Transcultural Potentials and Limits in the Global Bahá'í Community

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the transcultural potentials and limits in the Bahá'í community and its practices as presented in two primary sources: “The Bahá'í Faith” by W Hatcher and D Martin (2002) and “Gardeners of God” by C Gouvion and P Jouvion (1994). I have chosen these texts because they outline the foundational Bahá'í principles, which seem to suggest transcultural potential - the oneness of religion and independent investigation of truth. I also briefly discuss two additional Bahá'í principles which address some of the intra-cultural hierarchical patterns and divisions, namely gender equality and elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty. I argue that while these Bahá'í principles have the potential to deconstruct or at least weaken many of the divisive binaries, boundaries and hierarchies that have been prevalent in almost all societies, they are balanced by other aspects of the Bahá'í Faith: the Covenant, laws and a strong sense of identity, which help preserve unity and order within the Bahá'í community.

1. Introduction:

Culture and religion have influenced each other throughout the centuries, resulting in a very complex relationship between the two. For example, religious practice can become inseparable from cultural traits just as cultural characteristics can become codified in a religious tradition. It is, therefore, an interesting subject of study to apply theories describing culture to religious communities.

This research paper is a qualitative analysis of the transcultural potentials and limits in the Bahá'í community, based on the ideas introduced in *"The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion"* (Hatcher & Martin, 2002) and the observations made by the authors of the *"The Gardeners of God: An Encounter with Five Million Bahá'ís"* (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994). It will also rely on a number of secondary sources and will include my own observations as well as personal and direct experiences as a member of the Bahá'í community. It is important to emphasize that my findings are purely my own, and in no way should be taken as an official representation of the Bahá'í Faith or community.

This introductory chapter will summarize key aspects of the Bahá'í Faith, introduce the two primary texts and elaborate on the research questions.

The second chapter entitled "Transculturality Revisited" will be an overview of the theory of transculturality in comparison with the ideas of "monoculturality", "traditional multiculturality" and "traditional interculturality". At the end of this chapter, there will be a section discussing how the

Bahá'í Faith relates to the idea of transculturality and the reasons why the global Bahá'í community can be a suitable case study for the theory of transculturality.

The third chapter will be an in-depth analysis of some of the Bahá'í teachings, chosen from the list of teachings introduced in the primary texts, together with their transcultural potentials and limits as practiced by the worldwide Bahá'í Community.

The final chapter will gather the concluding remarks that will summarize what has been argued in the body of the paper and will link the conclusion back to the research questions.

1.1 Introducing the Bahá'í Faith, as the subject of discussion by the two books:

The Bahá'í Faith is a young monotheistic religion with a diverse range of followers from almost every ethnic, social, national and religious background. According to the BBC Religions' site, "there are 6 million Bahá'ís in the world, in 235 countries and around 6,000 live in Britain". (BBC - Religion, 2009).

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) is the Prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith whose teachings centre on three concepts: the oneness of God, the oneness of humanity, and the oneness of religion. According to Hatcher and Martin, the essence of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is "that the day has come for the unification of humanity into one global family" (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:xiii). In Bahá'u'lláh's own words: "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens" (Bahá'u'lláh, 1990:249-250).

While these central themes seem attractive to many people, as evidenced by the growth of the Bahá'í community in the past century, they are not without their critics. For example, the idea of one creator is rejected by atheist authors (Dawkins, 2006) and the notion of oneness of humanity and global citizenship seems to be on the retreat in recent political debates such as the 2016 Presidential elections in America or Brexit in the UK. As for the oneness of religion, which will be examined in detail in chapter 3, the opposing ideas of uniqueness of Christianity (Morris & Clark, 1995) as well as the finality of Islam (Idara Dawat-o-Irshad, 2015), among the major world religions, will be discussed as examples highlighting opposing views to this teaching.

Some of the other teachings of the Bahá'í Faith include: Independent search for truth, unity of science and religion, elimination of all forms (racial, national, religious) of prejudices, equality of men and women, spiritual solutions to economic problems, universal education, introduction of a universal auxiliary language, universal peace and integration of worship and service. (Website of the International Bahá'í community, 2018). Some of these principles will be introduced in more detail in the upcoming sections.

With these ideals and aspirations for a united global society, the Bahá'í Faith can seem too idealistic or even dreamy, and it has been criticized and dismissed by some authors as “a kind of eclectic, utopian, mystical monotheism with a strong internationalist flavor” (Kirkus Reviews, 1985). In a practical sense, however, what it has managed to achieve in the span if its short existence (174 years) is a testament to its potential, at least partially, to bring together a cross section of the global society in a spirit of genuine fellowship. This potentially paves the way for

the emergence of a “Third Space” (Bhabha, 1994:312), which accommodates the never-ending negotiation of identities.

The Bahá'í Faith claims to offer practical solutions to many of the modern-day social issues in our global society. Many of these solutions and their practical application can provide a suitable case study in the exploration of the idea of “transculturality”, which according to Benessaieh is an invitation “to consider the intermingling of presumably distinct cultures and the blurry lines between them” (Benessaieh, 2010:11). When applied, the solutions envisaged by the Bahá'í teachings attempt to break down or at least weaken some of the traditional binaries, boundaries and hierarchies that have been prevalent and internalized in most, if not all, societies. However, there are a few areas where the Bahá'í principles and the theory of transculturality part ways. These areas are referred to, in this paper, as transcultural limits and will be discussed in detail in the main text analysis.

In short, with minimal cultural or traditional influences, The Bahá'í Faith claims to be attempting to bring humanity together, in the "realisation of its universal self" (Jouvion & Gouvion, 1994:16) and help individuals from different cultures deepen a “sense of identification with a whole of humanity” (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:177).

To get a better understanding of the cultural influences in the Bahá'í Faith, or absence therefrom, it is helpful to have a brief look at the historical and geographic origins of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh was born Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri in Persia (modern-day Iran) in 1817 and died in Palestine in 1892. He was banished from Persia in 1853 and exiled, together with his family and a growing band of followers, through different countries and regions of the Ottoman Empire,

starting from Baghdad (current Iraq) through Constantinople and Adrianople (current Istanbul and Edirne in Turkey) and finally, to the prison city of Akka in Palestine (current Israel). (Momen, 2017:141-145).

Throughout his exile he wrote a great body of writings including letters to a number of the world's leaders and monarchs "including Emperor Napoleon III, Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm I, Tsar Alexander II, Emperor Franz Joseph, Pope Pius IX, Sultan Abdul-Aziz, and the Iranian ruler, Nasiri'd-Din Shah" (Website of the international Bahá'í Community, 2018), inviting them to a process of disarmament and reconciliation between the nations. He emphasized that "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established". (Bahá'u'lláh, 1990:286). The central idea of oneness of mankind and the realisation of humanity's universal self, is the foundation of this unity.

1.2 Introducing the books and their authors:

The first source of reference for this paper is "*The Bahá'í Faith"*, which was first published in 1985 (and reprinted in 1989, 1992, 1998) and is co-authored by two prominent scholars of the Bahá'í Faith. The book is an in depth introduction to the basics of the Bahá'í Faith, its principles, its history, and the foundations of its administrative system.

W. S. Hatcher (1935-2005) was a mathematician by profession as well as a philosopher and university lecturer in the United States, Canada, Europe and Russia. One of his main points of philosophical interest was the harmony of science and religion, which he has written extensively about in several of his books such as *The Science of Religion* (1980) and *Minimalism: A Bridge*

between Classical Philosophy and the Bahá'í Revelation (2002). (The William S. Hatcher Library, 2008).

J. D. Martin (1929-present) a consultant in advertising and public relations by career, was elected to and served between 1993 and 2005 as one of the nine members of the Universal House of Justice - the supreme governing body of the global Bahá'í Community and currently lives in Toronto, Canada. (Hatcher & Martin, 2002, back cover).

Perhaps due to the fact the "*The Bahá'í Faith"* is written by prominent members from within the Bahá'í Community, rather than sharing a skeptic's perspective or an outsider's viewpoint, it has been called a "serviceable if uncritical introduction" in a review. (Kirkus Review, 1985). On the other hand, its "uncritical" nature can be attributed to its function as a formal presentation, rather than a critical analysis, and serves to introduce a Faith community by its own representatives. For this reason, this research study also includes an outsider's perspective, in addition to the representatives' own channel of introduction, in order to maintain a balance between what the members see in their Faith and how it is perceived by non-members, which will be taken into account together with the presentation of my own findings in this qualitative analysis.

The second text and source of reference is the "*The Gardeners of God"*, authored by French journalists and reporters Colette Gouvion and Philippe Jouvion, reviewed by J. Walbridge (1995). Using their "free access to individual Bahá'ís of varying backgrounds, to Bahá'í meetings and to Bahá'í archives", the authors provide recorded interviews as well as personal experiences and encounters with the practicing members of the Faith, in addition to some introductory material. Furthermore, as a supplement to interviewing the members, Gouvion and

Jouvion “also contacted some non-Bahá'ís to obtain other views of the Bahá'í Faith” in the process of conducting their research (Walbridge, 1995). As a downside, however, the reviewer notes a lack of academic or scholarly virtue in their work, which has been conducted by journalists rather than academic scholars: “They seem to have been unfamiliar with the scholarly literature that might have nuanced their analysis”. Interestingly enough, the review goes on to point out: “Much to be preferred are the works like W.S. Hatcher and J.D. Martin’s *The Bahá'í Faith”.* (Walbridge, 1995). Therefore, this observation confirms a well-rounded research ground for this paper, which thus includes both a scholarly albeit internal view, as well as a less academic but experiential external source.

C. Gouvion has worked for the French weekly L’Express for thirteen years and as editor-in-Chief of the Marie-Claire Magazine for fifteen years. She has authored numerous books such as *Les Enfants Problèmes*, *La Symbolique des Rues et des Cités*, *La Voix des Nouveaux Paysans*, *Béatrice de Planissoles*, *Plus vous que Moi* and *The Gardeners of God*. (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994:1).

P. Jouvion is an award winning documentary film producer, researcher and reporter who has co-authored this book with his mother, Colette. (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994:1).

1.3 Research Questions:

Drawing on the two aforementioned main texts and other sources this paper will focus on the following research questions:

1) In how far do the main primary sources, "*The Bahá'í Faith"* by Hatcher & Martin (2002) and "*Gardeners of God"* by Gouvion & Jouvion (1994) reflect a transcultural perspective?

2) Are there any limits to this perspective?

3) In how far does Bahá'í community's practices link up to the ideas developed in these books?

2. Transculturality revisited:

It is difficult to summarize the concept of transculturality in a general sentence or even a paragraph due to its many facets and descriptions by various authors, however, as briefly stated in the introduction, the theory of transculturality, as suggested by Afef Benessaieh (2010) can best be introduced as an invitation "to consider the intermingling of presumably distinct cultures and the blurry lines between them" (Benessaieh, 2010:11). In other words, transculturality can be explained as the blurry - or weakened - boundaries, binaries and hierarchies that separate and distinguish different cultures from one another. In the following paragraphs different descriptions and key definitions will be used to refine the concept of transculturality.

It is also difficult to describe transculturality in an absolute sense or in isolation from the competing theories such as monoculturality, traditional multiculturality and traditional interculturality. To better appreciate the idea of transculturality, therefore, one needs to look at it in comparison with the other three concepts.

2.1. Monoculturality *vs*. Transculturality:

This initial comparison is potentially the most important one as it highlights the widest contrast to transculturality, which is the main subject of this study. These two concepts “could be located as the opposite ends of a cultural spectrum with multiculturality and interculturality between these two poles” (Rings, 2016:5).

Monoculturality is often defined by its tendency to view cultures as separate “spheres or islands” (Welsch, 1999:2) that stand apart from each other with minimal interaction or interdependence. The key characteristic of this approach is the idea of separation, as if by distinct lines or well-defined boundaries, between different cultures.

Monoculturality and its features have often been linked to European colonialism as well as 19th/early 20th century nationalism (Rings, 2016:14), and monocultural boundaries are naturally reflected in some of the neocolonial patterns, practices and mentalities that might still be prevalent in our societies today. However, a monocultural view isn’t limited to the European colonialist or nationalist approach alone, but it can take many shapes, forms and directions and can, in addition, point to any “traditional binary construct of Self and Other”. (Rings, 2016:11). For example, the boundaries of the monocultural perspective can highlight the normalized lines that separate the racially, ethnically, or culturally “pure” Self from the “impure”, inferior Other (Rings, 2017b). Therefore, regardless of which perspective the Self views the Other from, a monocultural outlook can manage to separate and exalt the Self over and above an inferior Other.

The idea of monoculturality can also express the notion of solidity, “boundedness” and stability of cultures in contrast to the opposing suggestion of the “fluid”, fluctuating nature of cultures as “mobile flows” (Benessaieh, 2010:19) that are continuously moving, changing and undergoing transformation in our global society (ibid:12). Naturally, in an imaginary sense, solid entities such as hypothetical islands cannot mesh and overlap as easily as fluid masses would. So to view cultures as fluid and transformative processes by one body of literature (Benessaieh, 2010:25) or as geographically transcendent “currents” passing “in time and space” as introduced by another “cluster of authors” echoing Patrick Chamoiseau, (ibid:23) rather than solid and still islands which may or may not interact with one another, is an effective way to envision the notion of transculturality.

However, going back to monoculturality as a set of dividing boundaries, distinguishing the culturally stable and pure Self from the rest, we can view transculturality as an opposing force that tries to blur these lines and facilitate the mixing of the Self and the Other by making them overlap in shared spaces.

One of the key features of monocultural times, places and societies, as described by Moses/Rothberg (2014) in the theory of “Ethics of transcultural memory” is the tendency to cling to a partial and particular monocultural past, exclusive of the impact of the Other. As an example in the religious context, which is the main focus of this study, the European memory of the Muslims as the invaders of (Western) Europe from the 8th century, creates or reinforces the fear of the Muslims trying to invade Europe again. However, at the same time, it should be part of the collective human memory that Islam preserved the learning of the ancient world, enriched it and brought it forward by advances in mathematics, medicine, chemistry, architecture, etc.,

which were freely shared with the rest of the world, including Europe. This can capture another side of history which includes the Other. Additionally, a more impartial view would also include the Christian invasions of Muslim regions, from the crusades and European colonialism, (Rings, 2017b) to more recent instances such as invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in the 21st century.

In light of the above examples, one of the ways to correct this exclusive and partial view is to consider “our implication in each other's suffering and loss” (Moses/Rothberg, 2014:29) and acknowledge the shared experiences which give way to the intermingling of different cultures and further blur the lines that separate them.

Generally, in the context of religion, monocultural boundaries can be translated into questions of gender equality, racial or ethnic equality, inter-racial or interfaith marriages, a hostile or a favourable attitude toward other Faiths, caste or class divisions, special power and station of “the learned”, “the elders” or the clergy, and finally, the salvation of the Self *vs*. the damnation of the Other, which are a few of the many binaries, some of which will be discussed throughout this study. Some of these examples highlight the “vertical differences” (such as class gaps) as well as “horizontal divisions” (such as gender inequality), as introduced by Welsch (1999), that are seen within the modern multicultural societies. (Welsch, 1999:2).

2.2 Traditional Multiculturality *vs*. Transculturality:

In contrast to monoculturality’s narrow range of options between “assimilation” or “exclusion” (Rings, 2017b), traditional multiculturality (which differs from the more contemporary forms of multiculturalism in that it is still considered a “mono-cultural continuity” (Rings, 2017b)) not only accepts and welcomes differences but also seeks to “maintain and cultivate” them (Benessaieh,

2010:17) in the form of the “peaceful coexistence of different cultures within a society” (Rings, 2016:15). This theory has a feature in common with monoculturality in that it builds its foundation on the separateness (and potential for conflict) between cultures. Without separateness, there is little significance to the term “traditional multiculturality” as it is a place where the differences are highlighted and protected. One facet of this theory as a public policy in hybrid societies, serves as a regulating mechanism to manage cultural diversity (Benessaieh, 2010:17). This is a condition that allows each cultural group to thrive and ensure its own well-being, in relative isolation from other groups and within a safe distance from one another but in a shared geographic space.

In this light, if we envision traditional multiculturality as a “mosaic” made up of many different cultures, as is the case with Canada, a country which prides itself in having a diverse “cultural mosaic” contrary to the American “melting pot” of assimilation (Esman, 1982:242), transculturality would differ in the image it would evoke. In contrast to traditional multiculturality’s mosaic made up of various square blocks with clearly defined edges and borders, transculturality would create a picture made up of various shapes with rounded corners or blurry lines. While it is difficult to view this latter picture as a mosaic, one can imagine an impressionist watercolour painting without sketches or lines, in which the shapes and images are borne into each other. The observer could see that the image consists of different shapes and colours, yet it would be difficult to see where one shade or colour ends and where the next one begins.

In the context of religion, traditional multiculturality would naturally reflect itself in a tolerant society where the members of various religions would have the right to peacefully practice their own traditions, in their own separate places of worship (most likely situated in their “own” ethnic

neighbourhoods) with minimal interaction, if at all. For example, in such societies as Canada or the UK, the Muslims feel comfortable going to their Mosques on Fridays, the Jews safely and freely walk to their local synagogues on Saturdays, and the Christians attend Church services on Sundays. With tolerance as its distinguishing feature, this approach would keep religious conflict at bay, and would ensure that these distinct groups keep peace by maintaining a safe distance from one another.

2.3 Traditional Interculturality *vs*. Transculturality:

Traditional Interculturality (as opposed to the contemporary view summarised below) is regarded by Huggan (2006) and Welsch (1999) as the continuity of monoculturality and traditional multiculturality in its confirmation of separateness of cultures and solid grounds for conflict. As described by Huggan, traditional interculturality can be viewed as the “Backdoor cultural essentialism” (Huggan, 2006:58), bringing it back to the separatist idea of “culture of the folk” (Welsch 1999:2) and therefore, very close in character to monoculturality.

In this view, even though traditional interculturality seeks, by means of interaction, to promote mutual understanding and prevent clashes, it is nonetheless built on the same premise of separateness and potential for conflict. The greater the distance between separate entities or hypothetical islands, the higher the need for systematic exchange and dialogue to keep conflict and tension under control. According to Welsch: “Intercultural problems stem from the island premis” (Welsch, 1999:13), which sees it impossible or very unlikely for islands to actually overlap or be attached to each other because islands are solid, separate and relatively stable. Similarly, in his description of transculturality, Benessaieh also suggests “departing from the

traditional, yet very current view of ‘cultures’ as fixed frames or separate islands neatly distanced and differentiated from one another". (Benessaieh, 2010:11).

On the other hand, as summarized by Rings (2016), a collection of contemporary approaches place interculturality main focus on the interdependence of cultures (Rings, 2017b), bringing about a shared space for the negotiation of identities, and is therefore, closer in definition to the idea of transculturality. As outlined by Rings (2016), intercultural dialogue manages to “cross boundaries” but transculturality would seek to essentially blur the boundaries, rather than to temporarily cross them. (Rings, 2017b).

Overall, irrespective of the contemporary or traditional approach, the idea of interculturality differs from transculturality in that the former focuses on interaction and the formation of shared spaces between separate cultures, whereas the latter goes beyond interaction and questions the essential “separateness of cultures” (Benessaieh, 2010:25) placing a “distinctive emphasis on commonality and connection” (ibid:19). As quoted by Benessaieh, a body of literature sees transculturality “as a fluid, transformative process in which people no longer perceive themselves under one single culture”. (ibid:26). This highlights a sense of in-betweenness that is becoming more visible in our global environment today, particularly in the more hybrid societies. Similarly, “emphasizing the relatedness of cultures” is an approach that seeks to break or blur the frontiers of “us” and “them” (ibid.:26). In short, shifting the focus from differences toward commonalities as well as the shared experiences between cultures, is an important feature of transculturality.

With regards to religion and its role in cultural relations and interactions, if we look again at Canada, as our example of a hybrid society, interculturality has “come to account for the...relations between a Francophone minority population of Catholic heritage, and an Anglophone majority of Protestant origins” (Benessaieh, 2010:18). This illustrates religion as an integrated part of the greater culture for most societies, which influences the ways in which a country approaches or handles diversity.

In the broader context of religion, interculturality can reflect itself in the notion of interfaith dialogue facilitating interaction between the members and representatives of various religious groups, who would learn about each other’s practices, traditions and festivals. For example, the “UK Interfaith Network” promotes knowledge and understanding among different Faith groups in the country through the activities of the interfaith week, advocacy, etc., (Website for Interfaith Network for the UK, 2018). While such a dialogue is in itself a positive step forward, it could perhaps deepen the focus on the separateness rather than commonalities in various religions, be it in experiences or world views.

2.4 The Bahá'í Faith and Transculturality

In the the same way that the idea of transculturality brings “to light what is common or alike amid what seems to be different” (Benessaieh, 2010:18) in various cultures, the Bahá'í Faith brings to light what is common against what is seemingly different in various religions. The focus on commonality as well as shared values and experiences is, therefore, one of the characteristics of the Bahá'í community.

To exemplify the latter view on “otherness”, `Abdu’l-Bahá, the son and successor of Bahá'u'lláh and the authorized interpreter of his writings, uses the following words: “Cleanse ye your eyes, so that ye behold no man as different from yourselves. ...love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness”. (`Abdu’l-Bahá, 1982a:24). “Cleansing” of the eyes can be seen as a metaphoric way to refer to deprogramming of the mind, which is conditioned to see the collective Self as separate from the Other. Similarly, shifting the “gaze” from otherness toward sameness (or “oneness” as referred to in the Bahá'í Writings) makes it more likely for humanity to live in peace. On the contrary, it would be difficult and more time consuming to achieve these results when keeping the collective gaze on “otherness” all the while attempting, with the best of intentions, to manage conflict, create dialogue, or keep peace with the Other.

As mentioned in the introduction, the theme of unity in diversity is of central importance in the Bahá'í religion. Through this concept, the Bahá'í Faith brings awareness to our common or shared humanity or “human identity” (a term used by Bahá'í author, Michael Karlberg, 2008:315) which goes above and beyond national, cultural or ethnic identities.

In his article titled “Discourse, Identity and Global Citizenship” published in *Peace Review*, Karlberg, who is a scholar on the topic as well as a member of the Bahá'í community, offers a number of ways to “operationalize the principles of global citizenship and the oneness of humanity”. One of his suggested ways is to question or “re-evaluate inherited cultural habits, norms, values, institutions, and discourses” that are prevalent in our current social structures. In this article, Karlberg mentions the Bahá'í international community as one of the groups who systematically endeavour to operationalize this idea of oneness, introducing it as “an open, inclusive, and outward-oriented community constituted on the basis of difference from historical

values and antagonisms from which it wishes to distance itself" (ibid:315). The following chapter will shed light on some of the ways in which the international Bahá'í community is distancing itself from inherited cultural patterns and divisive identity constructs, while attempting to maintain an internal sense of order and unity, which result in some boundaries and transcultural limits in the process.

3. Transcultural potentials and limits in the Bahá'í Community

A number of the Bahá'í principles, discussed by the two sources, can potentially be examined in light of transcultural potentials and limits. To limit the scope of this paper, I will focus on two of the foundational principles of the Bahá'í Faith, which will be discussed in detail: "independent investigation of truth", and "oneness of religion". Each potential will be followed by its limits in the same section. A few of the remaining aspects will then be grouped together and briefly mentioned in a final section titled "other principles", with an emphasis on two social principles addressing some of the prevalent intra-cultural hierarchical patterns. Throughout this chapter, transcultural limits might be identified within the potentials, and some potentials may be highlighted within the limits.

It is important to note that the Bahá'í Faith does not have transculturality but unity at its heart. This means that the blurring of traditional cultural boundaries is not an end goal in itself, but can be a helpful tool in achieving unity in diversity, a stated goal of the Bahá'í Community. Consequently, this research paper aims to examine the possible emergence, as a result of the application of the Bahá'í teachings, of a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994:312) in the Bahá'í

community, as well as the blurring of societal boundaries, binaries and hierarchies that contribute to the separation of the Self and the Other.

3.1 Oneness of Religion

3.1.1 Potentials:

Before proceeding with this discussion, I should first define what is meant, in this particular context, by “world religions”. For the purposes of this paper, this term refers to those particular revealed religions with a significant long term socio-cultural impact in the history of humanity “whose teachings have provided the basis for the advancement of civilization”. (Website of the International Bahá'í community, 2018).

One of the central principles mentioned in the introduction and listed by the two primary sources is oneness of religion, which attempts to remove the “true or false” binary construct from the question of the major world religions. This, and the derivative binary construct of the salvation of the Self against the damnation of the Other, has been and continues to be a source of conflict between the followers of different religions. “The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity.” (Abdu'l-Baha, Paris talks, 41. 7 cited in Hatcher & Martin, 2002:87).

This principle can potentially have a significant impact on the individual's view of other religions and their followers in that it removes some of the “othering” elements that cause intolerance between them. In the words of Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957, this impact is summarised as follows:

“The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose (Shoghi Effendi, 1991:57-58).

Based on this outlook, the Bahá'í converts are not expected to abandon or deny their old religious beliefs but to view them in a renewed sense. Former atheists who embrace the Bahá'í Faith are invited to study and understand the previous major world religions as part of their investigation. Bahá'ís are also encouraged to refer to other religious texts as a source of inspiration, to keep close contact with family and friends from other religious groups and to “consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship” (Bahá'u'lláh, 1988:269). If implemented in personal and community lives, this teaching helps create a shared space where negotiation of identities takes place and binary constructs are blurred. For instance, services at Bahá'í Houses of Worship are non-denominational and Bahá'í devotional meetings typically include interfaith materials, both being fully open to the wider community. In formation of a shared space, we can also consider another example being the interfaith and interracial marriages in the Bahá'í community, particularly during the times of racial segregation in America, starting around “the years 1898–1921”, between American Bahá'ís of Black and White origins, as part of their efforts toward the promotion of “the principle of oneness of humanity” and “race amity in the United States” (Ruhe-Schoen, 2015, synopsis), to the present-time interfaith and interracial marriages that commonly take place in the Bahá'í community today.

Race relations, particularly in America, continue to be a major societal challenge including in the context of worship. For example, to this day, America's churches can still be considered "a reflection of the nation's racial divide" (Lopez et al, 2015). In the words of Dr. Richard Thomas, an African-American Bahá'í of Christian background: "My first real multicultural religious experience occured in the Bahá'í community, where I first genuinely prayed and worshiped with people of all racial and cultural backgrounds". He additionally goes on to share his experience as a university lecturer in "race relations classes and seminars" stating: "These Bahá'í multiracial/cultural experiences provided me with a vast and rich reservoir of stories to share with my students"..."who had become cynical about the possibility of multiracial community-building based upon spiritual principles and practices". (Thomas, 2013:9).

In the theoretical sense, Bahá'ís "do not regard their Faith as having a monopoly on truth" (Matthews, 1989:2-9) but consider it to be a renewal of the foundational chapters in the metaphorical "eternal book of revelation", and their Prophet as the promised figure of the previous dispensations. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh: "These firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are the rays of one light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated". (Bahá'u'lláh, 1990:287-288). Concerning the question of religious diversity and oneness of religion, Bahá'u'lláh's "Book of Certitude", which is one of his most significant theological works, "asserts the relativity of religious truth and the continuity of Divine Revelation, affirms the unity of the Prophets, the universality of their message, the identity of their fundamental teachings…" (Shoghi Effendi, cited by Dunbar, 2000:7).

In short, when it comes to the Bahá'í view of the established world religions, their differences are not a matter of right or wrong but require an appreciation of perspective, shedding light on the collective human maturity in their own particular age, the conditions of the times and the applicability of their teachings as well as considerations of their socio-cultural backgrounds.

However, this contextual view might bring up the question of absolute accuracy in the reader's mind, as it is impossible for all perspectives to simultaneously be accurate and all views to be equally valid. One of the criteria to recognize true religion, according to the Bahá'í view, is that it must be in harmony with science and reason. The unity of science and religion (as two different perspectives on the same reality) is one of the main principles of the Bahá'í Faith. Hatcher and Martin argue that based on the premise of oneness of reality, "it is impossible for something to be scientifically false and religiously true" (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:88). There are also other criteria mentioned in the Bahá'í writings to recognise if a religion can be regarded as valid, particularly for its own age. For example, according to the Bahá'í view, religion should be the cause of love and unity and that "If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division it would be better to be without it". (Abdu'l-Baha, Paris talks, cited by the Website of the International Bahá'í Community, 2018).

This view is directly related to Bahá'ís metaphorical, as opposed to literal, interpretation of the older sacred texts, and constitutes one of the main differences from the fundamentalist approaches espoused by some groups within other religions. If interpreted literally, for example, it is clearly impossible to reconcile some of the accounts in the Bible with the teachings of the other major religions. Christianity is even viewed by some as "not a religion but a person": "All religions are not the same—Biblical Christianity is absolutely unique among all the religions and

philosophies of mankind. Its claim to be necessary for salvation is based squarely on the uniquely powerful evidences for its truth and finality. Actually, true Christianity is not a religion, but a person, Jesus Christ". (Morris & Clark, 1995).

The same can be said about the Muslims' common view of Prophet Muhammad as the "Seal of the Prophets" (The Koran 33:40) which, depending on interpretation, can make it impossible for religion to be an eternally renewed entity beyond the Islamic dispensation. According to this view: "Being the last Prophet in the chain of prophethood, no one ever shall now succeed him to that status of dignity". (Idara Dawat-o-Irshad, 2015). Bahá'ís have a different perspective on this matter and "reject the interpretation that Islamic orthodoxy reads into this verse". (Dan Gebhardt, 2014). This view highlights the significant role that perspective and interpretation of scriptures and prophecy can make in the response to the question of religious diversity.

One of the ways in which the oneness of religion takes practical expression in the every-day community life of the believers is the aforementioned practice of "devotional meetings" in which adherents of all (or no) faiths and philosophies are invited to join the Bahá'í community in order to meditate and reflect on inspirational texts, which are not exclusive to the Bahá'í scripture. "In diverse settings, Bahá'ís and their friends and families unite with one another in prayer. There are no rituals; no one individual has any special role". (Website of the Bahá'í International Community, 2018). Other activities, such as neighbourhood children's classes and junior youth empowerment groups, are also open to, and attended by non-members. It is interesting to note that the open nature of such gatherings is not aimed at "conversion" (i.e. assimilation or exclusion) of non-believers as an ultimate goal, but for the purpose of coming together in

realization of our “common interests” and working together toward them. (Michael Karlberg, 2008:311).

Another way in which this teaching finds expression in action is through the “Bahá'í Houses of Worship” which are built “on every continent” in the world. (Hatcher and Martin, 2002:173). In the areas surrounding each of these buildings, other agencies and institutions are to be built in the future, such as schools, hostels, homes for the elderly and administrative institutions. Bahá'í Houses of Worship are also open to individuals of all (or no) religious backgrounds to meditate in private or worship together. Services “consist of readings and prayers from the scriptures of the world’s faiths with no sermons or other attempts to cast these teachings in a mold of specifically Bahá'í interpretation” (ibid).

In terms of design and architectural style, the only requirement for these Houses of Worship is that they have nine sides and a dome as a symbol of Bahá'í acceptance of all religious traditions and symbolises the fact that even though the participants may enter through different doors they come together “in recognition of one Creator” (ibid). For example, as a symbol of unity in diversity, Louis Bourgeois, the architect of the American house of worship has mixed several architectural traditions and merged together the symbols of many of the major world religions. In the words of the architect himself: “In this new concept of the temple is woven, in a symbolic form, the great Bahá'í teaching of unity - unity of all religions and of all mankind. We find there combinations of mathematical lines, symbolizing those of the universe and in their complex merging of overlapping circles within circles, we can describe the merging of all religions into one.(Louis Bourgeois cited by Hatcher and Martin, 2002:172).

The Bahá'í Houses of Worship are located in Chile, United States, Uganda, Australia, Germany, Panama, Samoa, India, Colombia and Cambodia. (Website of the international Bahá'í community, 2018). These buildings along with their architecture, design and ornamentations can be considered as strong transcultural symbols signifying the shared spaces that bring to the observer's mind a sense of commonality previously discussed in the context of transculturality.

3.1.2 Limits:

We have seen so far that the Bahá'í community is consciously attempting to move away from "othering" and division in its path toward unity. However, there are a few areas in which the Bahá'í community shows a strong sense of group identity and clear boundaries, leading to a number of transcultural limits.

As a brief recap to the idea of a transcultural limit, we can summarize it as a solid set of boundaries *vs*. fluid and transformative borders (Benessaieh, 2010:26) between different groups as well as the clear *vs*. blurry lines in between them. As such, elements that would lead to separation of Self from the Other by the creation of an in-group and a subsequent out-group, will be highlighted in this part. As a potential within a limit, it will be argued in this section that according to the Bahá'í view **"**those who are not "us" are not considered necessarily bad and those who are "us" are not necessarily good" (Momen, 2007:187-209), but most of the "othering" elements in the Bahá'í community are due to administrative purposes (such as participation in Bahá'í elections and contribution to Bahá'í funds), rather than justified by the inherent superiority of Self over others.

Enrollment and singular affiliation:

Despite the transcultural potentials that were mentioned before, the Bahá'í Faith cannot be considered a “trans-religious” entity as there is a solid Bahá'í identity that differs from the transcultural concept of in-betweenness. Even though cultural in-betweenness can certainly be witnessed in the community life of the believers, the members’ religious affiliation is singular and is expressed through enrollment in the community membership lists. Once an individual expresses the desire to enrol in the community as a member, “application is made to the local spiritual assembly of the area; if that institution is satisfied that the applicants understand the implications of membership and are prepared to assume the responsibility of living according to Bahá'u'lláh’s teachings, they are enrolled”. (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:176).

As a result, there is no such affiliation as a part-Bahá'í like it is with dual or mixed national or cultural identities. It should be noted, however, “that the present situation of having strong group boundaries has not always been the case. Under the second leader of the Bahá'í Faith, Abdu'l-Bahá (head of the Faith from 1892 to 1921), group boundaries were fairly porous and, for example, dual affiliations were regarded as permissible”. (Momen, 2007:187-209). This is mainly because the Bahá'í administrative order had not yet been established and the membership criteria had not been created in order “to draw up electoral rolls” until 1920s and 1930s. (Smith, 1987:111, 122, 145-6 cited by Momen, 2007:187-209).

Aside from electoral rolls and administrative functionings (e.g., permission to contribute to Bahá'í funds), another reason behind the sharper boundaries in the more recent years, including singular affiliation and enrolment, could perhaps be linked to the attempts made by some Muslim governments, particularly the Islamic Republic of Iran, at the slow and “silent genocide

of the Bahá'ís" (Langness, 2014) in a sociological way, which would aim at the gradual elimination of this particular group from their respective societies. The attacks on the human rights of the Iranian Bahá'ís have included "immediate expulsions from universities and schools; denial of education for Bahá'í children and youth; mass firings from government and private-sector jobs; the failure of authorities to pursue and punish those committing crimes against Bahá'ís; and in many cases, imprisonment, torture, show trials, disappearances and executions" (Langness, 2014). In the experience of my immediate family, myself included, this meant a choice between writing "Muslim" (or another "official" religious affiliation), in the relevant application forms or losing many of our citizenship rights. This is one of the ways in which the Iranian Bahá'í community has been pressured toward annihilation. The choice to change, hide or deny someone's identity by choosing another affiliation in the face of such pressures is one of the features which makes the threat of elimination a gradual one. Of course, some members have chosen to walk away in favor of their basic human rights, but by practicing the singular affiliation, whereby refusing to recant their Bahá'í identity, the bulk of the community has remained united and protected itself from extinction.

This issue is not limited to the Iranian members alone and has affected Bahá'ís from other countries as well. Gouvion and Jouvion's interviewee states: "*I was once asked to accompany my president to an orthodox Muslim country where Bahá'ís are prohibited entry. To obtain a visa I had to fill out a form and state my religion. I was told to write "Catholic", my former religion, but I did not even consider it. I explained the problem to my boss, and he went without me*". (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994:118).

Another issue with dual affiliations is the conflict between the concept of expectation (of a prophesied Messiah) characterised by many of the religious traditions, *vs*. the claim of fulfillment of those expectations in the Bahá'í dispensation. As explained by Hatcher and Martin: “The Bahá'ís of Jewish, Christian or other religious backgrounds do not consider that they have abandoned their former faiths in becoming Bahá'ís. They believe they are responding to their obligations as believers in and followers of whichever Manifestation of God founded their own religious traditions” (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:131). Additionally, they learn to appreciate the validity of other major world religions. This idea of fulfilment signifies a next stage of a journey through the former steps in a religious evolutionary path and symbolises a vertical ascent through the other stages rather than a circular one. In other words, since many of the older religions are still expecting the return of their Messiah and fulfilment of prophecy (which Bahá'ís consider fulfilled), carrying on with their old affiliations would create an inconsistency which would be difficult to reconcile.

This clear and distinct group identity, no matter how broad in a cultural sense, inevitably creates a boundary differentiating the Self from other groups. Even if this perspective does not necessarily position the Self above or against others, it still separates them into distinct categories, which could be described as a transcultural limit. At this point, one may ask if strong group boundaries are necessary to maintain strong group identity. After all, would it not be possible to have a strong collective identity without the need for strong boundaries? While this is not a black or white issue, in my personal view, some boundaries are necessary in order to protect the core values that a particular belief-based (rather than a cultural) collective may stand for. Otherwise, anyone, regardless of intention (good or bad), can in principle misrepresent, change, distort or even hijack what the group stands for, causing fragmentation and disunity,

which in the case of the Bahá'í community would be against its stated goal. This is one of the ways in which unity is prioritized over transculturality in the Bahá'í community and will be discussed further as a transcultural limit.

3.2 Independent Investigation of Truth

3.2.1 Potentials:

In *“The Bahá'í Faith”*, Hatcher and Martin list independent investigation of Truth as one of the foundational teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. This principle mainly, but not exclusively, relates to religious fanaticism. “Critics of religion often view it as being, by its very nature, hostile to a free and open search for truth. Such hostility is certainly a key aspect of religious fanaticism, which in the minds of many is synonymous with religion itself”. (Matthews, 1989:2-9).

Tendencies to follow various traditions and opinions “blindly and uncritically”, often lead to conflict since when people “become fanatically attached to some particular opinion and tradition” they tend to become intolerant of those who do not share it (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:86). This can particularly be true in cases where religion, cultural characteristics and family ties and traditions become intertwined into an emotional bundle of attachment in which members of a given group automatically identify with, and follow their fathers and forefathers for generations. In modern history, the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, or the conflict between Israel and Palestine could serve as warning examples. Emotional ties can therefore make it more difficult to have independent objective views about the world at large. “While investigation of reality applies with special force to religious faith, it — like religion itself — is seen by Bahá'ís as a continuing approach to all of life”. (Matthews, 1989:2-9).

One practical implication of this teaching, is that no one can theoretically be a Bahá'í by birth. Each individual, regardless of their family background, is expected to conduct their own search and decide which religious affiliation, if any, they wish to choose. This differs from the inherited religious identity that is passed down from a parent (e.g. mother in Judaism) to children by birth (Chernofsky, 2014), or the ritualistic inheritance of religious practices such as Baptism in Christianity (Earhart, 1993:598) and circumcision in Judaism (ibid:445) or Islam (BBC - Religion, 2009).

Those born in Bahá'í families are encouraged to study different views and only enrol in the Bahá'í community at the age of fifteen or older. When explaining about membership in the Bahá'í community, Hatcher and Martin call this “the age of consent” in which “youths assume responsibility for their own individual spiritual development” (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:176). As a limit, one can argue that fifteen is still a distance away from full adulthood and may not necessarily be an appropriate age to make such a commitment. While maturity varies from person to person, it is fair to note that in the Bahá'í community individuals are not expected to make this decision precisely at this numeric point in their development but from the age of fifteen onward. Many children born in Bahá'í families (myself included) make this decision in their late teens or older. As will be discussed below, the age of voting and administrative eligibility in the Bahá'í community starts from twenty one.

In the interviews conducted by Gouvion & Jouvion, parental pressure is described as contrary to the spirit of this teaching. According to one parent: “*I never pushed them. I participated in a lot of Bahá'í expositions and I used to take them with me”…” When she was fifteen, my eldest daughter didn’t want to hear a thing about religion. I left her alone”.* (Gouvion & Jouvion,

1994:114). In another case, a son is quoted as saying the following about his father: "*He did nothing to force me to accept his beliefs".* (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994:76).

This freedom of choice is of course difficult to measure and depends on each particular case. There might be certain social pressures applied, direct or indirect, which may come with cultural or family norms and expectations. As a counterexample to the above cases, in the circle of my acquaintances "anonymous A" was pressured by family who, possibly due to cultural reasons, wanted to save face and keep their child in the community. However, this led to resentment and rebellion at a later stage. There are no formal mechanisms to protect the child from such pressures, but individuals are free to leave the community at a later point. Throughout this and next subsections, I will discuss other examples of those who have decided to leave the Bahá'í community. As far as I am aware, there is no official published statistics or academic research into circumstances of such departures.

Like in many other religious communities, children attend moral educational classes, which are open to the wider community, with much of their focus on the shared human virtues, irrespective of belief or affiliation. The materials used in these classes "emphasise the acquisition of spiritual qualities—for example, truthfulness, generosity, purity of heart, and kindness, to name a few" …"The goal is for the children to reach a stage in which they can understand and act upon the imperative to tend to their own spiritual development and contribute to the well-being of society" (Website of the international Bahá'í community, 2018).

The idea of independent investigation of truth finds another practical expression through absence of clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Instead of individual priests with religious or sometimes

even political power, the Bahá'í Faith manages itself through elective consultative bodies of nine or more individuals on local and national levels referred to as Local or National Spiritual Assemblies (LSAs and NSAs). The local election process can start in any village, town or city with nine or more adult members in its Bahá'í community (Hatcher and Martin, 2002:147- 150). Similarly, every five years an international convention at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, elects the international governing body - the “Universal House of Justice”. As a side note, Israel is considered by some to be a controversial place for the presence of the Bahá'í administration and this issue is a continuous source of criticism against the Bahá'í community, particularly from some Muslim quarters, such as the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Mackey, 2009). It is helpful to note that the presence of the Bahá'í community in Israel predates its formation as a state, and that through an accident of history the Founder was exiled to the prison city of Akka in Palestine (Momen, 2017:145) in which he passed away and was buried in 1892, rendering that spot the holiest place for the Bahá'í world. “Today, more than 800 Bahá'ís serve as volunteers at the Bahá'í World Center. They come from all over the world, serving for specified periods of time, and are engaged solely in the care of the Bahá'í Holy places and the internal administration of the Bahá'í world community”. (Newsletter of the Bahá'í International Community, 2018).

It is important to bear in mind that the “elections of Bahá'í administrative institutions occur by secret ballot in an atmosphere of prayer and reverence. Self-promotion, open discussion of possible members, canvassing, nominations, and campaigning of any kind are strictly forbidden”. Additionally, “there is no notion of incumbency or tenure, meaning that serving members enjoy no special consideration in the voting process”. (Bowers, 2018).

Another important aspect of the Bahá'í election is prioritization of minorities. This has been explained by Hatcher and Martin as Bahá'u'lláh's reference to lack of equal opportunity so far in human history. When it comes to Bahá'í elections, electors are bound by their individual conscience to keep this in mind when voting, such as in the instance of a tie vote, when preference is given to the minority representative. (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:150).

As a limit, it would be difficult to accurately monitor or measure the success of minority prioritization, relying solely on individual conscience, especially in a private and secret balloting system. Unfortunately, as of yet, there have not been research studies done on minority discrimination in the Bahá'í community, perhaps primarily due to its young age. One could speculate that the purpose of prioritization of minorities is not solely intended to protect minority rights but to also gradually shift the individuals' old mental patterns, such as an implicit bias in favour of white and/or male figures. As an example, we can consider the National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) of the Bahá'ís of Canada, a country with two significant minority groups: the First Nations and the French Canadians. Based on the available public data, of the nine members serving on this assembly in 2018, there has been one representative from each of these minority groups. Also, the number of female members exceeds the number of male members at 5 to 4. (Website of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 2018). This shows a considerable change from 2005 when the majority (6 out of 9) of the members where male and only one of them represented a minority group. (Bahá'í World News Service, 2005).

On a different note, in contrast to the traditional hierarchies between the clergy (or "the elders") *vs*. the "lehman", this idea of equality in the context of consultative elected bodies is a potential for transculturality. Not only because the "priest and lehman" binary is abolished, but also

because the membership on these administrative institutions is open to all the adult members (of 21 or over) of the community, irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, social class or other traditional hierarchies.

As a criticism, however, some of the former members who “went on to become Christians comment that they felt that the lack of a priesthood in the Bahá'í community meant that there was not sufficient pastoral care given when an individual was going through a personal crisis”. (Momen, 2007:187-209).

This independence of choice brings with it a sense of “personal responsibility for the work undertaken” as well as the decision making process by the members. “The fact that the Bahá'í Faith is a lehman’s religion impresses itself” on the members as they realize and are reminded that “they have joined a community, not a congregation”.(Hatcher & Martin, 2002:181). This sense of individual responsibility *vs*. the passive expectation for guidance from other spiritually superior figures is a tool to break down some of the old traditional hierarchies.

Another factor with the potential to blur traditional boundaries is that, unlike priests who serve for a lifetime, the membership on the administrative bodies of the Bahá'í communities is renewed by election on a regular basis. (Shoghi Effendi, 1974:40). Each year the election process repeats itself and the community votes for the new members of the administrative assemblies. As a result, the members of the elected consultative bodies do not necessarily remain in their positions on a permanent basis. This is of course, a theoretical scenario and might differ in practice from region to region. Some practical examples show that those already in the position of service on Bahá'í elected bodies may be re-elected repeatedly to the same

administrative body, which is clearly a practical limit to this theoretical potential. For instance, three of the members of the NSA of Canada were repeatedly elected to that institution in the aforementioned period between 2005 and 2018. (Website of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 2018 & Bahá'í World News Service, 2005). As with the above case for prioritization of minorities, where individuals are encouraged to keep diversity in mind when voting, the annual chance for renewal of membership can serve as an opportunity to gradually change the individuals' old mental patterns and tendencies, which could mean a slow shift away from implicit bias toward those who are already recognized as leaders.

It is timely to note at this point that the members of the Bahá'í assemblies do not have a claim to power, at least in a theoretical sense. Instead, such membership is recognized, in the Bahá'í Faith, as a position of service to their community. There may of course be individuals with power-seeking tendencies who might be elected to these councils but the collective and consultative nature of these bodies should serve as a moderation to such personal ambitions. "There have been Christian ministers who led their followers to an acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh. A few of them, accustomed to their previous role as leaders, became frustrated when there were no positions open to them. Some of them withdrew, but often their followers remained". (Kolstoe, 2015:290-291). Therefore, the desire for leadership may well be a challenge for some individuals to work through.

Even though in most cases there is no monetary reward for this kind of membership, the privilege of direct contribution to collective decision-making and the sense of respect it generates as a result, can be considered a mental or emotional reward to the members. This is a limit that can possibly create a sense of hierarchy, and perhaps more so in some cultures than

others. Generally, however, the much emphasised position of service *vs*. power is itself a way of looking at traditional binaries in a different light. As an example, Gouvion and Jouvion state the following observation at the Bahá'í World Centre: “Members who occupied the highest position in their community ate elbow to elbow with the gardeners, the young security guards and the janitors. Like everyone else they filled their own trays in the kitchen, and cleared the table after eating. They were treated respectfully but without any fear or fawning. (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994:26).

Another important facet of this principle is the central role of consultation, as “the underlying requisite of Bahá'í community life” (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:165), particularly in relation to the functioning of the administrative bodies. As explained by `Abdu’l-Bahá, the son and successor of Bahá'u'lláh: “Consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth. He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide.”(`Abdu’l-Bahá, 1982b:72-73.) Thus, consultation can help weaken the binary of Self and Other as being inherently “right” and “wrong”, respectively. The principle of consultation can be regarded as a transcultural tool to bring into consideration the input of a heterogenous body representing different mentalities, cultures, classes, etc.

In another instance, regarding the clash of opinions `Abdu'l-Bahá states: “The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions”. (`Abdu’l-Bahá:1982a:87). This could further position consultation as an instrument to bring forward the sense of a “third space” - where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences” (Bhabha, 1994:312). In case of such consultations (especially in traditional

multicultural environments) the tension created by the clash of opinions, though potentially uncomfortable, ultimately serves a higher purpose. “Silence or avoidance of topics that matter is definitely not the solution to coming to a conclusion, resolving conflicts or finding the truth”. (Rebecca Sherry Eshraghi, 2018).

In the third chapter of “Gardeners of God” titled “Roads to belief”, Gouvion and Jouvion interviewed a number of individuals who independently investigated and joined the Bahá'í Faith through various paths. Introducing these interviews, the authors state: ”Bahá'í scripture says that the search for truth must be individual; each adult must seek with his or her own eyes and judge with his or her own mind. The people we talked to had obviously thought things out for themselves”. (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994:72). For example: Jean-Marie Nau from Luxembourg has stated that he read a few books and attended Bahá'í events for two years until *“I finally took the big step when I was really sure of myself”.* (ibid:73). Samuel Tanyi-Tambe, from Cameroon has stated that he was born in a Muslim region but his father was a Bahá'í. “*He did nothing to force me to accept his beliefs. Until I was sixteen I drank and smoked and was far from saintly. Then I became interested in the Bahá'í writings. I read their books and it seemed to me that this religion suited the modern age better than either Christianity or Islam. I was struck by their conception of a united human race”*. (ibid:76). Arlette Mattheus from Belgium has stated that by chance she went to a Bahá'í meeting in Ostend. “*What interested me was their conception of a single human race and their condemnation of all forms of racism and segregation*”... At first, ” *without becoming a convert I participated in many of their activities*”... (ibid:80). Together with her then partner, Gaston, they studied several books. And then, according to Gaston: “*we declared ourselves Bahá'ís*”. (ibid:81). The above accounts were a few anecdotes highlighting different individuals’ independent paths in their own words.

3.2.2 Limits:

Apart from administrative purposes (such as elections and financial contributions), group boundaries in the Bahá'í community also serve to preserve the order and unity of the worldwide Bahá'í community. This sense of order is generated through a set of laws as well as a central administration (referred to by Bahá'ís as the “Administrative Order”), which will be described below.

Additionally, it will be argued in this section that despite the boundaries that the community sets in the process of maintaining unity, social exclusion is not a common solution (except in one particular scenario) and the idea of administrative exclusion will be introduced as an alternative. Even though this is in itself a transcultural limit, this alternative to social exclusion can be viewed as a movement away from monoculturality.

The Covenant:

Even though the principle of independent investigation of truth mostly serves as a transcultural potential, it operates within certain limits. As will be described shortly, to Bahá'ís themselves, these limits are not obstructive but conducive to unity as their main purpose. One of the limits which serves to preserve internal unity and puts in place strong group boundaries is the concept of the Covenant. As explained by Hatcher and Martin, the Covenant is “the distinguishing feature” of the Bahá'í religion which protects it from schism. “This was explicit conveyance of authority for the establishment of an institutional system designed to guide, protect and enlarge the emerging Bahá'í community”. (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:50). This means that despite the individuals prerogative to independently investigate and form their own opinions on the Bahá'í

teachings, an attempt to impose them on others as authoritative, or to create division is prevented by the Covenant.

This protective feature is based on a “body of interrelated documents in which Bahá'u'lláh established a covenant or solemn agreement with his followers” (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:50) naming his eldest son, `Abdu’l-Bahá as the authoritative interpreter of his teachings” (ibid). In his written will, Bahá'u'lláh “urged all of the members of his family and the believers to obey his eldest son after him and the heir he would choose in order to guarantee the unity of the cause” (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994:66). In turn, in his own will and testament, the heir to whom `Abdu’l-Bahá chose to pass this central authority, was his grandson Shoghi Effendi as the Guardian of the Faith. (ibid:175). Among other responsibilities, such as translation and authoritative interpretation of the texts, he was given the task of establishing the Universal House of Justice, ordained in Bahá'u'lláh’s writings.

Throughout the length of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi worked to set up the local and national Bahá'í administrations and “to get them functioning in such a manner as would permit the election of the Universal House of Justice” (Momen & Momen, 2011:106). In his own writings Bahá'u'lláh gave the House of Justice “the authority to legislate on those matters on which there were no specific instructions in the Bahá'í scriptures”. (ibid). The Universal House of Justice is the present-day head of the global Bahá'í community and the centre of its administration. In summary, loyalty to the central and straight line of leadership from Bahá'u'lláh to `Abdu’l-Bahá, then to Shoghi Effendi, and finally to the Universal House of Justice, is the essence of the Bahá'í Covenant. This idea of loyalty to a central administration, can be considered a transcultural limit as it leaves out those who deviate from this clear line of succession or choose

to be loyal only to some, but not all of these central figures or bodies. For example, “some two years after Shoghi Effendi’s death”, which happened unexpectedly and without him having left a will or designated a successor, the president of the appointed “International Bahá'í Council”, Charles Mason Remey, “laid claim to the Guardianship”. (The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, Unit 2, 2012:72). More details about this particular episode, which is one of the most well known threats of schism in the Bahá'í community will be explained later in this section.

As a limit, one may criticise the idea of a strong central leadership to resemble authoritarian patterns, but the elective, consultative and collective nature of these councils suggests balance and sheds light on their distinction from monocultural forms of leadership such as the traditional authority of charismatic or powerful individuals like Bishops, Popes, Imams or Ayatollahs.

In the long run, by turning toward one centralized administration, Bahá'ís around the world have managed to preserve the unity and solidarity of their global community. However, this means that along the way, the Bahá'í community sets clear limits and solid boundaries that give it a distinct collective identity. “This loyalty to the centre of the religion is the doctrine of the Covenant and, for Bahá'ís, the greatest spiritual crime is "covenant-breaking" - attacking the head of the Faith or seeking to create schism”. (Momen, 2007:187-209). According to this principle, “Individuals are free to hold their own theological opinions as long as they do not press them to the extent of forming schisms.” (ibid). If they do so, they will be “advised and warned on several occasions, but if they persist, they may be subjected to sanctions which may involve removing their name from membership lists or in extreme cases declaring them ‘covenant-breakers’”. (ibid). Even though they are extremely rare, the way in which these measures may be considered justified is that “a religion that claims to be trying to unite the

world cannot be effective or credible if it itself is not united. It should be emphasised, however, that the sanction of declaring someone a covenant-breaker is rarely used and is only applied after prolonged negotiations fail to resolve the situation" (ibid), as was the case with Charles Mason Remey in the late 1950s. (Kolstoe, 2015:301-302).

Mason Remey had been one of the nine individuals "who had searched Shoghi Effendi's apartment in Haifa for his will or any last instructions" and had additionally signed a statement issued in 1957 to this effect and then a second statement outlining the way in which the "International Bahá'í Council would evolve leading to the election of the Universal House of Justice" (The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, Unit 2, 2012:72). However, in 1960 Remey started "sending letters to the believers all over the world announcing his claim as second Guardian" (ibid). He did manage to gather a small number of followers, mostly in New Mexico, USA, but eventually, "he expelled most of them" (Kolstoe, 2015:302) leading to a few different factions, which may still exist under various names. As for the core of the Bahá'í community, however, by upholding the Covenant it managed to remain united in the face of the turbulence caused by this incident and moved on to electing the first Universal House of Justice in 1963 (Kolstoe, 2015:302).

The concept of covenant-breaking and the sanction of excommunication (i.e., cutting all communication with the covenant-breaker, while respecting their civil rights) as a particular response to this particular act, can be considered an "othering" element and a transcultural limit. It is important to emphasize that the sanction of excommunication is only applied as a response to covenant-breaking alone. Those whose names are removed from membership lists, for all other reasons, are not covenant-breakers and are thus not excommunicated, but would only

lose their administrative rights, e.g., to vote or be elected to Bahá'í institutions. This topic will be discussed further in the next subsection. Likewise, “those who wish to leave can do so freely by indicating their desire to the relevant Bahá'í institution” (Momen, 2007:187-209). In both of the above situations, the individuals are free to keep their social connections with the community and its members. As an example from the circle of my family and friends who have decided to withdraw from the Faith and/or community, “Anonymous B” left the Faith and community but kept in touch with their own family and friends. “Anonymous C” chose not to practice the Faith or take part in administrative aspects of it, but continued to attend social and community events. “Anonymous D” had their administrative status removed but reapplied at a later point and had their rights reinstated, while keeping contact with family and friends in the meantime. “Anonymous E” decided to withdraw from the Faith and community and is not interested to keep contact despite the community’s efforts to reach out. In light of these examples, the distinction between administrative and social exclusion may become more apparent.

The Laws:

Like with many other religions, the Bahá'í Faith has its set of laws, listed by both sources, concerning personal conduct and social structure of the community. As Bahá'í author, Udo Schaefer, explains: The Bahá'í community “is more than a call to religious unity”... “It is not an association of like-minded world reformers” or “a loose amorphous, spiritualistic movement” but “a community based on law. The believers are not only united by the bond of faith and love but also by the bond of law”. (Schaefer, 1980:45).

Despite their importance in the Bahá'í community, “these laws are not nearly as all-pervasive as the Islamic Shari’ah or Judaic Halachah but they do include such injunctions as daily prayers, fasting and abstaining from alcohol”. (Momen, 2007:187-209).

Since some of these laws share a common base with older religions, one may question the originality of the Bahá'í system of laws. This is explained by the Bahá'í belief that there are two sets of divine laws: one set consists of the “the universal, unchangeable spiritual laws which are animated by, and reflected in, all of God’s religions” (Website for the International Bahá'í Community, 2018), regardless of the age in which they are revealed including the “golden rule” or the law of reciprocity, chastity and fidelity in marriage, prayer and fasting, as well as prohibition of theft and murder. The other set of laws, Bahá'ís argue, “change according to the particular conditions and circumstances of the time” and are specifically suitable for the needs of the age in which they are revealed. (ibid, 2018). Examples of these in the Bahá'í Faith include prohibition of slavery, of asceticism and monasticism, as well as laws pertaining to social order and structure, such as the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

Many Bahá'í laws, especially those pertaining to the individual’s personal life, are mostly left to the conscience of the individual as “moral ideals” (Kolstoe, 2015:176) and are not communally enforced. For example, contributions to Bahá'í funds and payments of the Bahá'í religious tax are strictly anonymous, limited to registered members of the community, and are a matter for individual believers to decide on. (Payman, 1996).

It should also be noted that the Bahá'í community does not take the current standards of the mainstream Western societies as the ultimate model of morality or happiness. For example

some “Western cultures glorify violence and sex in entertainment; the news media, video games and advertising increasing the appetite for both” (Kolstoe, 2015:176). However, despite the discrepancy between common customary practices and the standards of Bahá'í life, the Bahá'í community “does not seek to impose its values on others, nor does it pass judgement on others on the basis of its own moral standards”. (Letter from the Universal House of Justice, 27 October, 2010, cited by Kolstoe, 2015:179). This can be considered a transcultural potential within a limit, as it is a movement away from the idea of moral superiority of Self over others.

While the scope of this paper is beyond analyzing each of these individual or social laws, I will discuss a few examples that, when applied in the context of a shared space, may cause a certain degree of tension and can be viewed as transcultural limits implying cultural boundaries.

Based on Gouvion and Jouvion’s interviews, it is evident that individuals from various cultures may struggle in putting into practice some of the Bahá'í laws. In the words of Bill Collins, an American head librarian in his forties at the time of the interview: ”*Many Bahá'ís find it difficult to live up to their own standards. I don’t find it easy but we keep trying”*. (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994:79). This personal difficulty can be compared to “the role of fish swimming upstream, against the social current”, i.e., the society at large (Kolstoe, 2015:177), and is more indicative of a personal struggle rather than external consequences applied by the Bahá'í community. I have personally known individuals who drank alcohol or lived with partners outside of marriage, never faced social consequences by the community, but did experience internal struggles and either eventually left the Faith on their own accord (in case of “anonymous F”) or chose to stay in the Faith and community, despite their internal struggle with the laws (in case of “anonymous G & H”).

In most of these cases, the individuals are left to themselves, as long as they do not inflict harm on other members, or on the community, as a whole. “The Universal House of Justice gave the following guidance to a Spiritual Assembly: ‘When the conduct has no significant bearing on the good name of the Faith, the assembly may decide to leave the individual to go his or her own way’”. (Letter from the Universal House of Justice, 23 April 2013, cited by Kolstoe, 2015:179). If, however, the conduct does have a negative impact on the collective, after genuine attempts to resolve the matter, the individual’s voting rights and eligibility for election on the administrative bodies might be removed, but the individual is welcome to keep their social contact with the community members. Some do (as in the above case with “anonymous G & H”) and some walk away altogether (as in the case of “anonymous F”). This is another example of the distinction between social and administrative exclusion within the Bahá'í community.

It is interesting to note that based on various social and cultural norms, different individuals, according to Gouvion & Jouvion’s text, have found different laws to be challenging. Some have had difficulty with idea of chastity (i.e., abstaining from premarital or extramarital sex), some with abstaining from alcohol, and some with daily prayer and meditation. This can be an indication of cultural differences as barriers to the observance of the same set of laws, which might be normal in one society but unusual in other cultures.

For example, Daniel Caillaud’s struggle as a 41 year old French industrial artist has been described as follows: ”*The Bahá'í rules for a clean life don’t bother me... The most difficult for me was the obligation to pray. With Catholics, prayer is often very mechanical. I realized that I was praying mechanically too. So I stopped when it became too automatic. Meditation was also*

new to me, and I wasn't prepared for it. It wasn't easy and it took me a long time. I have been learning my new faith for the past twenty years". (Gouvion & Jouvion, 1994:89).

As explained by Gouvion & Jouvion: "The prohibition on alcohol is a problem that Frank smiles about today. An Israeli, he has settled as a general practitioner in a little town in Languedoc, in the heart of a major wine-growing area. "'*In the beginning it was very difficult. In this region wine is part of the culture. It wasn't easy to find a tactful way to explain why I couldn't accept the friendly glass of wine*'". (ibid:106). This particular example sheds light on the tensions that result from cultural and social implications of this law, as refusing a "friendly glass of wine", can be seen as culture clash or even resemble some prevalent monocultural tendencies, if viewed as a cultural practice. If, however, this principle is viewed to go beyond culture and instead seen in a global light as a religious or public health concern, it can simply be categorized as a transcultural limit.

A similar example is the experience of Muhammad, an Algerian from a Muslim background: "'*Since I was a practicing Muslim when I declared myself a Bahá'í, it was nothing new to me … What was a little more difficult was dealing with my wife's French relatives. Neither they nor the people I work with could understand why I refused to drink*"'. (ibid:106). In this case, Muhammad's religious boundaries clearly caused a tension between him and his wife's family or co-workers, which is another example of a transcultural limit.

Despite the external transcultural limits that are caused by these laws, the Bahá'í community's own internal response to laws and their observance by (fellow) members, is a fairly transcultural one. This can perhaps be linked to tolerance as a vital instrument toward unity in diversity. In

other words, since the purpose of the Bahá'í Faith is “the realization of the organic unity of the entire human race, and Bahá'ís are enjoined to eliminate from their lives all forms of prejudice and to manifest respect toward all”, to regard those who are different or those who make different moral choices “with prejudice and disdain would be against the spirit of the Faith”. (Kolstoe, 2015:181). By this token, the new members are not expected to change their lifestyle suddenly but are encouraged to do so gradually and privately. In some cases, it may take years for this to happen, one step at a time. Debbie Simon, an American office worker at the Bahá'í World Centre at the time of the interview has stated: *“I couldn’t change my lifestyle immediately but with a friend I observed the fast on the Bahá'í calendar”.* (ibid:84). This may indicate a step-by-step attempt at upholding Bahá'í standards, in the individual’s own time.

3.3 Other Principles:

There are a number of other principles listed by the two sources that can also be viewed as transcultural potentials, albeit within limits, and which partially deconstruct the traditional boundaries, binaries and hierarchies both within individual societies and in the global context. Examples include spiritual solutions to economic problems, equality of men and women, universal compulsory education, introduction of a universal auxiliary language and the elimination of all forms of prejudices based on the central teaching of oneness of humanity.

The detailed discussion of the all these principles is beyond the scope of this paper but two of the Bahá'í principles addressing some of the intra-cultural hierarchical patterns and binaries will be mentioned in more detail below. These two principles address social class extremes and gender inequality, which can be considered as “vertical and horizontal divisions” respectively, mainly within a particular society, as introduced by Welsch (1999:2), but also globally.

First is the principle of equality of men and women and the sameness of “all the intellectual abilities” and “their capacity for intellectual and scientific achievement in all aspects of human endeavor”. (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:90). This is in direct contrast to the traditional hierarchies that are seen in almost all societies and cultures. Even in the most progressive nations (e.g., Scandinavia or Canada), achieving equal rights for women has been and continues to be a battle. The Bahá'í idea of equality of the sexes can be best described through the following analogy: “The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly.“ (`Abdu’l-Bahá 1986:302)

In this regard, Gouvion and Jouvion explain: “Not only was the Bahá'í doctrine being ahead of the demands of the suffragettes” in early 1900s “that is to say their demands for equal rights, equal education, the right to vote and political participation but, it went beyond the radical militant phase of the women’s rights movements in the 1960s” (Gouvion and Jouvion, 1994:128).

With regards to the practical role that women have played in the history of the Bahá'í Faith, there are many examples that Gouvion and Jouvion list in their chapter titled “The Importance of Women” (1994:126-146). The examples are too numerous to be listed here but perhaps one of the most important cases is that of the Founder’s daughter (Bahiyyih Khanum 1846-1932) who served as the acting head of the world wide Bahá'í community in two periods: in 1910-1913 and a decade later in 1922-24. (Rouhani Ma’ani, 2012:171-176, 188 -193).

The important role of women in the Bahá'í context goes back, in terms of timeline, to the inception of the Faith in its “Babi” roots with Tahirih Qurratu’l-’Ayn the “feminist martyr” (Toth, 2016) whose audacity to publicly remove the veil which Muslim women had to wear for centuries, broke a strong cultural and religious tabu 170 years ago (Gouvoin & Jouvion, 1994:136), through to the early 1900s when a handful of North American women took on the task of spreading the Bahá'í message far and wide (Ruhe-Schoen, 1998), all the way to the present day role and presence of women in all, except one, of the the Bahá'í administrative institutions. Of course, women’s absence from this one institution, The Universal House of Justice, can definitely be viewed as a transcultural limit. This topic has been discussed by van den Hoonaard & van den Hoonaard, (2006:216-224) in their sociological study of the Canadian Bahá'í communities’ attitudes toward equality of men and women. According to their study, this issue is primarily a problem if one views the membership on administrative bodies as a position of power, which was discussed previously in the context of independent investigation of truth. Either way, a position of power or not, this issue can be considered a limit, which the Bahá'í community accepts. (Gouvion & Jouvion, 2004:211).

As a practical example, we can consider the “Barli Development Institute for Rural Women” (Website for Barli Development Institute, 2018), which is a local Bahá'í inspired education programme, based in Indore, India. “The Institute conducts residential training programmes for rural, village and tribal women who did not get the opportunity of schooling” and reflects “the belief of the Institute that women are the central pillars of society”. In 2016, the institute was awarded “Gold Award Certification by GuideStar India”. (ibid, 2018).

The other transcultural potential refers to social classes in the Bahá'í teachings is “economic justice” and “abolishment of the extremes of wealth and poverty” which seeks to break down the social class hierarchies “within nations and between nations”. (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:92). The underlying cause for economic imbalance in the world, according to the Bahá'í view, is unhealthy competition. The Bahá'í model suggests a more cooperative system whereby “the long term good of all” replaces “the short term good of a few”. The idea of cooperation can, for example be applied to the “essential partnership” of owners and workers, who should all share in the profits of the enterprise”. (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:91- 93).

Within the framework of such a cooperative system, “Bahá'í teachings accept the idea of private ownership of property and the need for private economic initiative”. In addition, the Bahá'í view accepts that “there are natural differences in human needs and capacities” (ibid) and therefore it does not advocate the same income for all individuals. However, it suggests to have absolute limits in place for minimum and maximum income levels.

Such co-operative systems (be it in economics, educational or socio-developmental) require a general “movement away from the hierarchical, hegemonic, patriarchal contemporary societies, with their inherent and inescapable competitiveness and conflicts, and a movement towards communities built on a Bahá'í-inspired model of cooperation and collaboration, where decisions are made through a consultative process that involves everyone”. (Momen, 2018). There are a number of Bahá'í inspired educational programmes that “contribute to prevalent discourses concerned with the betterment of society” such as ISGP (Website of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, 2018) as well as social developmental projects all around the world such as “FUNDAEC”, (a Bahá'í inspired educational system “with a ‘Change the World -- Best Practice

Award' for its achievements in providing high school education and training to more than 50,000 people living in rural areas in Latin America" (The Bahá'í World News Service, 2002)). However, when it comes to economics, the Bahá'í community's impact is rather insignificant at present, perhaps due to its limited size. Nevertheless, a number of organizations such as the "Ethical Business Building the Future" (EBBF), are striving to implement these teachings and transform the business cultures at grassroot level by promoting ethical "and sustainable economic systems". EBBF in particular is a "Bahá'í-inspired global learning community that accompanies mindful individuals and groups through daily work and discourse to transform business and the economy thereby contributing to a prosperous, just and sustainable civilisation". (The EBBF Website, 2018). Time will only tell how effective this and similar attempts are in bringing about meaningful large-scale change.

4. Conclusion:

As discussed in earlier chapters, there is a notable resemblance between scholarly perspectives on transculturality and Bahá'í views on religion. For example, in the same way that Benessaieh describes cultures in terms of their "commonality and connection" (Benessaieh, 2010:19) when discussing transculturality, Hatcher and Martin describe religions as being interconnected and having common foundations, in presenting the Bahá'í view (Hatcher & Martin, 2002:82-85). In other words, in as much as transculturality "questions the separateness of cultures" (Benessaieh, 2010:25), the Bahá'í Faith poses a similar question in relation to religion and puts forward the idea of oneness, as opposed to separateness, of the essence of world religions. The difference however, lies in the distinction between the idea of cultural in-betweenness *vs*. the sense of succession and fulfilment when it comes to religion. It is thus possible to regard the Bahá'í community as a transcultural body, which is open to and inclusive

of people from any culture, religious background, nationality, social class or gender, and the Bahá'í community has demonstrated its ability to embrace this diversity in its daily life. However, it would not be justified to regard the Bahá'í community as a “trans-religious” entity since it regards itself as the latest evolutionary stage of humanity’s religious movement, rather than positioning itself in between other religions.

Revisiting the first research question regarding the extent of Bahá'í communities’ potential for transculturality, it was argued in the third chapter that the international Bahá'í community and its practical functionings, do in part embody transcultural practices and symbols such as open and inclusive places of worship and elective consultative governing bodies. In addition, by striving adhere to Bahá'í principles, the community attempts to deconstruct such monocultural binaries as salvation of the Self *vs*. damnation of the Other, religious caste or class divisions, special powers and station of the elders or clergy, and racial purity or superiority as outlined in chapter 2. Summarized by Karlberg, the international Bahá'í community is trying to overcome many “divisive identity constructs” because ”as long as people understand the world primarily in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’— whether those categories be racial, national, ideological, or religious — humanity will be unable to realize its common interests”. (Karlberg, 2008:311).

This approach is not without limits, which address the second research question regarding transcultural limits of the Bahá'í community. These limits take expression through the Bahá'í Administrative Order, the Covenant, laws and membership enrollments, which highlight a strong group identity and draw clear group boundaries, resulting in a sense of distinction between the Bahá'í community and other religious groups. For the most part, this distinction does not prevent the Bahá'í community from collaborating with other groups and individuals toward common

goals and global aspirations, whether or not their identities fit the Bahá'í values and standards. Examples of these include youth empowerment programmes, neighbourhood children's classes, interfaith devotional gatherings, and the social development or educational projects mentioned in chapter 3, which address the third research question regarding the translation of Bahá'í principles from theory to practice by the community. There are of course, areas where the Bahá'í community has not been able to bring these potentials into full fruition such as renewal of membership and minority representation on administrative bodies, as explained in the same chapter.

To close with an example of Bahá'í community's work in progress toward the fulfilment of some of its transcultural potentials from theory to practice, we can revisit the case of " Barli Development Institute for Rural Women" in Indore, India (Website for Barli Development Institute, 2018), as briefly mentioned in chapter 3. This is an example of the Bahá'í community 1) consciously working with others, 2) prioritising women's empowerment and education, and 3) prioritising disadvantaged people, which can all be considered transcultural potentials in the process of gradual implementation.

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