

A “GRAND SUMO TOURNAMENT”: ŠOWQĪ EFFENDI RABBĀNĪ VS. DEGUCHI ONISABURŌ

Bei, Dawei

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ABSTRACT

In 1929, Šowqī Effendi Rabbānī—Guardian of the Bahā’ī Faith, and a great-grandson of Bahā’ Allāh, the Bahā’ī founder—indicated that he was “very surprised to learn that the Ōmoto religion of Japan has published a statement to the effect that the Bahā’ī Revelation is a branch of their religion.” His reference was to 1923 dictations by Deguchi Onisaburō, the co-founder of Ōmoto, introducing a Bahā’ī character called “Bahā’ Allāh” into a fictional dialogue about the coming messiah (hinted as being Onisaburō himself). The episode reveals some of the limitations and unacknowledged agendas of inter-religious dialogue.

The core teachings of the Bahā’ī and Ōmoto religions have an interfaith dimension. Bahā’īs view their nineteenth-century Iranian founder, Bahā’ Allāh, as the most recent in a series of prophets, which includes the central figures of the world’s major religions, whose authority is thus subsumed by the new revelation. Of course such claims raise a number of thorny theological difficulties, to which Bahā’ī scholars are not entirely insensitive.¹ Meanwhile, the Ōmoto principle of *bankyō dōkon* (万教同根, “ten thousand teachings, one root”) suggests that Ōmoto is the root, and other religions the branches, of a common religious tree. Richard Fox Young (1988) has described the historical background of this theme, including parallels in other East Asian syncretistic sects—several of which exchanged visits, or entered into loose alliances with Ōmoto during the 1920s and 1930s. Bahā’ī, as well as Ōmoto leaders, combined doctrinal inclusivism with a practical program of inter-religious outreach, so that what might have remained variations of *ghulāt* Shi’ism or sectarian Shinto respectively, have instead cultivated independent identities and transnational presences on the model of the “great” religions. When the two groups finally encountered one another in the 1920s, however, initial expressions of goodwill broke down in the face of inter-religious rivalry and cultural misunderstanding.

What happens when two religious groups, each claiming to unite all world religions under its aegis, encounter one another? Do they embrace each other as like-minded comrades, or—like the “Three Christs of Ypsilanti”²—scoff at their obviously deluded rivals, while remaining confident in their own tendentious claims? Or do they rethink their own theologies, even as they search for

¹ For example, Christopher Buck (1998) admits that “Bahā’u’llāh’s fulfillment of Zoroastrian prophecy was never meant to bear the test of textual and hermeneutical scrutiny.” Moojan Momen (1989), commenting on the Bahā’ī understanding of Buddha as a prophet of God, concedes that there is “not much evidence for all of this in the Buddhist writings” (60).

² Three Michigan psychiatric patients, each of whom believed himself to be Christ, were brought together for two years by a curious psychologist (Rokeach 1964).

some respectful way to frame their differences and engage one another? In this case, all three responses occurred, though not at the same time, or from the same people.

Early Bahā'ī Inter-religious Activity

The early twentieth-century spread of the Bahā'ī community beyond the Persian and Ottoman Empires coincided with the emergence of formal inter-religious dialogue, following the example of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions. This event, held as part of the World Columbian Exposition (Chicago World's Fair), is remembered by Bahā'īs primarily for the fact that one of its speakers mentioned Bahā' Allāh, who had died the previous year.³ Between 1911 and 1913, Bahā' Allāh's son and successor, 'Abd-al-Bahā, made several international voyages, in the course of which he addressed a variety of European and North American audiences—including the Greenacre summer camp in rural Eliot, Maine (f. 1894), whose annual inter-religious forum followed the same format as the 1893 Parliament, and included many of the same speakers.⁴ Chicago-style dialogue events also proved popular in India, and Bahā'ī representatives participated in the second Convention of the Religions in India, held January 6-8, 1911 in Allahabad, and sponsored by the Vivekānanda Society.⁵

After 'Abd-al-Bahā's death in 1921, leadership of the Bahā'ī community passed to his grandson, Šowqī (or Shoghi) Effendi Rabbānī (1897-1957). From his base in Haifa, Rabbānī received visitors and kept up a voluminous correspondence, while supervising the completion of several monumental building projects. Under his direction, Bahā'ī "pioneers"⁶ traveled to most of the countries not yet reached, and the outlines of what would become a global hierarchy of elected councils took shape. At the same time, he steadily translated into English a number of key Bahā'ī scriptures, as well as a popular history of the faith. Their elevated Gibbonian style would later come to characterize much institutional Baha'i rhetoric. Where earlier believers distinguished between "Jewish, Zoroastrian, Christian, and Mohammedan Bahais" (e.g. Abdul-Baha 1910), Rabbānī forbade multiple identities on the principle that the "Bahā'ī Faith" (to use his nomenclature) was nothing less than an independent world religion—a reformulation made possible by the transition from Ottoman to British (and later, Israeli) rule.

Rabbānī took an active role in planning the Bahā'ī presentation at the Conference of Some Living Religions of the British Empire (or the Religions of Empire Conference), held at the Imperial Institute in South Kensington from September 22 - October 3, 1924, in connection with the 1924-1925 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. Although the initial idea came from Theosophists, the conference was sponsored by the School of Oriental Studies (whose director, Sir E. Denison Ross, served as chair) and the Sociological Society. The main Bahā'ī speech was drafted by Horace Holley, longtime secretary of the then combined, New York based National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahā'īs of the United States and Canada, and delivered on September 25 by its chairman, C.

³ See Jessup (1894). Henry Harris Jessup was an American Presbyterian missionary posted to Beirut. His paper—read by a colleague, George A. Ford of Sidon, on September 23, 1893—eulogized Bahā' Allāh as "the head of that vast reform party of Persian Moslems who accept the New Testament as the Word of God and Christ as the Deliverer of men, who regard all nations as one, and all men as brothers."

⁴ 'Abd-al-Bahā spent the week of August 16-24, 1912 there, giving five talks. Greenacre's founder, Sarah Jane Farmer, had become a Bahā'ī in 1900. The intervening years saw a power struggle between Bahā'ī, Vedantin, and late Transcendentalist / New Thought factions. After Farmer's death in 1916, the property became a Bahā'ī retreat center. See Schmidt (2012, 185-224); and Richardson (1931).

⁵ See Vakil (1911, 5). Unlike its 1909 Calcutta predecessor, no book of the conference proceedings seems to have been published, although many individual speeches were circulated. Siyyid Mustaffa Rumi contributed a paper summarizing Bahā'ī history, which was read for him at the conference by Narayan Rao Sethji, aka Vakil.

⁶ Bahā'īs distinguish their "pioneers" from the "missionaries" of other religions. As Rabbānī explains in a letter of February 7, 1945 (Hornby 1983, no.1962), the latter term "has often been associated with a narrow-minded, bigoted type of proselytizing quite alien to the Bahā'ī method of spreading our teachings."

Mountfort Mills (representing Canada). A second paper was read by Rabbānī's cousin, Rūhī Afnān.⁷ Rabbānī's letters to other Bahā'īs express the hope that participation in the high-profile, semi-governmental event "might arouse and stimulate widespread interest among the enlightened public," and that "it will be known to the public that the Cause is not a movement collateral with other movements such as the Brahmo Somaj or Ahmadi movements."⁸

Bahā'īs spoke at the fortieth-anniversary (1933) commemoration of the 1893 Parliament, also in Chicago, and held under the auspices of the newly-formed World Fellowship of Faiths, whose co-directors were American social worker Charles Frederick Weller and Tagore associate Kedernath Das Gupta.⁹ The previous year, Rabbānī had noted with concern Das Gupta's leadership of the WFF (the initial letters had been sent by Rabbi Stephen Samuel Wise), and urged the North American assembly to inquire "whether its purpose was in any way political," or "a form of Indian propaganda."¹⁰ Bahā'īs also attended the inaugural conference of the World Congress of Faiths founded by Sir Francis Younghusband, and held July 3-18, 1936 at Queen's Hall and University College, London. (Confusingly, this event was sometimes called the Second International Conference of the World *Fellowship* of Faiths, which is how Rabbānī refers to it in his writings.) On July 6, George Townshend read a paper "approved" by Rabbānī, "Bahā'u'llāh's Grand Plan of World Fellowship." The session was chaired by the British High Commissioner for Palestine, Herbert Samuel, whose Zionism aroused no objection from Rabbānī (Bishop 1939, 634-645; Braybrooke 1980, 20-39). Although the conference became an annual event, no Bahā'īs seem to have participated in 1937 (World Congress of Faiths 1937).

That year, Shirin Fozdar—a second-generation Bahā'ī from Bombay, of Iranian Zoroastrian ancestry—presented a paper on "The Bahai Religion" at the International Parliament of Religions, held March 1-8, 1937 in the Town Hall of Calcutta, under the auspices of the Sri Ramakṛṣṇa Centenary Committee (Fozdar 1938). Mrs. Fozdar was the longtime secretary of the All Faiths League, which met monthly in various Indian cities. In addition to Bahā'ī functions, she often spoke on behalf of secular causes such as education or women's rights (Fozdar 1983).

In her diary, Agnes Baldwin Alexander—a Hawaiian Bahā'ī "pioneer" residing permanently (from 1914) in Japan—reports attending the Japan Religion Conference (日本宗教懇話会, *Nihon Shūkyō Konwakai*) held June 5-8, 1928 in Tokyo (Alexander 1977, 73-74). Sponsored by the state-run Shinto Propagation Society (神道宣揚会, *Shintō Senyokai*), the conference rallied major Japanese religious groups against Communism and sectarian religious movements (Ives 2009, 28), although Barbara R. Sims (1998, 12) paints it in more progressive terms. Alexander was one of some 1,500 participants, three foreign guests, and eighteen selected to speak (for two minutes each) during a banquet held on the sixth. Her diary also records another Tokyo interfaith conference held in 1931, but provides no further details, except to note that she had met the Rev. Kunio Kodaira of the (Congregationalist) Japanese Independent Church of Oakland, California, which nine years earlier had hosted 'Abd-al-Bahā. Interestingly, Alexander does not mention the Great Religious Exposition (宗教大博覧会, *Dai Shūkyō Hakurankai*) held March 8 to May 6, 1930 in Kyoto.¹¹

⁷ *Bahā'ī World*, vol. 2 (1926-1928), part 4, contains several relevant items, including the two speeches.

⁸ From a letter of January 6, 1924, to George P. Simpson, in which was enclosed a January 4, 1924 letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahā'īs of the United States and Canada (Rabbānī 1981, 19-21).

⁹ Proceedings collected in Weller (1935). The Bahā'ī contribution is in vol. 3, sec. 14.

¹⁰ In a letter dated November 16, 1932. In a follow-up dated November 30, 1932, Rabbānī seemed to conclude that the organization was political, and ordered that no Bahā'īs attend. At some point he must have changed his mind. He seems to have believed that Das Gupta succeeded Rabbi Wise as WFF leader; in fact, Wise was vice-chairman of the U.S. committee (Braybrooke 1980, 167-170). Ironically, Rabbi Wise would later write in support of a petition protesting Rabbānī's 1935 excommunication of Rūhī Afnān, among other family members (Sohrab 1943, 16).

¹¹ Twelve religions were represented, including Ōmoto, whose pavilion was especially popular. See Stalker 2008, 118-130.

As in India, early Bahā'ī interfaith activity in Japan (and there were numerous smaller-scale exchanges) blurs together with other causes such as peace, world federalism, and the welfare of the blind, in which many of the same people were active. One of these causes was Esperanto. Agnes Alexander had begun studying the language at the urging of 'Abd-al-Bahā, who was also responsible for sending her to Japan. Her diary, which is peppered with Esperanto, shows that the language was one of several in common use among local Bahā'īs. Nor were they the only new religious group to embrace it.

First Contact with Ōmoto

Ōmoto was founded in the 1890s by Deguchi Nao (出口 なお), on the basis of mediumistic revelations received from the folk deity, Ushitora no Konjin (艮の金神). After Nao's death in 1918, leadership passed to her son-in-law, Deguchi Onisaburō (出口 王仁三郎, 1871-1947),¹² with whom she had had a vexed relationship. A charismatic, flamboyant extrovert with a penchant for cross-dressing, Onisaburō introduced ceaseless innovations, gradually supplanting Nao's revelations with his own. Nancy K. Stalker (2008) describes "a series of rapidly evolving campaigns" (3) including spiritual healing and exorcism, educational and agricultural reform, newspaper publishing, and humanitarian projects. There were constant experiments with organizational structure aimed at placating the government.¹³ Ōmoto applied to join one, then another state-approved Shinto body, while simultaneously remaining in the public eye (e.g., by deploying teams of street preachers). By the 1930s the sect had grown dramatically, and acquired a presence in several foreign countries as well as the Japanese colonies of Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria.

Not that Onisaburō's management style was entirely rational. In one memorable 1924 episode, he and several comrades (including Aikido founder Ueshiba Morihei 植芝 盛平) were arrested on the border of Inner Mongolia, and nearly executed by firing squad. Apparently their plan had been to recruit a mercenary army, and rally Inner Asia to the banner of the "Oomoto Dalai Lama." (Cf. the similarly quixotic nation-founding projects of Baron Nikolaus von Ungern-Sternberg and Nikolai Konstantinovitch Rerikh.) Stalker (2008, 142) adds the irresistible detail that Onisaburō had brought along costumes for Noh dramas, which he intended to perform in Jerusalem at a later stage of the campaign.

Between 1921 and 1934, Onisaburō dictated an 81-volume work titled *Reikai-monogatari* (霊界物語, "Tales from the Spirit World"), based on a week long series of ecstatic visions received on Mt. Takakuma (高隈山) in 1898. Volume 6, chapter 23 of this work (revealed January 1922) introduces the concept of *bankyō dōkon*, asserting that the founders of the world's major religions were Japanese deities in disguise. Young (1988, 269) points out the venerable Japanese history of the arboreal metaphor (for example, Kitabatake Chikafusa 北畠 親房 in the fourteenth century described Shintō as the trunk of a tree with Confucian branches and Buddhist leaves), as well as the numerous Chinese sects purporting to harmonize the "three teachings" (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism), or perhaps five (adding Christianity and Islam) or more. In fact, Ōmoto cultivated ties with a number of new, spiritualist, syncretistic religious groups throughout the 1920s and 1930s (see Young 1988, 264, n.3 for a list), beginning with the Dàojuàn (道院, = Tao Yüan in Wade-Giles romanization; Jp. Dō-in), a Shandong-based planchette divination sect, and its humanitarian arm, the World Red Swastika Society. Although this alliance is officially traced to

¹² The two are not related. Onisaburō (born Ueda Kisaburō 上田 喜三郎) took the Deguchi surname when he married Nao's daughter Sumiko (on New Years Day, 1900), and following a custom of the time, was adopted into the family. Their personal names are used here in order to avoid confusion.

¹³ With mixed success, in view of the suppressions of 1921 and 1935.

relief efforts in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, Young suggests that the two groups had been in contact for some time before that. On May 22, 1925, after a scant few months of planning, Ōmoto and the Dàoyuàn organized the inaugural (and only) meeting of the World Religious Federation in Beijing, apparently intending the religious equivalent of world federalism, i.e., a League of Nations style body characterized by mutual recognition. When this project floundered, Onisaburō shifted his attention to Jinrui Aizenkai (人類愛善会, anglicized as the Universal Love and Brotherhood Association), an Ōmoto-sponsored international humanitarian organization founded June 9, 1925, and open to participants from all religions.

Ōmoto sources point to “a Baha’i follower” or “some Baha’i followers” as having introduced Onisaburō to Esperanto in 1922.¹⁴ Stalker clarifies that Onisaburō had been “intrigued by Esperanto since 1913,” but lacked the opportunity to study the language. In May 1922, he sent an aide, Katō Haruko, to enroll in an accelerated Esperanto course in Tokyo; she then recruited an Esperanto teacher to teach Esperanto at Ōmoto headquarters in Ayabe (near Kyoto). As for the Bahā’ī connection, Stalker adds that Onisaburō’s wife, Sumiko, met an elderly American Bahā’ī Esperantist named Ida A. Finch on a streetcar in July 1922,¹⁵ and invited her to visit Ayabe, which she did the following September (Stalker 2008, 157-158). Alexander supplies the additional information that Finch returned in late April or May of 1923 in the company of yet *another* American Bahā’ī Esperantist, Martha L. Root.

These dates do not encourage the notion that *bankyō dōkon* was inspired by Bahā’ī teachings, and as noted above, Young suggests a number of alternative sources. Nevertheless, according to Stalker, this early exposure to the Bahā’ī religion influenced subsequent Ōmoto doctrine, and awakened in Onisaburō an abiding interest in interfaith dialogue:

Although there does not appear to be a sustained interchange between Baha’i and Oomoto, concepts from the former strongly influenced the latter’s beliefs and practices. Onisaburō made Baha’u’llah a prominent character in episodes of the *Reikai-monogatari*, including him in a prophetic dialogue entitled “Grand Sumo Tournament” in which Baha’u’llah condemns war and warns of a coming world war between two great forces in the world. (Stalker 2008, 158)

Her reference is to volume 64, unique in the *Reikai-monogatari* for being (according to Onisaburō’s preface) a work of fiction, “something like a novel.” In it, a Japanese missionary named Burabasa¹⁶ arrives in Jerusalem in order to prepare for the return of the messiah, and (if this is not the same thing) to prepare for a future visit by his master, a certain Udumbara Chandra,¹⁷ the head of a new East Asian religion called “Root-Baha.”¹⁸ Selected for his knowledge of languages, including Esperanto, Burabasa is apparently modeled after real-life Ōmoto missionary Nishimura Kogetsu (西村 輝雄), later Ōmoto’s first representative to Europe, who attended the 1925 World Esperanto Congress in Geneva. Several chapters touch on the Bahā’ī religion, but contain numerous

¹⁴ Both quotes are from the pamphlet *Bankyō Dōkon: Seventy Years of Inter-Faith Activity at Oomoto* (1996). See also ch. 20 of K. Deguchi (1998). The 1923 meeting is reported by Nishimura Kogetsu in a May 10, 1923 article in the Ōmoto magazine *Kami-no-Kuni* (神の国, *Realm of the Gods*) entitled “*Bahai-kyo senkyoshi kitaru*” (“Baha’i missionaries have come”).

¹⁵ I have taken the liberty of correcting Stalker’s “Aida” to “Ida.”

¹⁶ A non-Japanese name of uncertain origin. Japanese phonology would also permit such variant renderings as “Brabasa” or “Vulavasa.”

¹⁷ This Sanskrit name combines *udumbara* (*Ficus racemosa*, a species of fig celebrated in Buddhist lore, whose flower is said to bloom once every 3000 years) with *chandra* (the moon).

¹⁸ Rendered *ruta* or *luto* in Japanese phonetics, this foreign word suggests the English “root,” and presumably refers to Oomoto, although one thinks also of Bahā’ī pioneer Martha Root. Perhaps Onisaburo was struck by the coincidence. *Bahā* (Arabic: “splendor”) is the “Greatest Name” which Bahā’ī tradition adds to the ninety-nine “Beautiful Names” of God mentioned in Qur’an 7: 179, and which forms part of the names *Bahā’ Allāh* and *.Bahā’*.

fundamental distortions. Onisaburō's peculiar method of transmission—he dictated 27 chapters in four days, apparently while lying on his side (Stalker 2008, 100)—goes far in explaining his rather free-wheeling use of sources.

Bahā'ī Content in *Reikai-monogatari* vol. 64

The character introduced as “Bahā' Allāh of the Bahā'ī Faith” first appears in chapter 2 (“The Missionary,” revealed July 10, 1923), as a passenger on the Palestine Railways line from al-Qantara, Egypt to Jerusalem. In the course of this journey, he strikes up a conversation with Burabasa. Since the real-life Bahā' Allāh died in 1892, and the text (as we shall see) is apparently set in 1923, one struggles to make sense of the chronology. Perhaps the solution is to say that Onisaburō's “Bahā' Allāh” is not really the Bahā'ī founder, but an ordinary Bahā'ī missionary who inexplicably shares his religious epithet. Interestingly, “Bahā' Allāh” is described as an “elderly gentleman” with “white hair.” In real life, Bahā' Allāh in his old age used henna to dye his hair black,¹⁹ although images of him are not distributed by Bahā'īs, and his appearance would not have been widely known. The reference to white hair suggests instead the ubiquitous photographs of his son, 'Abd-al-Bahā. Later in the same chapter, “Bahā' Allāh” refers to 'Abd-al-Bahā as “my holy master.” Although Bahā'īs do customarily refer to 'Abd-al-Bahā as “the Master,” they would find the reversal of roles bewildering, since Bahā' Allāh is their prophet, not 'Abd-al-Bahā, whose cognomen literally means “slave of *Bahā*” (i.e., of Bahā' Allāh; see note 18).

“Bahā' Allāh” observes that Burabasa does not have the face of an ordinary person, but seems to be a holy man. Burabasa thanks him, and explains that he is a missionary of the god Okuni Harutachi no Ōkami, come to serve his religion and experience the holy atmosphere of Jerusalem. Declaring that religion is not limited by race or nationality, he offers his friendship. “Bahā' Allāh” eagerly accepts. All human beings, he says, ought to help each other, for they are all God's children; the same sun shines upon them all. The Bahā'ī religion was founded on the principles that all religions are equal, that science and religion are one, and that religion should be free from prejudice. Humanity needs neither “the dead Buddhas of the past” nor the old, moldering, formal religions which fuel conflict by demonizing one another. After all, the purpose of religion is to deepen the bonds of love and affection among the world's people. Touched, Burabasa responds that he cannot see any difference between “Bahā' Allāh's” words and the teachings of his own religion, “so please, let's become sister religions and foster eternal friendship.”

To which “Bahā' Allāh” replies, “Yes, please, let's do this. But what do you think about the current situation of the world?” Burabasa relates a news item from the previous day's *London Times*,²⁰ about a message received by Arthur Conan Doyle from the spirit of Lord Northcliffe (d. 1922), warning that unless the human race reformed itself spiritually, it would be punished with an even worse disaster than World War I. He adds that thirty years ago, the founder of Root-*Bahā* was ridiculed for predicting global upheaval, the deterioration of human morals, and a restless spirit of malevolence. Only a messiah can save them. “Bahā' Allāh” states that “my God told me that the messiah will appear soon,” on the Mount of Olives, and that the Bahā'ī religion was founded in order “to warn the people of the world” to follow him. Burabasa responds that the messiah has already been born.

Startled, “Bahā' Allāh” lists nine qualifications (the number nine being a prominent Bahā'ī symbol) by which the messiah can be recognized:

1. He will be an educator of humanity.
2. His teaching will be universal.
3. He will possess innate (not acquired) knowledge.

¹⁹ As reported by his barber (Salmānī 1982, 18-19).

²⁰ Conan Doyle gave a press conference to this effect on 31 May 1923, with news articles appearing in early June.

4. He will answer all kinds of questions put to him by sages, resolve all problems, and willingly accept suffering.
5. He will be a “giver of pleasure,” and the “leader of a happy kingdom.”
6. His knowledge will be limitless, yet comprehensible to ordinary people.
7. His speech will be comprehensive, and powerful enough to overcome even the worst enemy.
8. He will not be bothered by sorrows or troubles, but will grow increasingly powerful and passionate, showing godlike courage and judgment.
9. He will perfect global culture, and unite all religions; his character will be capable of realizing world peace, and embody the highest morals for humanity.

Although numbered lists are common in Bahā'ī literature, and certain details suggest Bahā'ī inspiration (for example, Bahā'īs call their prophets the “educators of humanity”), this particular list appears to be original to Onisaburō.

When “Bahā' Allāh” confesses his personal belief that ‘Abd-al-Bahā is the messiah, Burabasa objects that “he is not alive anymore. Even though he meets the nine qualifications, he cannot do anything to save the world.” Burabasa instead proposes his own master, Udumbara Chandra, now preparing for some great work from his base in Mt. Okebuse (桶伏山, a mountain near Ayabe) on “Takasago Island,” and makes his case point by point.

By now it should be obvious that Udumbara Chandra is really Onisaburō, who in effect spends several pages praising himself. Udumbara Chandra is said to be the return of Jesus, while the founder of his religion—Nao's fictional counterpart—is identified with John (Jp. *Yohana* ヨハネ), presumably the Baptist. In real life, Bahā'īs regard Bahā' Allāh as fulfilling the messianic expectations of all religions: he is the future Buddha Maitreya, the Second Coming of Christ, the *Mahdī* and the *Qā'im*, etc. (Although some turn-of-the-century Western Bahā'īs regarded ‘Abd-al-Bahā as Christ, he repudiated the claim.) The Bahā'ī counterpart of John the Baptist would be another nineteenth-century Persian religious figure known as the Bāb. Meanwhile, Onisaburō had been proclaiming the advent of Maitreya since 1916, and made public his claim to be this personage on March 3, 1928 (Miyata 1988, 188; cf. the similar developments in Theosophy). In any event, “Bahā' Allāh” reacts positively but noncommittally (“What an amazing person. He must be a real messiah...”), then excuses himself when their train arrives in Jerusalem, bringing the chapter to an end.

In chapter 15 (“A Grand Sumo Tournament,” revealed 12 July 1923), “Bahā' Allāh” visits Burabasa at the latter's lodgings, in a pilgrims' hospice run by a Catholic monastery in Jerusalem (and based on the real-life French Hospice of Notre Dame). After some small talk, the conversation turns to the threat of war. “Bahā' Allāh” relates prophecies of a global conflict (“Armageddon”) between two unnamed powers, strongly hinted to be Japan and the United States. This is the “Grand Sumo Tournament” of the title. Their oppositional relationship is indicated by the fact that one has the sun for its symbol and the other the stars, making it a land of “eternal night”; one is aggressively trying to dominate the world, while the other has only recently opened its doors to competition and entered the world stage. Burabasa tells “Bahā' Allāh” of a third power, “Sunrise Island” (日の出島, *Hinode-jima*), which will attempt to unite the world. Confusingly, it too seems to represent Japan. This country has a special tie with the Jewish people. For example, it was founded some 2,600 years ago (an allusion to the mythological compendia *Kojiki* 古事記 and *Nihongi* 日本紀), around the same time as the Babylonian Captivity. Where “Sunrise Island” has had a continuous culture and imperial line since ancient times, the Jews lost their language and kingdom long ago; still, “nothing compares with them in terms of their faith, endurance, patience, and power of spirit.”

Before taking his leave, “Bahā' Allāh” invites Burabasa to visit him at his Bahā'ī “church” near the Jordan River. Burabasa does so in chapter 18 (“A Scandal in the Newspapers,” revealed July 13, 1923); however, they interact only briefly, and the chapter introduces little new Bahā'ī content.

The Fallout

Japan-based Bahā'īs may have read the above in Esperanto translation in *Oomoto Gazeto Esperanta*, where it was serialized from January 1925 (Stalker 2008, 227 n. 76). Agnes Alexander was clearly offended by what she felt to be an attempt to co-opt Bahā'ī teachings, and ascribe to Onisaburō a station comparable to Bahā' Allāh. According to her diary,

There was at that time in Japan a religion called Oomoto, which had rapidly spread throughout the country. The head of the religion was regarded by his followers as a Manifestation of God.²¹ They used Esperanto in their propaganda. In their publications they had taken some of the Baha'i principles and teachings and published them as their own.

Alexander reported the situation to Rabbānī. On January 11, 1929 his secretary, Soheil Afnān, responded that Rabbānī was “very surprised to learn that the Oomoto religion of Japan has published a statement to the effect that the Baha'i Revelation is a branch of their religion,” and ordered Alexander to issue a rebuttal (Alexander 1977, 75). Some irony may be perceived in Bahā'ī protests against the appropriation of their religion by another. In any case, all this goes far in explaining the absence of Bahā'īs from subsequent Ōmoto-sponsored interfaith events, such as the 1925 World Religious Fellowship, or its branch meeting held concurrently in Japan.

It is tempting to blame the rift between Ōmoto and the Bahā'īs on their competing claims to represent the quintessence of all religions. Yet this did not prevent Ōmoto from enjoying cordial relations with the Dàoyuàn, or other groups with similar pretensions to universality. The problem seems to have arisen from their fundamentally different notions of inter-religious dialogue. Onisaburō did not intentionally set out to offend his Bahā'ī guests; rather, he honored them in the same way that East Asian spiritualist sects customarily honored one another—by acknowledging, through a revelation, the divinity of their founder and basic principles. What he perhaps failed to appreciate was the exclusive nature of Western religious identity, and the efforts of Rabbānī to distinguish the Bahā'ī religion from other minor sects. Onisaburō's characterization of what would become *Reikai-monogatari* vol. 64 as “something like a novel” may represent his attempt to rescue the situation. For his part, Rabbānī (as we have seen) took great pains to control how his faith was presented, and approached inter-religious dialogue primarily as an exercise in public relations. We can only imagine how he must have greeted the news that Bahā' Allāh—whose depiction is avoided by Bahā'īs, even in fiction—was more or less being trance-channeled by some Japanese shaman, with no great concern for detail. Reconciliation, of a sort, only became possible after Onisaburō's death in 1947.

On August 8, 1955, two Bahā'īs (Dr. David Magarey Earl and his wife, Joy Hill Earl) attended a session of the Conference of World Religionists held at Ayabe.²² Both religions sent representatives to the founding session of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, held 1970 in Tokyo.²³ In 1993, Roberta McFarland represented the Bahā'īs at the 70th anniversary meeting

²¹ From the Arabic *maẓhar ilāhī* (“theophany”) or *ẓuhūr* (“appearance”). In Bahā'ī parlance, a “Manifestation of God” is generally a founding prophet of one of the world's major religions, the most recent of whom is said to be Bahā' Allāh.

²² Personal communication from Okuwaki Toshiomi, of Ōmoto's international department. For Bahā'ī records of the event (which do not specifically note the Ayabe session), see Sims (1998, 37; 1989, ch.46). The Ōmoto pamphlet *BankyōDōkon* lists the 1955 event as the “World Religious Congress for Peace, Ayabe Congress,” which seems to represent confusion with a similarly-named event held in 1970. According to Sims, the Conference of World Religionists took place in Tokyo (though with some sessions held elsewhere) between August 1-14. Dr. Earl formally represented the Bahā'īs at the event; also present were Agnes Alexander and Philip Marangella.

²³ The Bahā'īs were represented by Glenford E. Mitchell (then secretary of the US National Spiritual Assembly, later a member of the Universal House of Justice), Shirin Fozdar (visiting from Thailand), Toshio Suzuki (representing the Tokyo-based National Spiritual Assembly of Northeast Asia), and Rouhollah Mumtanz (Continental Counselor from 1968). See Sims (1989, 159).

of the (Ōmoto-sponsored) Esperanto-Populariga Asocio (Association for the Propagation of Esperanto).²⁴ While world peace was hardly at stake, the rift between Ōmoto and the Bahā'ī religion seems to have mended, leaving the two groups at last free to “become sister religions and foster eternal friendship.”

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** Dawei Bei*
Assistant Professor,
Hsuan Chuang University,
Hsinchu, Taiwan

²⁴ Personal communication from Mr. Okuwaki.

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