CHAPTER 4

The Baha’is of the North

Margit Warburg

In August 2013 some 350 young Baha’is from Denmark, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland convened for a three day conference in the peak of the short Nordic summer. The conference was the Baha’i Helsinki Youth Conference – one out of 114 parallel conferences held all over the world from July to October 2013.1 Towards the end of the conference a participant said,2

I used to be a shy and quiet person. But here I experienced that we all share the same vision of Bahá’u’lláh. We have risen to give our life to serving the community, by being role models for the younger ones, being spearheads of learning. We have become a unified group.

These Baha’i youth conferences, which serve the purpose of socialising the rising generation into common ideals, are but one indicator of the Baha’i religion being a well-organised, global-spanning religion. The holding of the Helsinki conference also indicates that it is meaningful to discuss the Baha’is of the Nordic countries together. The Nordic countries are perceived as culturally very similar to each other, and there are also striking parallels in the way in which the Baha’i religion was established and promoted in the Nordic countries. In all the countries the very first individuals converted in the 1920s and the 1930s, and after World War II American Baha’i missionaries sparked an effective growth in membership. Today, well-established Baha’i communities are part of the landscape of new religions in all five Nordic countries, numbering a total of about 3,800 registered members, see Table 4.1.

On a world basis the Baha’is claim some five million adherents.3 The majority live in South Asia, Africa, and South America. The Baha’is do not publish membership statistics for different regions or individual countries; however, by triangulation of numbers obtained from various sources I have estimated the number of Baha’is in Europe to at least 40,000 in 2001 (Warburg 2006: 226). It is possible that the number today has reached 50,000 but not much above that.

In the light of this, the figure of 3,800 Baha’is in the five Nordic countries is well above the European average, considering that the 26 million inhabitants of the Nordic countries constitute only about four per cent of the European population excluding Russia.

### Literature

A systematic literature survey carried out in connection with the writing of this chapter showed that apart from occasional unpublished BA and MA theses, academic studies of the individual Baha’i communities in the Nordic countries are sparse and largely represented by works of the present author (Warburg 1991; Warburg 1995; Warburg 2006: 229–423). Furthermore, Per-Olof Åkerdahl has written an entry on Baha’i in the handbook *Religion i Sverige* (2008); this book contains a section on the Swedish Baha’i community, including a brief history and some statistics. Lise Quistgaard Raben has authored a history of the Danish Baha’i community (2012). Her detailed account has a personal perspective on many events, and it places local history tightly within the global development of Baha’i as seen by a veteran, informed insider.

My own primary research has included field studies, interviews, and archival studies concentrating on the Danish Baha’i community and on the Baha’is globally. However, I have also visited the national Baha’i centres in Reykjavik (25 August 1992), Stockholm (26 May 1995) and Oslo (19 October 2000), and here I interviewed Baha’i representatives on the history and demography of these three Nordic Baha’i communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Iceland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approximate number of Baha’is</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>1080</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Million inhabitants</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>9.56</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>0.322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baha’is per million inhabitants</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>1118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*According to information given to the author by e-mail in February 2014 from the respective national Baha’i communities. The numbers include children of Baha’i families.

*Not including Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

*Not including 76 Baha’is living in the North Calotte region of Sweden and Norway who are administratively under the Finnish national spiritual assembly.*