and the declaration of various gnostic beliefs as *bid'a* ('innovation', that is, heresy), did not prevent the tolerance or even acceptance of gnosis in its more moderate forms. In contrast to the dichotomy between Christianity and classical Gnosticism some continuum of belief existed between the orthodox and the gnostics enabling the construction of a system in which gnosis might be seen as an inner reality of faith and not an alternative means of salvation in contradiction to it. In such a characterization gnostics may form what might be thought of as a type of *ecclesiola in ecclesia*.

The third theme, which I have termed 'polar' (from '*qutb*', see below), relates to the Shí'a concept of *wiláya* which may be translated as 'sainthood', but also refers to the 'function of interpreting the esoteric dimension of the revelation' (Nasr 1966: 161) and has been described as constituting with bin the two lines of force in Shí'a thought

(Corbin 1971–2, iii). The *walí* (pl. *awliyá*) is not only ‘the friend of God’ and possessed of personal sanctity; he is the direct channel to the source of revelation, who makes possible the interpretation of esoteric from exoteric, and is the source of grace (*baraka*). In Shi’ism the *awliyá* are the inerrant, immaculate Imams, the rightful and real rulers of the community, who sustain and interpret the faith. The term also occurs in Sufism where the *walí* is par excellence the *insánu’l-kámil* (the Perfect Man) and the ‘*quṭb*’ (the ‘axis’ or ‘pole’) at the centre of the hierarchy of saints, or more generally any saint or shaykh. In ‘Twelver’ Shi’ism,¹⁹ the Prophet, who is also a wall, is regarded as bringing a divine revelation, including a law (*shar’á*) which represents the exoteric content of the revelation, the esoteric content being maintained by the sequence of *awliyá* who follow after him. This alternation of Prophets and *awliyá* reached its climax with Muḥammad, the Seal of the Prophets, after whom followed in lineal descent the Twelve Imams, beginning with ‘Ali, the son-in-law and nephew of Muḥammad al-Mahdí who disappeared upon the death of his father in AH 260 (CE 873). Each Imam received his appointment, his designation as Imam (*naṣṣ*) from his predecessor. As there must always be an Imam present in the world whether visible or hidden, the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam is termed ‘*ghaybat*’ (occultation). The minor occultation (AH 260–329, CE 873–940) during which he occasionally appeared to his representatives (*ná’ib*) the four *abwáb* (‘gates’; singular, *báb*), was succeeded by the major occultation (AH 329 onwards) during which the Hidden Imam remained alive as ‘the *axis mundi*, the Invisible ruler of the Universe’ (Nasr 1966: 166), and which would only end with the reappearance of the Imam, ‘in the last days’, who would establish Shi’ism and ‘fill the earth with justice after it has been filled with iniquity’ (Browne 1902–1924:IV, 394), when shall follow the appearance of Antichrist, a reign of saints and the resurrection.²⁰

Having portrayed the main elements of Islamic, especially Shia esotericism and the interrelationship between them, it is possible to suggest the applicability of two separate motifs to the study of Shi’a and, as will be seen later, Bábí-Bahá’í history. The first of these motifs is what has been termed ‘polar’, that is the belief in an individual who is the vice-regent of God in the world, the sustainer and interpreter of the faith and the source of grace. Important variables with regard to this motif are whether the ‘pole’ is absent or present and the degree to which the individual believer is expected and prepared to submit to the interpretations and decrees of the ‘pole’. In the case of ‘Twelver’ Shi’ism this motif is also strongly linked to the messianic

motif. The second motif, which will be termed 'esoteric-gnostic', represents both the concern with knowledge of the inner reality which lies within external appearances and the soteriological import of that knowledge. Associated with this motif in its 'Twelver' form is that congeries of ideas which I have termed the 'gnostic corpus', and also the doctrine of *taqiyya*. In its 'moderate' form this motif is associated with a rapprochement between *báṭin* and *záhir*, and relatively less concern with gnostic beliefs, knowledge of the Imam/*quṭb* being regarded as the supreme gnosis as it were. In its extreme form this motif is associated with the dominance of the *báṭin* over the *záhir*, a greater concern with gnostic beliefs, and more interest in the gnostic corpus.

Sociologically, these two motifs are closely linked to the questions of authority and sectarian differentiation. The Imam/*quṭb* possesses strong hereditary charismatic authority by virtue of his holy descent and charisma of office as a result of his designation (*naṣṣ*) by his predecessor, in addition to any personal charismatic authority imputed to him by his followers. This authority invests the institution of the Imamate with a large measure of what Michael Hill has termed charismatic 'latency' by which the charismatic pedigree may readily legitimate a process of innovation (Hill 1973:168-73). The political effect of this charismatic authority depends upon the degree to which the legitimacy of the temporal authorities is questioned.

As already noted, the existence of a gnostic elite may simply lead to some form of *ecclesiola in ecclesia*. In a situation in which loyalty to the state is equated with at least nominal orthodoxy, and heterodoxy may lead to persecution, then whether sectarian tendencies result in the formation of a sect depends on the degree of freedom officially allowed under the heading 'orthodoxy' as well as the distance between the beliefs of the potentially heterodox group and the majority. Beliefs in a hidden *báṭin*, salvation on the basis of knowledge and the necessity of *taqiyya* can in such a situation make the apparent degree of separation seem less than it actually is. Obversely, a sectarian group identified as heretical can have heterodox beliefs attributed to it which it does not in fact hold, the very secrecy surrounding its beliefs making it easier for the 'orthodox' to believe that the group is concealing its 'real' beliefs.

Motifs in Bábí-Bahá'í history

At a theoretical level with regard to Berger's messianic motif

I have suggested that ‘messianic’ and ‘legalistic’ motifs may be usefully distinguished, particularly with regard to religions in which the concept of a divine law is important. In considering Berger’s gnostic motif, it was felt that a far more rigorous conceptualization both at the theoretical and empirical levels was required; accordingly, two new motifs were proposed and discussed in some detail so as to provide unambiguous ideal types. These ‘esoteric-gnostic’ and ‘polar’ motifs were derived from a review of Islamic esotericism which formed an important part of the background from which the Bábí Faith emerged and also, in part, the base from which Berger’s gnostic motif was conceptualized. The present discussion will consider the applicability of these recharacterized motifs.

In the early years of the Báb’s ministry (1844–1848) it is probable that there was considerable uncertainty as to his claims even amongst his followers. Most of the Báb’s leading disciples and many of the rank and file had been Shaykhís, that is followers of the school or sect within ‘Twelver’ Shi’ism founded by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá’í (d. 1826).²¹ With its beliefs in the need for there always to be present in the world a perfect Shí’í (*Shí’í-y-i-kámil*) as the legitimate authority; in the spiritual inner meaning of doctrine; and the expectation by at least some Shaykhís that the return of the Imam was imminent, Shaykhism represented a particular expression of the ‘polar’, ‘esoteric-gnostic’ and ‘messianic’ motifs. The death of the then leader in 1843 created a vacuum in the leadership which for some Shaykhís was filled in their acceptance of the Báb as their new leader. The full import of the Báb’s messianic claims only gradually became known and his initial role was probably as much an expression of the ‘polar’ motif as of messianism. When his messianic claims did become widely known it was in association with legalism and the revelation of a new *sharí’a*. His role as Imam removed the legitimacy of existing authorities.

The execution of the Báb and the various massacres of Bábís had the effect of driving the faith underground. It is probable that there was a complex of responses on the part of the Bábís: the abolition of the Islamic *sharí’a* combined with the defeat of their cause and the death of most of their leaders led some to disregard all law; the reality of persecution led to concealment of belief; the difficulties of communicating with Ṣubḥ-i-Azal, the Báb’s appointed successor, and in general the lack of leadership and of authoritative texts led to confusion, intense speculation and fragmentation. The situation was worsened when one group of Bábís attempted to assassinate the Shah (1852), the resultant campaign of

terror directed at all Bábís and suspected Bábís, resulted in a further loss of leaders. The great need for leadership was eventually met in the years following c. 1856 when Bahá'u'lláh increasingly came to be recognised as an effective and charismatic leader, expressing anew the polar motif. However, it was not until 1863 that Bahá'u'lláh declared his claim to be *Man-Yuẓhiruhu Alláh* to the small group of Baghdad exiles, and it was not until after 1867 when the final break between Bahá'u'lláh and Ṣubḥ-i-Azal occurred that the Báb's in Iran became properly aware of this claim and separate Bahá'í and Azalí groups developed.

It is possible to discern a common pattern of motifs with reference to both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. In both cases intense messianic expectation preceded their initial recognition as saintly leaders, which was followed by acceptance of them as the messianic centres (*Qá'im/Man-Yuẓhiruhu Alláh*) of a messianic age. In this sense the messianic role is to be seen as an extension of their 'polar' role. In each case the polar and to an even greater extent, the messianic motif dominated the other motifs. In contradistinction to Berger's account, the legalistic motif was important during the lifetime of both the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh. In both cases the general recognition of the messianic role was followed by the revelation of a new *Sharí'a* based on a book of holy law (the *Bayan-i-Fársí* and the *Kitábu'l-Aqdas*). Whilst the upheaval of the last two years of the Báb's life and the fragmentation and despair following his execution resulted in his *sharí'a* being neither widely applied nor fully differentiated from its Islamic forbear, giving way instead to a period in which there were strong antinomian tendencies, the laws of the *Kitábu'l-Aqdas* were widely promulgated and as circumstances permitted applied as distinct from those of Islam. An incidental point of interest here is that Bahá'u'lláh himself asked one of his followers who had been trained as a mujtahid (Islamic jurisprudent) to submit a series of questions to him on these laws, the result being the annex to the *Kitábu'l-Aqdas*. Further, it should be noted that Bábí and Bahá'í concern with a divine law is fully in accordance with their position concerning the equal importance of *ẓáhir* and *báṭin*; the concern with a *sharí'a* is compatible with a conception of the 'true believer' as needing to follow more than just a code of law, and of law itself as having a spiritual as well as a material dimension. A further pattern that can be suggested is that in general when the legalistic motif is strong because of its subsumption by the messianic motif then the esoteric-gnostic motif is likely to be subordinate.

In some respects the dominant motif for the entire

period since Bahá'u'lláh's death has been the 'polar'. It would be wrong to equate too closely the Islamic 'Imam' and the various successors to Bahá'u'lláh's leadership, but there are strong doctrinal similarities: 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice²² have all been regarded as infallible within certain limits; all have been regarded as the centres of guidance to which to turn; and in each case their legitimacy in terms of their designation by their predecessor has been stressed; specifically, the term for 'Guardianship' is *wilaya* and for 'Guardian of the Cause of God', *Walíy Amru'lláh*.

The importance of the Bahá'í doctrine of the 'Covenant', the idea that each leader is the divinely legitimated leader to whom obedience is due, is a major theme in Bahá'í writings: in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Will and Testament*, the Bahá'ís are bidden to obey both Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice: *'whatsoever they decide is of God—whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God ...'* (1944: 11)—until recently Bahá'ís in the West were commonly required to read 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Will and Testament* and gain an understanding of the Covenant before their declarations of faith were accepted. Obversely, the only cause of excommunication has been direct disobedience to the Covenant's centre. Berger suggests that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was accepted by the Bahá'ís as successor to Bahá'u'lláh rather than his brother, because he was a more charismatic leader who represented the messianic motif more strongly; whilst this was undoubtedly a factor, it must also be remembered that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was also the designated 'Centre of the Covenant'. The much greater emphasis on the 'Covenant' during the period of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leadership and after surely acted as a major factor in the relatively unopposed succession of both Shoghi Effendi, despite the novelty of the Guardianship and his youth, and of the Universal House of Justice, despite a six-year gap following the Guardian's death and the absence of a will giving clear instructions as to what should happen in those years. It is noteworthy that the only numerically significant group of 'Covenant-Breakers' (*Náqıdún*, literally, 'violators') in the period since Bahá'u'lláh's death were those American Bahá'ís or rather, 'Behaists' who followed their teacher Ibrahim Kheiralla into partisanship for Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí in 1900: Kheiralla's version of the Bahá'í teachings was highly esoteric, whilst the relationship he established with his converts was highly centralized around himself.²³

The period 1844–1921 is designated by Shoghi Effendi as the 'Heroic Age' in distinction to the period after 1921 which

he termed the 'Formative Age' (1944: xiii), symbolizing thereby not only the break between charismatic and institutional leadership, but also what he perceived as the main purpose of the present period in Bahá'í history, namely the building up of a new 'World Order' in anticipation of a future 'Golden Age', 'the kingdom of God on earth'. If the polar motif dominates the Bahá'ís' attitude towards their leadership, then the messianic motif in the form of working to construct a future theocracy dominates their activity.²⁴ The series of teaching plans embarked on since 1937; the framework of the 'Administrative Order'; the promulgation and application of Bahá'í social principles; the gradual emergence of the Faith from 'obscurity' and from 'the fetters of religious orthodoxy'; the recognition and application of Bahá'í law; and the development of Bahá'í Houses of Worship, local and national headquarters and the shrines and other buildings at the Bahá'í World Centre (Haifa, Israel), are all regarded as constituting aspects of the progressive unfoldment of the Faith as it heads towards its destined goal.

Whilst Bahá'í belief in man's inner spiritual potential, in the inner as well as the outer meaning of past and present scriptures, and in the 'True Believer' as a station at which the individual Bahá'í should aim, indicate the continued existence of the esoteric-gnostic motif, it cannot be argued that the motif plays more than a very subordinate role. In part this is in keeping with what has already been said about the subordination of the esoteric-gnostic motif at those periods when the messianic motif is strong. As Berger has indicated, the 'Westernization' of the Faith must also be taken into account here.

An interesting reflection on this motif concerns the change in the relationship of Bahá'í to the churches in the West. Until as late as the 1930s the Bahá'í 'Movement', as it was often termed, lacked a fully distinctive existence vis-à-vis the churches, rather its stress on the unity of religion and the universality of its message was expressed in terms of a movement of spiritual and social renewal which was simultaneously separate from and yet part of the surrounding religious milieu. The Bahá'ís might also be church members. In a sense Bahá'í then formed an esoteric-gnostic group both within and between the churches.

With the establishment of the 'Administrative Order' and increasing stress by Shoghi Effendi on the status of the Faith as an independent world religion these ties with the churches were gradually cut. A somewhat analogous situation pertained in Iran during the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's

leadership when numbers of Zoroastrians and Jews became Bahá'ís and retained something of their identity in distinction to their mostly Muslim background co-religionists: thus at one time there was even an 'Assembly of the Israelitish Bahá'ís of Tīhrán'. In both West and East the Bahá'í communities gradually became more independent of their parent religions, increasing their distinctiveness as they did so.

The routinization of charisma

In Berger's argument the process of the routinization of charisma entails two transformations: from charismatic authority to traditional/rational-legal authority and from sect to church. Whilst in broad outline a transformation from the charismatic authority of the three leaders of the 'Heroic Age' to the more rationalized authority of the 'Formative Age' has taken place, we should note that non-charismatic elements—traditional secondary leaders, rational elements in leadership in general²⁵—were also present in the 'Heroic Age' and that whilst legal forms predominate in the 'Formative Age' the very real belief in the infallibility of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice has given them a kind of charisma of office in addition to their authority at the head of a largely rational administrative order.

Whilst charisma has in this sense been routinised the Bahá'í Faith has not yet entirely made the transition from sect to church. Berger himself points out that strong organization can occur in a sect as a means of furthering the sect's mission in the world and that it is the retreat of the spirit rather than change in organizational forms which is of the essence of the transformation of the sect into the church (1954a: 168; 1954b: 480–1). Berger's argument that the Bahá'í Faith has made this transition does not seem to be well rooted in this theoretical framework, but instead concentrates on those organizational forms which theoretically he has argued are only secondary in importance. The point in his argument which comes closest to this framework is his discussion of 'Covenant-Breaking' as a *prima facie* example of the retreat of the spirit and the replacement of charismatic authority by legal force. However, the corollary of this argument would be that in a certain sense the Bahá'í Faith has always been routinized, for the conception of a polar centre of the Faith towards whom obedience is obligatory and disobedience equal to disavowal of God is one of the most deeply rooted concepts in Bahá'í belief, as is shown by the extent to which most Bahá'ís have accepted each designated successor to the leadership.

The strength of such a belief perhaps makes it difficult to clearly differentiate between charismatic authority and legal force in this case.

It is probably more useful to regard the various national Bahá'í communities separately in a consideration of church and sect, thus some communities might be regarded as more 'church-like' and others as more 'sect-like'. For example in Iran most of the Bahá'í community are *Bahá'í-záda*, that is the descendants of earlier generations of Bahá'ís and Bábís; most of the activities of the community are centred upon its own needs; and only a small proportion are involved in its administration—'church-like' features seemingly predominate. By contrast, most of the Western Bahá'í communities largely consist of first or second-generation Bahá'ís strongly motivated to propagate their faith and heavily involved in its teaching and administrative work—factors which work against the transition to a church. In Isichei's (1964) terms 'insulating mechanisms' exist which in this case prolong sectarian characteristics.²⁶

Notes

- 1 This paper is a shortened version of a paper presented to the 16/17 April 1977 Bahá'í Studies Seminar at the University of Lancaster. The financial assistance of the Social Science Research Council is gratefully acknowledged.
- 2 Berger makes no claim to be a historian as such. On the whole he makes good use of secondary sources and of translations of texts. For the early period of Bábí-Bahá'í history he relies too heavily on Gobineau (1865) concerning whom see MacEoin (1976:109–10). For the Bahá'í treatment of history he accepts too readily the somewhat polemical belief that the *Nuqṭatu'l-Káfi* represents real history and later Bahá'í works simply revisions: for a discussion of this book and these issues raised see MacEoin (1976:70–101). His presentation of the Bahá'í Faith in the modern period is seriously marred by his non-use of periodicals such as *Star of the West* and the biennial *Bahá'í World* volumes as well as by his excessive reliance on the works and attitudes of those opposed to Shoghi Effendi for the account of his leadership. For general accounts of Bábí history see Balyuzi (1973), Browne (1891 and 1893), and Nabíl (1932). On Bahá'í history see Balyuzi (1971) on the period of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leadership and Shoghi Effendi (1944) on Bábí-Bahá'í history as a whole. See also the articles on 'Báb', 'Bábís', 'Bahá'u'lláh' and 'Bahá'ís' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition 1958, and on the 'Bahá'í Faith' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, 15th edition 1974.
- 3 The best treatment of the 'Lundensian' use of the motif in English is probably Nygren (1953); the same author has also dealt with the concept in a more recent work (1972:351–78).
- 4 The typology is as follows:

Type	Motif	Attitude towards world	Example
I Enthusiastic: An experience to be lived			
1a) Revivalist	'Fire falling from heaven'	World to be saved	Billy Sunday movement Over 100 Pentecostal groups
1b) Pentecostal			
2a) Pietist	'Follow the gleam'	World to be avoided	Salvation Army Church of the Nazarene
2) Holiness			
II Prophetic: A message to be proclaimed			
1) Chiliastic	'The Lord is coming'	World to be warned	Adventist groups
2) Legalistic	'A new order'	World to be conquered	Jehovah's Witnesses
III Gnostic: A secret to be divulged			

1) Oriental	'Wisdom from the East'	World irrelevant	Buddhist groups
2) New Thought	'Powers in the Soul'	World irrelevant	Rosicrucians
3) Spiritist	'Voices from beyond'		Spiritist groups

(Berger, 1954a: 189; 1954b: 478)

- ⁵ Weber argues strongly against the possibility of describing any alleged 'essence' of a historical configuration (1949, s.v. index; see also Burger, 1976).
- ⁶ See Beckford (1975: 97) on the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Theobald (1974) on the Seventh Day Adventists.
- ⁷ See Isichei (1964) on the Quakers; Robertson (1970: 127–8) on the Salvation Army; and Wallis (1976) on the Children of God.
- ⁸ Examples would include the immense variety within the tradition of Christian millennialism and the manner in which the idea of communitarian utopianism found favour with many different types of religious group in nineteenth-century America.
- ⁹ See Beckford (1976) and Theobald (1974)., Berger's own attempt at typologizing (see note 4) seems incongruous in the face of his obvious awareness of the various issues raised here.
- ¹⁰ Whilst Edward Granville Browne in his numerous works on the Bab' and Bahá'í Faiths tended to subsume both under the heading of 'Bábism', the modern trend, and this includes Berger, is the reverse, that is to refer to them jointly as 'Bahá'í'. Whilst the close relation between them and the fact that most of the surviving Bábís became Bahá'ís might justify the occasional use of Bahá'í to cover both, it would seem preferable to refer to them separately.
- ¹¹ The term 'island formation' is borrowed from Carl Meyer (1933).
- ¹² The page references in this section to the theoretical concluding chapter in Berger's thesis and the article in which it is substantially repeated (1954b) are given in the form (1954a/1954b).
- ¹³ See note 4.
- ¹⁴ Both the terms 'messianic' and 'millenarian' are derived from Judeo-Christian tradition. The messiah (Hebrew *mashuah*, literally the anointed one) coming to signify an expected redemptive leader and the millennium (Latin; Greek, *chilias*, a period of a thousand years) a future thousand year Kingdom of God on Earth. Sociological usage has applied these terms to a large number of social phenomena and various definitions have been suggested. Useful discussions of these issues are to be found in Thrupp (1962: 11–27) and Talmon (1966). The present paper is not especially concerned with comparative analysis and the two terms have therefore been used merely to signify respectively the ideas connected with an expected deliverer and with a future perfect age.
- ¹⁵ For Weber's discussion of the sociology of prophets and prophecy see the chapter from his *Economy and Society* on 'The Prophet' (1963: 46–59). See also Bryan Turner's discussion of the extent to which a 'new' world view is possible (1974: 25–7).
- ¹⁶ On the nature of gnosis and Gnosticism I have relied mainly on Bianchi (1970) and Grant (1974).
- ¹⁷ The description of Islamic esotericism relies mainly on the work of Corbin (1964, 1971–2) and Nasr (1966, 1970). See also Corbin's numerous articles in the *Eranos-Jarbucher*.
- ¹⁸ See Hodgson (1955) for an account of the extreme configuration of these esoteric themes found in Ismailism.
- ¹⁹ *Ithna-Asharí* (-yyih) Shi'ism, the 'Church of the Twelve', is that form of Shi'ism which has predominated in Iran since its designation as the state religion at the beginning of the sixteenth century. For a recent account of its beliefs written by a traditional *Shi'í* scholar see Ṭabāṭabá'í (1975). On its relationship to Sufism see Nasr (1970), MacEoin (1975) and Zarrinkoob (1970). On nineteenth-century *Ithna-Asharí* Shi'ism in Iran see Algar (1969) and Browne (1902–24, IV: 353–411).
- ²⁰ Descriptions of the traditional beliefs concerning the signs accompanying the return of the Twelfth Imam are to be found in Browne (1891: 299–306; and 1902–24, IV: 398–401).
- ²¹ There is very little material on the *Shaykhís* in European languages. An early general account is by Nicolas (1911–1914). Corbin (see especially 1971–2, IV: 205–300) provides a good account of *Shaykhí* doctrine within the context of Islamic esotericism.

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- ²² The Universal House of Justice (*Baytu'l-'Adl-i-A'zam*) has been the supreme authority in the Bahá'í world since its first election in 1963 (see *Bahá'í World*, Vol. XIV).
- ²³ On Kheiralla see Browne (1918: 93–171) and S.G. Wilson (1915: 265–73) for largely Behaist accounts of events. I have dealt with this period in some detail in a manuscript history of the early American Bahá'í community.
- ²⁴ The theme of the future World Order is a frequent theme in the writings of Shoghi Effendi, see especially the letters published under the title *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (1955).
- ²⁵ Many of the Bábí and early Bahá'í leaders were converted *mujtahids* and *mullas* and elements of traditional Islamic authority were present in Persian Bahá'í leadership well into the present century.
- ²⁶ See J. A. Beckford's study of the Jehovah's Witnesses (1975) for an account of the continued 'sectarian-ness' of a very different religious group. In both cases the group's strong sense of mission has been a major feature in the continued predominance of sect-like characteristics.

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