The Baha'i Faith and Science Fiction

â”€â
”€â”

The Bahá'í Faith and Science Fiction

Lavie Tidhar

published in Internet Review of Science Fiction

2004-01

In the city of Haifa, on the north coast of Israel, one becomes used to a prominent feature of the city's skyline: a golden dome burning in the sunlight. The dome is roof to the temple of the Bahá'í faith, a religion that I lived close to for many years without ever becoming aware of its nature. In fact, the Bahá'í religion is a fascinating example of a movement which embodies within itself a large number of what might be called science fictional principles and, with its utopian bent, actively promotes a science fictional future. I am using the term science-fictional not to suggest that Bahá'í ideals are unattainable but rather that they identify with the worldview of much pre-Cyberpunk science fiction. While SF has been known to directly or indirectly inspire religious movements, something which is covered in more detail in Tom Disch's The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of, the Bahá'í faith is interesting in that its development, and as I will show later its identity, has evolved in parallel to the world of science fiction. It seems unlikely that Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, the man who shaped the modern form of Bahá'ísm, read SF while "creating [sic] an image of Bahá'ísm as a dynamic new world religion" (MacEoin 626). It is easier to judge the effect Bahá'ísm has had on science fiction literature, however. The Bahá'ís in Science Fiction and Fantasy bibliography contains 31 mentions of Bahá'ísm in genre works. Of these, five do not even mention Bahá'ísm, but rather mention Jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie, who was a disciple. One mentions Carole Lombard, another Bahá'í, while the rest, with the exception of a handful of works by Bahá'í science fiction writers (more on this below) constitute only a paragraph or so.

To understand the argument, consider this oft-quoted summary of principles, provided by Shoghi Effendi:

The Bahá'í faith upholds the unity of God, recognizes the unity of His Prophets, and inculcates the principle of oneness and wholeness of the entire human race. It proclaims the necessity and inevitability of the unification of mankind... enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search

after truth, condemns all manner of prejudice and superstition, declares the purpose of religion to be the promotion of amity and concord, proclaims its essential harmony with science, and recognizes it as the foremost agency for the pacification and the orderly progress of human society" (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in Maceoin 630, my italics).

Science fiction, especially of the space opera variety, tends to portray a united Earth, extending a Fordist world-view into the future and into space itself: perhaps the best-known example is the Galactic Federation of Planets in the television series Star Trek. It could be argued that Bahá'ísm portrays the positive, utopian aspects of science fiction. The "unification of mankind", as Shoghi Effendi notes, requires science "as the foremost agency" for its pacification. It is easy to see in both SF from the Golden Age (1938-46) and the contemporary writing of Shoghi Effendi a focus on Fordism: the Modern era ushered by Henry Ford's methods of mass production was one of centralisation, of a relative prosperity for the masses (as often mentioned, Ford's employees were paid five dollars a day, an amount much higher than workers anywhere were previously paid)—a world of education for all and, significantly, a world with a universal language.

"It unequivocally maintains the principle of equal rights, opportunities, and privileges for men and women, insists on compulsory education, eliminates extremes of poverty and wealth, abolishes the institution of priesthood, prohibits slavery, asceticism, mendicancy, and monasticism, prescribes monogamy, discourages divorce, emphasizes the necessity of strict obedience to one's government, exalts any work performed in the spirit of service to the level of worship, urges either the creation or the selection of a auxiliary international language, and delineates the outlines of those institutions that must establish and perpetuate the general peace of mankind" (ibid, my italics).

Shoghi Effendi was born in the city of Akko in Israel, grandson to the Bahá'u'lláh, the head of the Bahá'í faith. His education was diverse: as Danesh note, it included "first attending a Jesuit school in Haifa, then boarding at another Catholic school in Beirut [...] Shoghi Effendi later attended the Syrian Protestant College (later known as the American University in Beirut) for his final years of high school and first years of university" (Danesh). The American influence was enhanced by a British one: "in the spring of 1920, Shoghi Effendi went up to Balliol College, Oxford, to pursue his post-graduate studies. Among the subjects which he studied were political science, social and industrial questions, logic, and English economic history since 1688" (ibid.). The influences of Western thought sit parallel to Shoghi's environment in the British protectorate of Palestine and later in the new-found state of Israel. Indeed, Bahá'ísm and Zionism share a common ground. Both movements contain a utopian element which is evident in the written works of the founders (Bahá'u'lláh and Theodore Herzl, respectively), both contain a socialist foundation, both "exalt [sic] any work performed in the spirit of service to the level of worship,"—as was evident to me when growing up on a kibbutz. Both also showed an interest in the creation of an international

language, and in particular in Esperanto, the creation of Polish Jew Dr. Lazarus (Eliezer) Ludwig Zamenhof. A planned language derived from the Latin family of languages, Esperanto uses a phonetic script ensuring all words are pronounced as written. It includes only sixteen grammatical rules, and only ten thousand (as opposed to about two hundred thousand in English) roots. While Zionism had overall forsaken Esperanto in favour of the revival of Hebrew, Esperanto, Bahá'í Dale Lehman notes, "has an interesting connection to the Bahá'í Faith," arguing that "as in so many other areas, we can see the development of languages such as Esperanto as a response to the spiritual forces unleashed by the new revelation. Ludwik Zamenhof, the Polish physician who created the language, first published his work in 1887, a mere 5 years before Bahá'u'lláh's ascension" (Lehman). As tenuous as that link sounds, it is of

... greater interest [...] that Dr. Zamenhof's daughter Lidia came into contact with the prominent Bahá'í teacher Martha Root. Lidia eventually embraced the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and traveled to America in 1937 at the invitation of U.S. National Spiritual Assembly and with the encouragement of Shoghi Effendi to promote and teach Esperanto in that country (ibid.).

Lidia Zamenhof later died in the Holocaust.

Bahá'u'lláh himself did not think Esperanto was sufficient, yet he "encouraged Bahá'ís to learn it and did not discount the possibility that in time Esperanto might mature into a true universal language" (ibid.). The links between Israel, the Bahá'í and Esperanto still exist, and the International Congress for Esperanto took place in Israel in 2000.

But what, exactly, is Bahá'ísm? "The movement," Maceoin notes, "originated in the 1860s as a faction within Babism [...] a messianic sect of Shi'a Islam that began in Iraq and Iran in 1844" (618). Bahá'ísm owes its name to Baha' Allah (1817-92) or Bahá'u'lláh ,who "claimed to be a new prophet and expounded his religion as the latest in a long line of divine revelations" (ibid.). The Bahá'í believe in a cyclical theory of history, in which there is a "linear process directed by the divine will and marked by the periodic appearances of major and minor prophets" (ibid.). It is very much a Great Man theory of history, as Esselmont argues in his 1923 book Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era: "it becomes evident," he says, "that the leading factor in human progress is the advent, from time to time, of men who pass beyond the accepted ideas of their day and become the discoverers and revealers of truths hitherto unknown among mankind" (11). For the Bahá'í, Bahá'u'lláh is the last in a long line of such prophets. Esselmont notes that "every few centuries a great Divine Revealer—a Krishna, a Zoroaster, a Moses, a Jesus, a Muhammad—appears in the East" (12). The early history of Bahá'ísm took place in the Middle East, with Bahá'u'lláh being exiled to the Turkish province of Palestine, where he spent the last twenty years of his life. It was the appointment of Shoghi Effendi as "first Guardian of the Cause of God", however, that "proved singularly important for the later development of the movement" (MacEoin 626). Shoghi Effendi began by first organizing the movement, establishing "local and

national administrative bodies throughout the Bahá'í world [... and] began to create an image of Bahá'ísm as a dynamic new world religion" (ibid.). His second move was to establish missionary enterprises, to the effect that today, Bahá'ísm is "overwhelmingly a "Third World" religion" (Hampson qtd. in Maceoin 636). Expansion has been "most rapid in India, South Vietnam, South America, the Pacific and parts of sub-Saharan Africa [...] although Iranians, Americans and Europeans remain the most active in missionary and administrative work" (MacEoin 636-637). Indeed, Bahá'ísm's spread has been such that, despite having only around five million adherents, the movement is described as "the second most widely spread religion after Christianity" (MacEoin 637) by the Britannica Book of the Year for 1998.

I find the idea of a cyclical history of Great Men of particular interest when considering two seemingly unrelated ideas. The one, Isaac Asimov's Foundation series; the other, the Japanese cult of Aum Shinrikyo, or Aum Ultimate Truth as it calls itself in English. Asimov, an American Jew born in Russia, created in the Foundation series (1942-1950; continued in the 1980s in a series of books) a future history (mirroring to a large extent the rise and fall of the Roman empire) in which a Galactic Empire in decline must be saved by a secret Foundation using the imaginary science of Psychohistory—a way of foretelling the future that, for all it claims to rely on mass trends, is based on the actions of single Great Men, not the least of whom is Hari Seldon, the inventor of Psychohistory. As a work of fiction, the Foundation series won a well-deserved Hugo Award in 1965; it may seem unlikely to be the cause of a new religious movement.

In fact, there have been several strong links between SF literature and religious or quasi-religious movements: useful examples include Robert Heinlein's novel Stranger in a Strange Land (1961) and its seminal influence on Charles Manson 1; Andrew Macdonald/William Pierce's right-wing apocalypse novel The Tuner Diaries (1978) and its influence on Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh; and above all L. Ron Hubbard's creation of Dianetics (later the Church of Scientology) out of the pages of the magazine Astounding Science Fiction.

Yet it is Asimov's work which is the most interesting. David Kaplan and Andrew Marshall note:

The similarities [of Asimov's Foundation] to Aum and its guru's quest were quite remarkable [...] in an interview, Murai [one of Aum's inner circle] would state matter-of-factly that Aum was using the Foundation series as the blueprint for the cult's long-term plans. He gave the impression of 'a graduate student who had read too many science fiction novels,' remembered one reporter. But it was real enough to the cult. Shoko Asahara, the blind and bearded guru from Japan, had become Hari Seldon; and Aum Supreme Truth was the Foundation (qtd. in Disch 143).

A further Asimov incidence concerns the emergence of the global terrorist group Al-Qaeda. "My supervisor, an expert in the Middle East, told me about a rumour circulating about the name of Bin Laden's network," Dr. China Mieville, a young

SF writer with a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics said in a letter to the newsletter Ansible. "The term "Al-Qaeda" seems to have no political precedent in Arabic, and has therefore been something of a conundrum to the experts, until someone pointed out that a very popular book in the Arab world, Arabs apparently being big readers of translated sf, is Asimov's Foundation, the title of which is translated as "Al-Qaeda." Unlikely as it sounds, this is the only theory anyone can come up with" (qtd. in Langford).

Although somewhate anecdotal, these statements highlight some of the links between science fiction literature and new religious movements. Bahá'ísm, in opposition to the examples given above, seems to take a positive and a non-millennialist approach to its world affairs. For a long time Bahá'ísm had also avoided any involvement in politics, reinforced by Shoghi Effendi's view that "believers should leave the outside world to collapse, while building a new Bahá'í order to take its place" (Maceoin 633). In 1983, the Universal House of Justice "announced that social action was now to be incorporated into Bahá'í community life and set up an Office of Social and Economic Development in Haifa to coordinate such activities" (ibid.). Maceoin argues that this shift in policy is a "direct response to the growth of religion in the Third World [and is] closely linked to the movement's broader missionary enterprise" (ibid.).

And yet, despite the lauded values of the movement, it is difficult to view its missionary efforts without some concern, just as the missionary efforts of the Catholic Church can be regarded as morally dubious, and as the Church of Scientology's tactics have come under fire. This is enhanced by a particular episode relating to one of the handful of science fiction and fantasy writers of the Bahá'í faith. A list at adherents.com, Science Fiction/Fantasy Authors of Various Faiths, contains entries on six authors, one of whom was apparently "excommunicated", or expelled from the faith by the Bahá'í Universal House of Justice. One problem may be that in the Bahá'í faith the Fordist worldview is compounded with Fordist morality: hard work and family values, a moral code that is under considerable strain in the twenty first century. For example, as part of the debate author and former Bahá'í Michael McKenny found himself involved in, the Universal House of Justice in 1995 declared: "the Bahá'í Faith strongly condemns all blatant acts of immorality, and it includes among them the expression of sexual love between individuals of the same sex." And, from the Bahá'í Teachings on Homosexuality: "No matter how devoted and fine the love may be between people of the same sex," Shoghi Effendi had said, "to let it find expression in sexual acts is wrong. To say that it is ideal is no excuse. Immorality of every sort is really forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh, and homosexual relationships He looks upon as such, besides being against nature." McKenny may have found himself at odds with the Universal House of Justice, but if he did it was not because of his writing. In fact, out of the remaining list of authors only one, Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff (published in Analog), may be considered a professional writer to be using Bahá'í themes. The other Bahá'í, Joseph Sheppherd, Arthur M. Weinberg, Barbara Larkin and Stephen D.

Dighton, may be considered peripheral. The reason, suggests the list, "that Bahá'ís have not been written about in popular fiction may be that writers are unfamiliar with them. Most science fiction and other genre writers are not personally acquainted with Bahá'ís." Although that is likely true, science fiction has for long tackled various religions, including Roger Zelazny's Hugo Award-winning novel Lord of Light (1967), which deals with Hinduism and Buddhism; Walter M. Miller Jr.'s A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959) and Anthony Boucher's classic short story "The Quest for St Aquin" (1951) both of which deal with Christianity; the anthology Wandering Stars (1974), which deals with Judaism; and Islamic and Sufi mysticism in Frank Herbert's Dune (1965). Indeed, Brian Stableford notes in the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction that "many of the roots of proto science fiction are embedded in traditions of speculative fiction closely associated with the religious imagination, and contemporary sf recovered a strong interest in certain mystical and transcendental themes and images" (1000). Perhaps, as the list suggests, "popular writers have not felt threatened by Bahá'ís, and so they have not written cautionary tales about them. One of the most common sources of subject material in science fiction and fantasy is any contemporary or historical movement which seems dangerous or threatening." The Bahá'ís, with a policy of non-involvement, and with ideals that seem almost to have sprung of the American pulp magazines of 1940s, possibly do not offer enough narrative tension. The list further notes:

Since the development of the Fundamentalist/Evangelical/Born Again movement in around the 1940s, over 50 science fiction novels have been written about dystopian near-future Americas governed by despotic Baptist or Evangelical regimes. Conversely, some Evangelical writers have written about dystopian near-future Americas ruined by intolerant liberal, atheistic, or New Age regimes. Even some relatively small groups have become fodder for popular fiction, as some writers have written fiction satirizing, warning against, or "exposing" groups such violence-prone racial separatists ("Christian Identity Movement", Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, black militants, and others have all been dealt with in science fiction novels). But Bahá'ís have apparently seemed so unobtrusive and non-threatening that no science fiction or fantasy writer has used their fiction to attack them, "expose" them or "warn" about them.

It is an interesting speculation, and not without merit; yet much science fiction has also been written with a positive view of religion. Perhaps, having used up the shared symbolism and goals of Bahá'ísm with SF at an earlier age, science fiction was no longer interested. Certainly, with the advent of Cyberpunk with a post-Modern distopian view of globalization, today's writing tends to portray a world very different to that imagined by Bahá'ís: fragmented rather than united, diversified rather than assimilated. Contemporary accounts of the future are a far cry from the fictions of the 1950s, of the fictions of Bahá'ísm itself. Yet I would tend to agree with the list's first explanation. After all, not much genre fiction has covered Cargo Cults either, and while Eastern religions, Native American religions, Vodoun and Catholicism (and to a lesser extent Judaism and Islam) have their own respectable bibliographies, other living religions such as Zoroastrianism,

Jainism and Sikhism remain largely unexplored.

Another problem, correctly identified by the list, is that the overwhelming majority of SF writers are American, with a smaller number in the UK and Canada, an even smaller one in Australia. What SF is written in other countries does not often appear in translation, and it could be said publishers in America and the UK are to a large extent anglocentric. As the majority of Bahá'ís live outside of those areas—in effect outside to a large degree of the English speaking word—exposure to Bahá'ís by science fiction writers would be minimal.

While contacts between science fiction and Bahá'ísm have so far been minimal, the origins of these two seemingly-disparate groups are shared by Western influences of the Enlightenment project, of the urbanization and industrialization that were transforming society, of Modernism and the world of mass consumption heralded by Henry Ford. It remains to be seen whether the vision of Golden Age science fiction is yet to materialise: a united Earth, ruled by a just World Government, a relative Society of Plenty in which everyone has work and no one lives in poverty, a civilization made possible by science, and where everyone speaks a common tongue.

It also remains to be seen if this future is Bahá'í.

Footnotes

Although this is open to debate, as discussions on Patrick Nielsen-Hayden's web site from 2002 indicate.

Works Referenced

Bahá'ís in Science Fiction and Fantasy. 9 Oct. 2002. Adherents.com. 17 Apr. 03.

Danesh, Helen, John and Amelia. The Life of Shoghi Effendi. Studying the Writings of Shoghi Effendi. Ed. M. Bergsmo. Oxford: George Ronald, 1991. bahai-library.com. 17 Apr. 03.

Disch, Thomas M. The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of. New York: The Free Press, 1998.

Esslemont, J.E. Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1923.

Langford, Dave. Ed. Ansible 172 (Nov. 2001). 17 Apr. 03.

Lehman, Dale E. Bahá'ís and Esperanto. planetbahai.org. 17 Apr. 03.

Maceoin, Denis. "Bahá'ísm". Living Religions. Ed. John R. Hinnells. London: Penguin, 1998. 618-643.

Science Fiction/Fantasy Authors of Various Faiths. 15 Feb. 03. Adherents.com. 17 Apr. 03.

Stableford, Brian. "Religion." The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction. Ed. John

Clute and Peter Nicholls. London: Orbit 1999. 1000-1003.

"The Bahá'í teachings on homosexuality". The American Bahá'í 152 (Nov. 1995). The Universal House of Justice. 17 Apr. 03.

Further Reading

Clute, John and Malcom J. Edwards. "Asimov, Isaac." The Ecyclopedia of Science Fiction. Ed. John Clute and

About Lavie Tidhar

Lavie Tidhar grew up on a kibbutz in Israel, lived in Israel and South Africa, travelled widely in Africa and Asia, and currently lives in London. He is the winner of the 2003 Clarke-Bradbury Prize (awarded by the European Space Agency), was the editor of Michael Marshall Smith: The Annotated Bibliography (PS Publishing 2004) and the anthology A Dick & Jane Primer for Adults (The British Fantasy Society, forthcoming 2006), and is the author of the recently-released novella An Occupation of Angels (Pendragon Press, Dec. 2005), a supernatural cold war thriller which Adam Roberts called a "powerfully phantasmagoric fantasy... Sharp, witty, violent and liable to haunt your dreams." His stories appear in Sci Fiction, Chizine, Postscripts, Nemonymous, Infinity Plus, Aeon, The Book of Dark Wisdom, Fortean Bureau and many others, and in translation in seven languages. His non-fiction appeared in Locus, Foundation, Interzone and IROSF.

Compilations-personal
Documents
East-asia
Encyclopedia
Essays
Etc
Excerpts
Fiction
Glossaries
Guardian
Histories
Introductory
Letters
Maps
Music
Newspapers
NSA-documents
NSA-letters
Personal
Pilgrims
Poetry
Presentations
Resources
Reviews
Scripts
Software
Statistics
Study
Talks
Theses
Transcripts
Translations
UHJ-documents
UHJ-letters
Video
Visual
Writings

home

sitemap

series

chronology

search:
author

title