

the prophesied Mahdi, who was already in the world. Consequently, on his death his followers dispersed to find the promised Mahdi. One of these questing Shaykis was Mulla Husayn (1813–1849). He took his search to Shiraz where he encountered ʿAli Muhammad Shirazi (20 October 1819–9 July 1850). ʿAli Muhammad Shirazi had been in contact with Rashti and shared his belief that the eschatological prophesies of Shiʿa Islam were soon to be fulfilled, on the night of 22 May 1844, he declared his mission to Mulla Husayn and revealed

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himself to be the Bab ('the Gate'), the promised Qa'im of Shiʿa Islam.

The Bab

and his short-lived Babi movement are regarded by Baha'is to be an independent prophet and an independent religion; however, they acknowledge the Bab's central function was that of a herald of a future prophet, referred to as

'He whom God will Make Manifest'. The Bab began by declaring the imminent return of the Twelfth Imam and sending out his followers to proclaim the news. In 1848, a conclave of the Bab's followers met at Badasht to abrogate the laws

of Islam. Many of the laws revealed by the Bab in his central book the Bayan, have been argued (Saiedi 2008) to be impossible to implement, because they are dependent upon the appearance of 'He whom God will Make Manifest', who would be able to affirm or abrogate them. Thus, it follows that the purpose of the Babi laws was simply to break with Islamic tradition and create a context for a further Revelation. The Babi movement was put down brutally and the Bab executed by firing squad. After his death, the nominal headship of the movement fell to Mirza Yahya Nuri (1831–1912) whose leadership proved

ineffective and ultimately caused the community to disintegrate into factions.

3 Baha'u'llah

Mirza Husayn-ʿAli Nuri (12 November 1817–29 May 1892) known as Baha'u'llah

was the older half-brother of Mirza Yahya Nuri, he had accepted the claims

of the Bab in the late summer of 1844 (Momen 2007), and attended the Conference of Badasht. He was a prominent and respected member of the Babi community. After the death of the Bab in 1850, Mirza Yahya, known as

Azal, became the publicly acknowledged leader of the Babis. It has been suggested by Juan Cole in his piece on Baha'u'llah in the Baha'i Encyclopaedia (Cole 1995) that Baha'u'llah, who had been corresponding with the Bab through his younger half-brother, may have been the real leader of the group. Cole goes on to say, "Azal was acknowledged by many prominent Babis as a 'Mirror' and a first among equals. There is no evidence that the Bab appointed him as a legatee or vicar, and there were many Mirrors" (Cole 1995). After a brief sojourn in Karbala, Iraq, Baha'u'llah returned to Iran in 1852, in his absence some fanatical Babis had plotted an attempt on the life of the Shah and despite Baha'u'llah's condemnation of the plot and innocence of involvement, he was arrested and imprisoned in the Siyah-Chal, the Black Pit dungeon. It was in this prison he underwent an intense mystical experience. On his release from prison and after a period in Baghdad, Baha'u'llah spent several years as a Sufi in Kurdistan. In response to the pleas of Babis concerning the shambolic leadership of his increasingly reclusive half-brother, Baha'u'llah returned to Baghdad in 1856 and

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took on much of the administrative leadership of the community. The positive impact of his work led to a resurgence of the Babi movement, and ultimately a demand from the Persian government for the extradition of Baha'u'llah to Persia. The Ottoman authorities refused but instead, for reasons which are not clear, removed Baha'u'llah to Constantinople. Before he left Baghdad on 21 April 1863, Baha'u'llah and his entourage stayed for twelve days in the Najibiyyih gardens, it was there that Baha'u'llah declared to a small group of his companions that he was He whom God will Make Manifest, the messenger promised by the Bab. Baha'u'llah travelled from Baghdad to Constantinople between 3 May and 17 August 1863, accompanied by a large group including family members and followers. After three and a half months in Constantinople, he was ordered to depart for Adrianople. It was while he was in Adrianople that the schism with his brother Azal became absolute after several attempts by Azal's supporters to kill Baha'u'llah.

In 1866, Baha'u'llah made his claim to be Him whom God will Make Manifest public (MacEoin 1989), as well as making a formal written announcement to Azal referring to his followers for the first time as the “people of Baha” (Smith 2008). Whilst in Adrianople Baha'u'llah wrote extensively, including letters to political and religious rulers, announcing his station and mission, demonstrating the intended universality of his message outside the Muslim world. The discord between Baha'u'llah and his followers and the rump of the Babi movement loyal to Azal caused the Ottoman authorities in July 1868 to exile both factions, Baha'u'llah to the prison city of 'Akka (Acre) and Azal to Famagusta in Cyprus. Baha'u'llah and his family arrived in 'Akka at the end of August 1868, the first years there were very hard and marred by the tragic death in 1870 of Baha'u'llah's son, Mirza Mehdi, at the age of twenty-two when he fell through a skylight. After some time, relations between the prisoners and officials and the local community improved, so that the conditions of the imprisonment were eased and eventually, Baha'u'llah was allowed to leave the city and visit nearby places. From 1877 until 1879 Baha'u'llah lived in the house of Mazra'ih (Smith 2008). In 1899 Baha'u'llah moved to his final home a small mansion at Bahjí. He had fourteen children by his three wives including four daughters, five of his sons predeceased him. Baha'u'llah died of a fever in 'Akka on 29 May 1892, at the age of seventy-four.

4 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghí Effendí

Before his death, Baha'u'llah appointed 'Abbas Efendi (23 May 1844–28 November 1921), his eldest son, as leader of the community and inspired

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interpreter of His Revelation. Known as 'Abdu'l-Baha, he communicated with the community he led through letters, referred to as tablets and through lectures. He visited the West to two occasions, the first time from August to December 1911, when he visited the United Kingdom, France, and Switzerland, and the second time between April 1912 and June 1913, when he visited Canada,

the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, and Hungary, meeting his growing number of Occidental supporters and answering their questions and concerns. This meant that issues such as the role of women were pushed to the fore and the Baha'i message took on aspects of Western social thought (Osborn 2014: 22). Several younger members of 'Abdu'l-Baha's family were sent to England to complete their educations and acquire linguistic skills. Between March 1916 and March 1917, 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote fourteen letters to the Baha'is of Canada and the United States known collectively as The

Tablets of the Divine Plan ('Abdu'l-Baha 1991 [1916–1917]). These instructed his

North American followers to spread the Baha'i teachings around the world, an indication of how important he understood his Western followers to be. With no surviving son, 'Abdu'l-Baha passed the leadership of the community to his

grandson and amanuensis Shoghi Effendi Rabbani.

Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1 March 1897–4 November 1957) was born in 'Akka and educated at the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut) and Balliol College, Oxford (Khadem 1999). He learned of the death of his grandfather in London and returned to Palestine to discover that his grandfather's will instructed the Baha'i community to "turn unto Shoghi Effendi ...

he is the sign of God, the chosen branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God ...

He is the expounder of the words of God and after him will succeed the firstborn of his lineal descendants" ('Abdu'l-Baha 1990). Under the Guardianship

of Shoghi Effendi the unique Baha'i Administration was set up, this included

the establishment of local and national bodies, the regulation of published material and large scale coordinated missionary activity. Throughout the period of the Guardianship the Baha'i Faith evolved into fast growing international community, stressing modernity and social reconstruction, books with

titles such as *Baha'u'llah and the New Era* (Esslemont 1923) and *Bahatism: the*

Modern Social Religion (Holley 1913) being used to teach the new religion across the globe.

The death of Shoghi Effendi in 1957 caused some tensions, as the will of 'Abdu'l-Baha had clearly stated the Guardianship was a hereditary office whose

incumbent would lead the community alongside an elected legislative body, the Universal House of Justice, an institution described by Baha'u'llah in the

Kitab-i-Aqdas. When Shoghi Effendi died without an heir there was potential for discord. However, in 1951 Shoghi Effendi had appointed a number of men

and women to the International Baha'i Council, a body which existed to assist

him in specific tasks and to be the forerunner of the Universal House of Justice.

In 1961, the appointed International Baha'i Council was reconstituted as an elected body and their final task was to set up the election of the Universal House of Justice which took place in 1963.

5 A 'World Religion' from 1957

The Universal House of Justice (henceforth UHJ) is elected every five years by the National Spiritual Assemblies (henceforth NSAs) which are in turn elected annually by unit conventions of grass roots members. Where more than nine Baha'is are resident in a locality a Local Spiritual Assembly (henceforth LSA) of

nine members is elected; unit conventions, local and national assemblies are open to all members, only the UHJ is restricted to males. As well as the elected

institutions, there is an appointed stratum of administration which also functions under the guidance of the UHJ, this comprises of Counsellors and their

appointees at local level, there is no clergy and apart from the members of the UHJ all functionaries are expected to be self-financing and in employment.

After the death of its last hereditary leader a period of significant expansion and development took place. The community had been rooted in Iran and spread into Iranian expatriate communities, gradually including Jews, Zoroastrians, Sunni Muslims, and others. From the 1890s small groups of Baha'is developed in the West, the most significant of these was that of the USA. In response to the expansion plans of Shoghí Effendí Baha'is from both

the Middle East and the West undertook 'pioneering'; moving to places hitherto without a Baha'i community and striving to set up groups. By the 1950s the

two cultural contexts of the Baha'i community came together in missionary activity, the post Islamic Iranian Baha'is and the occidental Baha'is seeped in

the alternative religious milieu of Europe and the USA began to establish Baha'i

communities in several parts of the non-Muslim 'developing world', initially

among the Western-oriented urban minority (Smith and Momen 1989: 68).

Throughout the 1960s the Baha'i Faith gained adherents throughout the

developing world and beyond. Baha'i teachers learned to adapt their message and missionary techniques to largely uneducated workers, transforming the social base of the community. In the well-established and largely white American community, converts began to be drawn from Native American and African American demographics.

The mission work was exceptionally successful in some areas, bringing about massive cultural change in the worldwide community, however, this change

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was not without problems. The infrastructure was not in place to enable retention of such an influx of new believers, many of whom “were poorly educated,

and many lived in rural and tribal areas with which effective communication was difficult to sustain” (Smith and Momen 1989: 72). Around the same time the revolution in Iran also effected the spread of the Baha'i Faith. The revolution brought about significant persecution of Baha'is in the homeland of the

Faith and furthermore curtailed the sending of funds abroad. This was a significant blow as the Iranian community had funded much missionary work and supported communities in poorer countries. The Iranian government, rather strangely for Shi'a Muslims, seemed oblivious of the positive impact of persecution and martyrdom, and Iranians fleeing the revolution bolstered numbers

across the worldwide community with emotive stories of persecution gaining much publicity.

To address the ability to attract people to the Faith but the failure to retain them a new strategy was implemented, the concept of the ‘training institute’

was introduced by the Universal House of Justice in the mid-1990s. Its purpose is to assist individuals to deepen their understanding of the Baha'i teachings,

and to gain the spiritual insights and practical skills they need to carry out the

work of the community. The Institute process is based on the use of materials developed in Columbia by The Ruhi Institute, which is directed by the Columbian NSA. The Institute produces a sequence of books, referred to as the ‘Ruhi Books’ which are studied in small groups led by a facilitator who has

completed the sequence. There are training materials for different age groups and a range of support resources including songbooks and colouring sheets. As well as the Ruhi Book, in study circles Baha'is are encouraged to participate in

‘core activities’, including children’s classes and devotional meetings.

It must

be stressed that these activities are neither compulsory nor restrictive and individuals are encouraged to continue and develop other activities, though there is anecdotal evidence that the study circles have come to dominate the community at the expense of other activities. At the present time, the

Institute

process does not appear to have been subjected to academic scrutiny, making it impossible to assess the effectiveness of the strategy.

6 Baha’i Beliefs and Practices

In common with Muslims, Baha’is have a linear view of history, throughout which prophets, or Manifestations of God, bring books and laws to found and govern divinely inspired communities, each revelation building upon the last in a process described as ‘Progressive Revelation’. Baha’u’llah is held to be the

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‘promised one of all ages’, the universal manifestation of the unknowable deity

and the founder of a new cycle of revelation. Some of the basic beliefs of the Baha’i Faith can be summarised as a list of principles extrapolated from the writings of the founder that concern the nature of religion. All religions, according to the Faith, are ultimately one: “It is the outward practices of religion that

are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity—while the reality is always the same, and one” (?Abdu’l-Baha 1969: 120). Thus, religion must be

a source of unity: “religion must be the cause of unity, harmony and agreement

among mankind. If it be the cause of discord and hostility, if it leads to separation and creates conflict, the absence of religion would be preferable in the

world” (?Abdu’l-Baha 1976 [1956]: 247). Furthermore, religion is evolutionary,

revealed to suit the place and time but receptacles on a single universal truth:

“There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message. They all have but one purpose; their secret is the same secret” (Baha’u’llah 1983: 78).

The understanding of this universality must be made through the independent investigation of truth, which Moojan Momen postulates in an article intended for the Baha’i Encyclopaedia (Momen n.d.) “is to be found in

embryonic form in the Shi'ī prohibition of taqlid, blind imitation, in matters of the principles of religion.” As ‘Abdu’l-Baha phrases it, “God has created in man the power of reason, whereby man is enabled to investigate reality. God has not intended man to imitate blindly his fathers and ancestors” (‘Abdu’l-Baha 1982: 291). This emphasis on reason is further enhanced by the insistence of the harmony between religion and science, which are described by ‘Abdu’l-Baha as “two wings” which will facilitate the development of the intellect and spirit (‘Abdu’l-Baha 1969: 143). Other principles deal with the nature of humankind, stressing the oneness of religion reflected in the oneness of humanity. This is the basis for the emphasis on equality: “as to religious, racial, national and political bias: all these prejudices strike at the very root of human life; one and all they beget bloodshed, and the ruination of the world. So long as these prejudices survive, there will be continuous and fearsome wars” (‘Abdu’l-Baha 1978: 249). Sex equality and equal opportunities for women and men in education and training are also stressed: “Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible” (‘Abdu’l-Baha 1982: 76). The abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty is also desirable, “O Ye Rich Ones on Earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust and be not intent only on your own ease” (Baha’u’llah 1990: 41). World unity is promoted, with peaceful consultation as a means for resolving differences: “The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions” (‘Abdu’l-Baha 1978: 87). The ideal is for

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universal peace and the establishment of a world parliament, where all world leaders will come together to “consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world’s Great Peace amongst men” (Baha’u’llah 1983: 249).

To facilitate unity great emphasis is put on universal education, “Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing and in all that hath been laid down in the Holy

Tablet”

(Baha'u'llah 1993: 38). In the interests of universal communication the need for an international auxiliary language is highlighted: “It behoveth the sovereigns of the world ... or the ministers of the earth to take counsel together and to adopt one of the existing languages or a new one to be taught to children in schools throughout the world, and likewise one script” (Baha'u'llah 1978: 22).

It is in the daily practices of Baha'is that the origins of the Faith in an Islamic context are most clearly preserved. Baha'is are required to declare their faith, pray in a specified manner at specific times, give alms based on property held, fast, and make a pilgrimage to sacred sites. It is widespread practice in some Baha'i communities to issue cards to new believers, which outline the beliefs being accepted, the following statement is on the card issued by the NSA of Australia:

I wish to become a member of the Baha'i community. I accept Baha'u'llah as the Bearer of God's Message for this Day and will endeavour to follow His teachings and the Baha'i way of life. I also accept the authority of the institutions which administer the affairs of the Baha'i community.

There are three daily obligatory prayers, any one of the three may be used but must be done so in accordance with any specific directions with which they may be accompanied, for example facing the qibla and prostrations. Baha'is are required to fast by refraining from food and drink between the hours of sunrise and sunset during the Baha'i month of Alá, (Loftiness). The Baha'i fast, therefore, takes place over nineteen days, from 2 March to 20 March inclusive. Baha'is are subject to the law of Huqúqu'lláh (the Portion of God): “Should anyone acquire one hundred mithqáls of gold, nineteen mithqáls thereof are God's and to be rendered unto Him” (Baha'u'llah 1993: 55) That is, 19% of that portion of income which is not essential for living expenses is to be paid, similar to a tithe, to support philanthropic causes.

7 Controversies

The teachings of the Baha'i Faith might generally be described as progressive, egalitarian, and inclusive, however, in recent years there has been some

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discussion, particularly in Europe and North America, around the issues of the role of women and LGBT rights. The equality of men and women is a basic principle of the Baha'i Faith and has been expounded as such since its inception, however, the Universal House of Justice is an exclusively male institution

and that has raised questions as to how that can be rationalised in a context of

gender equality (Lee et al 1999).

Despite non-involvement in politics the Baha'i Faith has a history of inclusivity of races and opposition to racism. This is particularly true in the US

where prominent African Americans in such diverse fields as philosophy, for example, Alain Locke (1885–1954) (Buck 2005), and jazz music, for example Dizzy Gillespie (Shipton 2001), have embraced the Baha'i Faith. The inclusivity in regard to race, sex, and gender has led to some tension over issues such

as same-sex marriage (Snow 2016). The Baha'i Faith has teachings similar to those of other Abrahamic faiths around chastity before marriage, faithfulness in marriage, and a dislike of divorce and non-heterosexual relations. Whilst strongly opposing any form of discrimination on the grounds of sexuality the admonishment of Baha'u'llah—“We shrink, for very shame, from treating of the subject of boys ... Commit not that which is forbidden you in Our

Holy Tablet, and be not of those who rove distractedly in the wilderness of their desires” (Baha'u'llah 1993: 59)—was further reinforced by both Shoghi

Effendi and 'Abdu'l-Baha to clarify the term ‘boys’ did not refer to pederasty or

paedophilia but is inclusive of adult homosexual acts. More latterly the UHJ has stated:

The Universal House of Justice is authorized to change or repeal its own legislation as conditions change ... but it cannot abrogate or change any of the laws which are explicitly laid down in the sacred Texts. It follows, then, that the House of Justice has no authority to change this clear teaching on homosexual practice.

Universal House of Justice 1995

The increasing numerical dominance of Baha'is in the developing world may render concerns around scholarship and gender politics marginal to the wider Baha'i community.

8 Persecution

Baha'is have suffered persecution for their beliefs, particularly in Muslim

majority countries where their understanding of the ministries of The Bab and Baha'u'llah as fulfilments Shi'a Islam and consequently 'prophets after

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Mohammed' have led to charges of apostasy. The presence of the Baha'i World

Centre in Israel has led to accusations of complicity with Zionism, despite the obvious objection that the Centre predated the foundation of the state of Israel.

The tragic situation for Baha'is in Iran is well documented, as since the 1979

Islamic Revolution in Iran Baha'is have been systematically persecuted as a matter of government policy. During the first decade of this persecution, more than two hundred Baha'is were killed or executed; hundreds more were tortured or imprisoned, and tens of thousands lost jobs, access to education, and

other rights solely because of their religious belief. According to Roger Cooper

in *The Baha'is of Iran: The Minority Rights Group Report 51*, Baha'is are classified as "unprotected infidels", "heretics" and "those whose blood may be shed

with impunity" making it impossible to seek justice, redress or protection.

The reaction of the Baha'is to oppression derives directly from the teachings

of Baha'u'llah:

Baha'is therefore believe that strategies for achieving lasting social change—including strategies for overcoming violent oppression—must pay attention to both the material and spiritual dimensions of change, including the transformation of hearts among both the oppressors and the oppressed. In this regard, oppositional strategies that pit one group against another, whether violently or non-violently, are not considered conducive to spiritual transformation and lasting change. Baha'is thus refrain from all divisive form of social action, including involvement in partisan political organising and opposition.

Karlberg 2010: 222

There are currently more than ninety Baha'is imprisoned in Iran, including all

seven members of the Yaran, a now disbanded leadership group which tended to the spiritual and social needs of the Baha'i community in the absence of an NSA.

Economic pressure on Iran's Baha'i community is acute, with both jobs

and business licenses being denied to Baha'is. Government jobs, including not only in the civil service but also in such fields as education and law, have been denied to Baha'is since the years immediately following the Revolution. Education has been denied, both to in schools and more significantly in universities, which are effectively closed to Baha'is. Other forms of persecution faced by Iranian Baha'is include the monitoring of their bank accounts, movements, and activities; the denial of pensions or rightful inheritances; the intimidation of Muslims who associate with Baha'is; the denial of access to publishing

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or copying facilities for Baha'i literature; and the unlawful confiscation or destruction of Baha'i properties, including Baha'i holy places and graveyards.

In Egypt, there has been spasmodic persecution of the Baha'is, since the Faith first arrived in Egypt in 1867 and developed through the work of Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl-i-Gulpáygání (Mirza Abu'l-Fada'il 1844–1914) at the Al-Azhar

University, where he taught from 1894, and brought as many as thirty (Momen 1995) teachers and students to accept the Baha'i Teachings. By 1900 there were small groups of Baha'is, mainly of Persian heritage, scattered throughout

Egypt and Baha'i texts in Arabic were being published in Cairo. In 1924, the first

National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt was elected and a year later a provisional court in Upper Egypt attempted to divorce three women from their husbands because they argued the men were not Muslims and could, therefore, not be married to Muslim women (Scharbrodt 200848). This case effectively created a legal precedent which separated the Baha'i Faith from Islam, particularly as

the women chose to remain with their husbands. The Baha'i community grew modestly over the next few decades with some outbreaks of hostility, however, in 1960 the passage of Law No. 263 under Gamal 'Abdel Nasser, which granted official government recognition only to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, effectively stripped organisational rights from all who would identify otherwise.

Baha'i rights were further complicated with the inclusion of Article 2 of the constitution in 1971, declaring Islamic law to be the source of Egyptian legislation. As such, any religion not recognised as legitimate by Islamic

scholars

cannot be recognised by the state.

There were periodic arrests of Baha'is in the mid-1960s, 1972, and 1985, and in early 1987 forty-eight Baha'is had sentences pronounced against them for religious activities. The restrictions on Baha'is came to a head in 2006,

over

the matter of identity cards, all Egyptians are required to carry an identity card, which states among other things their religious affiliation. Life without an identity card is almost impossible. Baha'is are forbidden to misrepresent their faith, and this had led to the custom of leaving the field blank, until the

system was computerised which made inserting anything but one of the 'three heavenly religions' (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) impossible. In 2008,

the

Court of Administrative Justice ruled that the Ministry of Interior must issue identification cards to Baha'is with the caveat that 'religion' is left blank, justified by Egyptian constitutional protections for freedom of religion.

While Iran and Egypt have been the particularly harsh in response to the Baha'is, there have been instances of persecution in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, and in several other predominantly Muslim nations. Some of the assertions made to discredit the Baha'is by the more imaginative of their

opponents go beyond the spiteful to the bizarre: for example, "They forbid

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their women to wear hijab, and they regard mut'ah (temporary marriage) as permissible, and they promote the sharing of women and wealth," claims an unnamed author answering the question "Q: What is the ruling on the Baha'i ideas and beliefs? What is the difference between them and other Muslims?" on Islamway.net (Anon. 2008).

9 Conclusion

In a century and half or so, since its inception in Iran, the Baha'i Faith has

spread throughout the globe, it has been embraced by a diverse community, comprising of urban workers, royalty, artists, and the lower classes, all of whom

have found solace in the teachings of Baha'u'llah. It is now possibly the eighth

largest religion in the world. How the role of this latest of the Abrahamic religions will unfold is not yet clear but its emphasis on unity in diversity makes it

likely to be of major significance in an ever more globally defined civilisation.

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