Baha'i, I by Margit Warburg: Review

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Daniela Pinna

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i baha'i

Author: Margit Warburg

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Edited by: Massimo Introvigne

Review by: Daniela Pinna

A religion suspended between globalization and fundamentalism, militant advocacy of human rights and censorship of its intellectuals. That's Danish sociologist Margit Warburg's portrayal of the Bahá'í Faith, as it emerges from her latest work i baha'i, recently published in Italy.

This is a tiny little book that may have a big impact on the image of the Bahá'í Faith in Italy, and on the way Italian Bahá'ís perceive themselves.

Dr. Warburg's is the first monographic work on the religion by a non-Bahá'í author to come out in Italy. It is number 25 in a series of slim, easy-to-read, low-priced volumes on minority religious movements authored by scholars and published by Elledici, a well-known Catholic publishing house with a widespread network of bookshops. The series is edited by Massimo Introvigne, a regular contributor to L'Avvenire, the Italian Bishop's daily newspaper, and founder of Turin-based Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), Italy's most influential source of information on NRMs.

All those elements combined imply that Dr. Warburg's book will reach a wide public, ranging from ordinary readers to opinion makers and scholars. The book may certainly shape the way the Bahá'í Faith is seen in Italy, a country where Catholicism is still the de facto, if not the de jure, state religion and where very little is known about minority religions in general, and the Bahá'í Faith in particular.

Not only that. This 120-page volume may also reshape the way Italian Bahá'ís look at themselves and their own religious beliefs. For most of them, it will be the first time they have been confronted with a thorough survey of their Faith by an external author. An entire section of the book is devoted to the issue of conflicts between scholars and Bahá'í authorities on freedom of research, a topic about which little is known among Italy's rank-and-file believers.

Religions in Italy

Now to fully understand the possible impact of Margit Warburg's book on an Italian public, some basic background information may be useful.

According to the latest estimates — provided by CESNUR's Enciclopedia delle Religioni in Italia (Turin: Elledici, 2001) — 1.1 million Italians (1.9 per cent) belong to minority (i.e., non-Catholic) religions. The figure rises to approximately 2 million (3.5 per cent), if immigrants are included. Minority rights are protected under the 1948 Republican Constitution, but non-Catholics are in fact second-class citizens in Italy. That is because of the enduring influence that the Catholic Church has exerted on laws and lawmakers since the Italian state was conceived.

British historian Denis Mack Smith states that the destruction of the Pope's temporal power was one of the most significant achievements of the Risorgimento, the movement for the unification of Italy (Modern Italy, a Political History, London: Yale University Press, 1997). When in 1870 Italian troops conquered the Holy City, Pope Pius IX locked himself inside the Vatican, and Rome was made the Capital of the Kingdom of Italy. Shortly afterwards, the Vatican forbade Catholics to vote in national elections. The prohibition was largely ignored, despite the threat of excommunication. Relations between the Vatican and the Kingdom of Italy remained tense, with the Pope claiming temporal sovereignty over the city of Rome. The Vatican in typical fashion protested the abolition of anti-Jewish legislation and of the Ghetto, and it objected to the building of a Protestant church and a Free Masons temple in Rome. Still, the secular Kingdom of Italy did not grant non-Catholic religions full rights. They were instead guaranteed "tolerance," provided they did not infringe "public order".

The situation changed for the worse in 1929, when Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini made his peace with the Church, signing the Concordat. Now Catholicism was the state religion, a compulsory subject taught in public schools. The Church was granted tax exemptions, state funds, and substantial independence. The Catholic laws concerning marriage were imposed on all Italians. A few months later, in June 1929, Law No. 1159 was passed regulating the rights and activities of "admitted cults." They could proselytize, were entitled to partial tax exemption, and could perform legally binding marriages. But, once again, they were not to infringe public order, and worse, public morality, a rather vague concept. In fact, this was

a way to legalize persecution.

The 1948 Republican Constitution granted all citizens religious freedom, but not without ambiguities. The restrictions concerning public order were abolished, but not those concerning public morality. What's more, an alliance between the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats granted the Church full recognition in the Constitution of Mussolini's Concordat. That was to have lasting effects on Italian legislation on a number of issues. It was not until the 1970s that any non-Catholic-oriented legislation was passed, allowing for equal rights and responsibility between husband and wife (for example), legalizing the sale of contraceptives, permitting divorce and, later, abortion.

The Concordat was eventually revised in 1984 by the government led by socialist Prime Minister Bettino Craxi. Briefly, Catholicism is no longer the state religion, but its privileges (such as the teaching of Catholic religion
in state schools at all levels by Church-appointed teachers paid for by the state) are guaranteed under Constitutional Law. The rights of minority religions are to be negotiated on a case by case basis, under lesser pacts called "Intese" (agreements). It is interesting to note that Law 1159 is still valid, although trimmed of its most undemocratic provisions by the Constitutional Court. An attempt at passing a new law to deal comprehensively with non-Catholic religions in a more democratic way failed during the 1996-2001 legislature.

To this day, only six minority religions have signed "Intese" granting tax exemptions, access to limited state funds, and the right to bring spiritual assistance to believers in hospitals and places of detention. The former leftist government headed by post-communist Massimo D'Alema approved draft "Intese" with the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Buddhist Union, but they were never ratified by Parliament because of vocal opposition from conservative circles and parties that now back Silvio Berlusconi's center-right government.

Suspicion against the rising number of immigrants (most of them Muslims), Catholic conservatism (still ingrained in powerful sectors of the Church), and fear caused by media reports of crimes perpetrated abroad by members of minority religions combine to produce a feeling of mistrust. Its most tangible expression is the rising number of organizations devoted to exposing the dangers inherent in minority religions, generally labelled as "cults."

Under Italian Law, the Bahá'í Faith ranks as an "Admitted Cult," the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly having obtained "recognition" as a Foundation in 1966. The National Assembly has started negotiations towards an "Intesa" that are still at an early stage. It must also be said that, in recent years, a clever, unrelenting, and consistent public relations strategy has managed to give the Bahá'í religion new visibility and credibility in the country.

Considering the socio-religious situation in Italy, and the political climate, no document, essay, or newspaper article published about the Bahá'í Faith could be without consequences. This is especially true of a monographic work by an academic sociologist who has extensively studied Bahá'í communities.

Theocratic reformers

The Bahá'ís are well integrated into a system they vow to change from its foundations. This is a contrast that Margit Warburg introduces from the book's first chapter, where she underlines the necessity of paying more attention to the Faith's programs and the way its believers try to pursue them. And this because — although the greater part of the personal and social teachings of their Faith reflects the mores of the Western middle class — the new world order they wish to install is a mix of religion and politics that is more Islamic than Western. Theocracy is a topic that the sociologist returns to later on in the book.

Warburg then proceeds to disclose the Islamic roots of a religion of Iranian origin that has come to Europe from the United States.

In the 26 pages that cover the period from the Bab's role in Shiite millenniarism to the 1990s, only a few main historical events are outlined. But the list of sources mentioned in the footnotes is an interesting key to Warburg's own interpretation of Bahá'í scholarship. Apart from the inescapable E. G. Browne (also via Moojan Momen) and Abbas Amanat, Warburg draws on Denis MacEoin, Peter Smith, and John Walbridge. Official Bahá'í history is represented by Stockman and Taherzadeh. Warburg's powerful portrayal of Bahá'u'lláh as an extraordinary religious reformer, aware of liberal and democratic tendencies at work in both the West and the Middle East, draws on Juan Cole's Modernity and the Millennium, repeatedly cited.

The core of the book is Chapter 3 (on doctrine and rituals) and Chapter 4 (on the number and organization of Bahá'ís worldwide). Both are based on Warburg's own field research, as well as on official documents (though the "cultural" background for Bahá'í rituals is provided by John Walbridge). They give interesting insights into Bahá'í life as seen by an outsider. The sociologist underlines the existence in the religion of clearly distinct sub-cultures directly linked to national identities. That is evidenced, for instance, by the different attitude towards fasting and towards the obligatory prayer between Iranian Bahá'ís and native believers in Denmark: the Persian immigrants strictly observe what they see as a duty, while the Danish Bahá'ís (and, according to the author, Western Bahá'ís in general) tend to stress personal choice over obedience.

Margit Warburg has published extensively on the Danish community, with which she has established cordial links. Yet, the precious experience she has gained with Bahá'ís in her own country plays against her in her Italian book. And this points up the work's only major limitation: Denmark (as indeed the whole of Europe, with its overall 30,000 believers) cannot be

taken to represent Bahá'í mentalities worldwide. The Italian Bahá'í community (of 2,800 members) — except for being occasionally mentioned here and there — is absent from a book written for the Italian public, as is Italy's major Bahá'í scholar, the late Orientalist Alessandro Bausani, none of whose works are referred to either in the footnotes or in the bibliography.

Warburg's reason for this absence is that she did not use Bausani's work in her research for i baha'i, and that her choices for a very concise bibliography (where no Italian authors are cited) show a sociological rather than historical bent. She also maintains that her silence "does not imply a judgment on the state of Bahá'í studies in Italy." However, she continues, "I do think that a country so important as Italy might have more scholars within the sociology of religion in general and studying Bahá'í in particular"
(personal communication, October 2001).

A large section of Chapter 4 is devoted to the activities at the Bahá'í World Center, the Haifa (Israel) headquarters of the Bahá'í Faith, with which Warburg has direct experience, having sojourned and done research there, which she describes as an extraordinary religious metropolis, and which she compares to the Vatican, and to the Mormon headquarters in Salt Lake City.

The Danish sociologist turns a sympathetic eye to the Bahá'í Faith's social projects and to its cooperation with international organizations on human rights and sustainable development issues. Drawing on her own research on Bahá'í approaches to globalization, Warburg emphasizes the unequivocally liberal content of the Bahá'í political messages to the United Nations. But then she goes on to stress that Bahá'ís do seem to focus on building a society that rejects one tenet of Western democracies: the separation of church and state. Warburg concedes that the issue is debated among intellectuals, and she again refers to Cole and Sen McGlinn as saying that Bahá'u'lláh's original teachings were in fact in favor of separation of church and state. But she points out that their position is a minority one. She concludes that, on this aspect, the Bahá'í Faith resembles the fundamentalist currents found today in its religious antecedents: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Schism and excommunication as a means for maintaining a monolithic organization are a recurring theme in i baha'i. Warburg deals with them specifically in Chapter 5. The issue of covenant-breaking cannot be discussed at length in a slim book directed toward the general public. But Warburg's brief list of schismatic crises can modify a stereotype that is widespread in the Italian rank-and-file Bahá'í community: that of a cohesive, tight-knit religious community where dissidence has always been limited to consciously mischievous individuals. It is not uncommon, in public meetings or at members-only deepenings, to hear Bahá'í officials say that the Bahá'í Faith has generated no sects.

But the most innovative section will no doubt be the one concerning opposition, where Margit Warburg concisely relates the controversies between some eminent Bahá'í scholars and Bahá'í authorities concerning pre-publication censorship and research methodologies.

In Italy, this issue will come as a surprise to most Bahá'ís. Bahá'í studies in Italy are considerably less developed than in the United States and Canada, or in Britain. Although there are dedicated individual believers who have done valuable research and have written books on Bahá'í history and theology, none of their works could be classified as scholarly, or would be accepted in academic circles. (The only exception is the late Professor Alessandro Bausani, who unfortunately left no intellectual heirs of his stature). Translation of books from English is limited to the sacred scriptures, compilations on general matters, and the occasional novel. Italian Bahá'ís, then, unless they speak English or are extremely motivated to go beyond official literature and have access to the internet, can have no clue as to conflicts between Bahá'í administrators and scholars. Or, if they do, it is mainly through official channels.

Quoting from the 3 January 1979 letter from the Universal House of Justice to young Bahá'í scholars, Dr. Warburg draws her conclusion which — as she's not a Bahá'í and does not have to meander along a web of subtleties and contradictions — goes right to the core: If the Bahá'í scriptures are the parameter against which all knowledge should be measured, then freedom of research must submit to religious premises. Warburg relates how these conflicts emerged on the Internet and eventually made it onto academic publications, while eminent scholars (no names are mentioned) resigned from the Faith, and others toned their rhetoric down.

Ample reference to the official documents from the House of Justice is to be found in footnotes, as well as to MacEoin's "The Crisis in Babi and Bahá'í Studies" and Juan Cole's "Panopticon." But Warburg does more than just report on the issue, stating that the Bahá'í leadership, by adopting a policy that may look like a clear violation of freedom of research on the part of Bahá'í scholars, is incurring the risk of gaining a bad reputation — a statement whose negative tones are only slightly attenuated by an uncharacteristically elaborated syntax and fine chiselling of words.

No mention is made in this chapter of dissent regarding women's exclusion from the Universal House of Justice or the prohibition against homosexuality. Such topics, in the author's comment "do not cause any real friction within the Bahá'í community."

The issues of censorship and internal opposition were not raised at the May public meeting in Turin where i baha'i was presented to the press in the presence of the author and of Italian national Bahá'í authorities. Nor had they been the subject of discussion when the editor sent the book's

typescript to the National Spiritual Assembly for its comments. It is possibly this step — which is not mentioned anywhere in the book — that led to speculation among some of the Bahá'ís in Italy that i baha'i had been, so to speak, approved by Italy's National Bahá'í Assembly.

According to Warburg herself, only two minor requests were made for editorial changes: one concerning the spelling of the word Bahá'í, the other the rephrasing of a sentence on abortion. The first she refused, but added a note explaining how she had adopted the international transliteration accepted by scholars, except when quoting from authors who had followed Bahá'í style; the second she accepted in part. Of course, this is a minor episode that would normally be of no interest in a book review. But it sheds light on the non-confrontational attitudes of the publisher, of the general editor of the series, and of the author who, although committed to scientific integrity, seek to respect the point of view of the religious minority group under scrutiny. It also speaks for the open-mindedness of Italy's National Spiritual Assembly, that they respected the author's independence, and did not try to interfere with content they must have found unpalatable — and that they accepted to take an active part in the book's public presentation.

The section of i baha'i concerning persecution is a brief but poignant indictment of Iran's theocracy. Discussing its deliberate attempt to destroy the Bahá'í community with a set of judiciary measures, Warburg does not hesitate to compare them to the infamous Nuremberg Laws. It is to be hoped that the Danish sociologist's denunciation of the persecution against Iranian Bahá'ís makes a positive impact on Italy's low level of awareness on the matter. In a country that is among Iran's foremost commercial partners, it is usually impossible for the non-political Italian Bahá'ís to make their voices heard in the national media, let alone in government quarters. Thus awareness of the Iranian persecution of the Bahá'í community is, in public opinion,
limited to small circles, often at the local level, where individual Bahá'ís are personally well accepted and esteemed.

Now, can i baha'i change that? In the long run, the possibility should not to be excluded for a number of reasons.

A potentially far-reaching book

With 4000 copies printed, there is obviously little hope of i baha'i becoming a bestseller — not even at a time where interest in religious movements is on the rise, especially if a Muslim link can be found or even suspected. Neither CESNUR nor Elledici have as yet any figures concerning sales. As of September, the publisher's PR office could only say that "several copies" had been ordered by unspecified Bahá'í authorities, and by Turin-based bookshops specializing in "alternative" religiosity (personal communication).

Both publishers and editor cater to selected groups of opinion makers. Elledici is a publishing house founded in the nineteenth century by San Giovanni Bosco, a Catholic priest, a groundbreaking social worker, and an educator. The Salesiani run a host of quality private schools, from elementary to high schools, children's recreational centers, and parish youth clubs, as well as a widespread chain of bookshops that cater mostly to families, the clergy, and Catholic religion teachers.

The Religioni and Movimenti series reaches farther than that, however. It is the first attempt in Italy at giving the general public an academicallly reliable, non-judgmental account of minority religions. Although the best-selling books of the series are easily those devoted to Satanism or Spiritism, titles range from Islam to Orthodox Churches, and from Scientology to the Protestants. As in Warburg's case, the language is accessible but the treatment is scholarly.

The series editor, Massimo Introvigne, is a lawyer turned sociologist founder (in 1988) of the Turin-based non-profit association CESNUR. Its president is Luigi Berzano, ordinary professor of Sociology at the University of Turin, while British-based academic Eileen Barker is a member of its scientific committee.

With a lending library of 20,000 volumes in several languages, and a rich corpus of field research, CESNUR has become the Italian media's more reliable source of independent information on new religion movements. Their most notable work to date is the Enciclopedia delle Religioni in Italia, a 1048-page tome covering from the Catholic Church (dissenters and schismatics included) to UFO cult groups. Their website hosts a collection of articles on CESNUR's works published in prominent newspapers and magazines.

CESNUR and notably Introvigne have been under attack in recent years for allegedly being "cult apologists." It goes beyond the scope of this review to delve into a polemic that spread mainly, if not only, via the Internet. But it should be noted that CESNUR's works are increasingly being quoted in academic publications in Italy, and that CESNUR experts regularly give papers at conferences organized by respected academic institutions. It could be suggested that, considering the Italian situation as described above, the mere act of studying non-Catholic religions in a non-judgmental way becomes a political act, subjected to partisan evaluation that is not always fair, or even well documented.

In the end, it can be said that Margit Warburg's i baha'i is a groundbreaking work in the field of Bahá'í studies in Italy, and it is likely to have an influence that well exceeds the obvious limits of an introductory publication. Being the first and only comprehensive study of the religion by a non-Bahá'í scholar, it may easily become a reference book for a wide public, from ordinary readers to scholars. In short, it will be difficult for anyone in Italy writing on the Bahá'ís — or even just seeking information

about them — to do without it.

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