Modernity was conceived in binary oppositions, between superstition and reason, absolutism and democracy, nation and civil society, civilization and barbarism, and male and female. Proponents of modernity, as Edward Said demonstrated, managed to range a number of such oppositions together, coding reason, liberty, nation, civilization and modernity in his master narrative. Such contrasts were, for example, the Eurocentric modernity that hid from itself its darker traits, including chauvinist hatreds, industrialized warfare, racism, and antifeminism, and the degree to which the modern form of these phenomena was inextricably intertwined with the entire modernist project.

From a postmodern point of view, modernity has lacked a sense of ambiguity and irony, and suffers from limiting its typologies to mere binary oppositions, when in fact social phenomena come in threes, fours, and even higher ordinals, not just in two’s. North Atlantic modernists have also privileged the European experience of modernity in ways that seem peculiar to anyone who knows something about world history. Anthony Giddens in The Consequences of Modernity (Stanford, 1990), argues that modernity is not a static matter of binary oppositions, but is rather dialectical: Movements against absolutism give rise not only to parliamentary regimes, but also to national security states that appear to many citizens to deprive them of liberties instead of bestowing them, thus generating oppositional grassroots movements campaigning for democracy (as opposed to elitist liberalism) and workers’ rights. That is, he challenges modernists’ insistence that the contenders in political battles can be neatly divided into ‘reactionaries’ and ‘progressives’. Giddens gives the name ‘utopian realist’ to the movements, such as those of workers, women, peace groups and others, that challenge the industrial, militant nation-states of bourgeois modernity.

Islam’s encounter with nineteenth-century modernity produced not only reactionary, revivalist, millenarian, liberal and fundamentalist responses, as some have argued, but in the person of the Baha’i or Bab, a synthesis of a mixture of millenarianism, liberalism and utopian realism that later turned sharply toward a sort of fundamentalism. The latter turn has tended to obscure the original emphases of the religion’s founder, which can only be recovered through reading his voluminous letters in their nineteenth-century political and cultural context.

The Baha’i faith developed out of the esoteric, kabbalistic Shaykh movement of Shi’ite Islam founded by Muhammad Shirazi, the ‘Bab’ or door to the divine, in 1844, which raked Iran with religious ferment and turmoil, leading to the Bab’s execution in 1850. The Genesis of the Baha’i Faith in the Nineteenth Century

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The Baha’i faith, which originated in nineteenth-century Iran, poses key conundrums to our understanding of the relationship between modernity and religion in the global South.

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J. Andrew Young, 1978.

Notes