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978-0-521-31755-9 - The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion

Peter Smith

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION



The Baha'i Faith is today a world-wide religious movement of considerable scope and dynamism. Established in most of the countries of the world, the Faith has attracted adherents from a multitude of religious and racial backgrounds, amply demonstrating the validity of its claims to universality. Teaching that their founder is the latest in a succession of messengers from God, and that his mission is the unification of all humanity in a divinely ordained Most Great Peace, the Baha'is have embarked on co-ordinated plans to expand and consolidate their community. Working to establish a Kingdom of God on Earth, they believe that the religious prophecies of all past religions are being fulfilled. Stressing the linkage between the spiritual transformation of the individual and that of society as a whole, the Baha'is propound and seek to embody teachings and principles which embrace many aspects of human life besides the specifically 'religious'. For Baha'is, the advocacy of sexual and racial equality, or of universal compulsory education, is as much part of their religious practice as is prayer or fasting or the challenges of individual morality.

Religious movements are rarely static entities. In the case of the Baha'i Faith, its short but eventful history has witnessed considerable transformation from its origins in the earlier Babi movement. The Babi religion had emerged in mid-nineteenth-century Iran as a powerful expression of the messianic expectations of Shi'i Islam. In 1844, its youthful founder, Sayyid 'Alí Muḥammad Shírání (1819–50), known as the Báb, had laid claim to be the promised one of Islam. His followers soon established a nation-wide movement which explicitly challenged the authority of the Shi'i religious leaders, who moved rapidly to oppose the movement. Aspiring to establish a theocratic state, the Babis also came into conflict with the Iranian government. The movement was then bloodily extirpated (1848–52) and the Báb himself executed. Out of the ashes of Babism, Baha'ism emerged. In the 1860s, one of the Báb's followers, Mirzá Ḥusayn 'Alí Núrí (1817–92), known as Bahá'u'lláh, attracted to

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himself the devotion of most of the Babi remnant. Claiming to be the promised one of all religions, Bahá'u'lláh promulgated a religion which stood in marked contrast to that of the Babis. In place of the militancy and religious exclusivity of the Babis, the Baha'is were enjoined to adopt an irenic attitude of religious tolerance and political quietism. In place of the messianic theocracy which the Babis had believed would soon be established in Iran, the Baha'is were advised to direct their hopes towards the future establishment of the Most Great Peace, a possibly distant vision of world-wide harmony and universal government. The theme of social reconstruction augmented the millennial vision.

When Bahá'u'lláh died in 1892, an exile in Ottoman Palestine since 1868, his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá 'Abbás (1844–1921), assumed the leadership of the movement as his father's appointed successor. Under his guidance, the Baha'i movement became established in the West. Although the new Western Baha'i communities were small by comparison with those of the East, they exerted an increasingly significant influence on the overall development of the religion as it assumed an ever more international flavour. This was particularly the case when 'Abdu'l-Bahá's successor, his grandson Shoghi Effendi Rabbání (1897–1957), undertook to replace the movement's earlier charismatic leadership with a more routinized form of administration. Subsequently, after a brief interregnum (1957–63), an elected nine-member Universal House of Justice assumed supreme authority. Extending the series of systematic plans for the propagation of the movement which had been instituted by Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice has led the Baha'is through a period of increasing expansion and international recognition. As a consequence, the social and religious basis of the Baha'i Faith has increasingly gravitated away from the land of its birth. Whatever may be the future of the Iranian Baha'i community – now beleaguered in a wave of savage persecution – the future of the Baha'i religion is no longer inextricably linked to its fortunes in Iran. The majority of Baha'is are not Iranians, and however vivid they may find the narratives of the origins of their religion, the social and religious context of that genesis must inevitably now be an alien one to them.

This present study has been written with the intention both of describing the original and changing context of the Babi and Baha'i religions, and of providing an account of the overall development of the two movements. To this end, I employ the concept of 'motif' to describe the various dominant religious concerns which have characterized the Babi and

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Baha'i religions.¹ As employed here, motifs represent fundamental patterns of religious experience which interact and change in the overall development of a religious movement. In the case of the Babi and Baha'i religions eight such motifs are identified: the regard for authoritative and charismatic leadership (the *polar* motif); the concern with structuring society according to the provisions of a holy law (*legalism*); *millenarian* expectation; the desire to engage in *social reform*; the belief in hidden salvatory knowledge (*esotericism*); the belief in the universality of God's guidance and grace to mankind (*universalism*); the belief that religious knowledge should be compatible with the rationality of the modern world (*liberalism*); and the interlinked Shi'i themes of religious martyrdom and of militant and sacrificial struggle (*holy war*). Two of these motifs – legalism and the regard for authoritative leadership – may be traced through their successive changes from Shi'ism to contemporary Baha'ism. Others are more circumscribed, with the Babi emphasis on millenarian expectation, esotericism and martyrdom continuing traditional Shi'i concerns, but later undergoing radical transformation, and standing in marked contrast to the liberalism, universalism and social reformism of modern Baha'i. These changing motifs may be seen as part of a general process of transformation, whereby what was essentially a messianic Shi'i sect has developed into a world religion.

The book is divided into three parts each with the same general pattern. Part I describes the emergence of Babism (Chapter 1), the movement's dominant religious concerns (Chapter 2), and its role and characteristics as a socio-religious movement in Iran (Chapter 3). Part II examines the emergence of the Baha'i Faith in the East (Chapter 4), its dominant religious concerns (Chapter 5), and the development of the religion in the changing context of Qajar Iran (Chapter 6). Part III deals with the transformation of Baha'i into a world religion, from its initial establishment in the West (Chapter 7), through the establishment of its administration (Chapter 8) and modern dominant concerns (Chapter 9), to its global expansion (Chapter 10). I also offer a few concluding comments in which some of the possibilities of Baha'i development are outlined.

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PART I: BABISM

1

THE BABI MOVEMENT



IRAN AND SHI'ISM

The Babi religion developed in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Iranian Shi'ism. Although rapidly diverging from Shi'i orthodoxy and making claim to be the bearers of a new religion, the early Babis continued to live largely within the conceptual universe of Shi'ism.

Iran

Three times the size of France, the land that is now Iran has only intermittently existed as a single political entity. Divided by mountains and by vast tracts of semi-desert, its component parts do not comprise a readily integrated or defensible whole. Subject to recurrent political instability and the centrifugal forces of localism and of ethnic and religious diversity, unification has been imperial rather than national in its inspiration. Under the Safavids (reigned 1501–1722), the effective founders of modern Iran, a rudimentary 'national' consciousness emerged, only to be shattered at the beginning of the eighteenth century by dynastic collapse and renewed political fragmentation. Over seventy years of recurrent war and devastation ensued, a period which was brought to a brutal end at the turn of the nineteenth century by the re-establishment of a unitary state under the tribal leaders of the Qajars (reigned 1796–1925).¹

Twelver Shi'ism

The establishment of the Safavid dynasty in 1501 had been accompanied by the establishment of Imámí or Ithná-^casharí (Twelver) Shi'ism as the

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Iranian state religion. Although only gradually adopted as the predominant religion of the Iranians, Twelver Shi'ism came to form the basis for an effective religious nationalism, marking off the mass of the Iranians from their Ottoman and Central Asian neighbours, who were predominantly members of the Sunni branch of Islam.

The origins of Twelver Shi'ism go back to the succession disputes that followed the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632. As the ideals of the early Islamic theocracy were quickly eroded, many pious Muslims had turned to the hope that some member of the Prophet's own family would supplant the rule of the Umayyad caliphs who had established their rule in AD 661, after the murder of the caliph 'Alí ibn Abí-Ṭálib, Muhammad's cousin, son-in-law, and close associate. Pious hope combined with political discontent to fuel a series of popular rebellions which eventually led to the overthrow of the Umayyads (747–50), but which failed to establish a theocratic paradise. Those who still hoped that some member of the Prophet's family would one day establish a just and godly rulership over the Muslim peoples increasingly cohered into a number of rival religious sects. These sectarians were now known as the *Shi'ā*, the 'partisans' of 'Alí and his descendants, different sects identifying different 'Alids as the putative just ruler.

Those Shi'is who came to be known as Twelvers identified a series of twelve *Imáms*, beginning with 'Alí and continuing through the line of descent from his wife Fátima, Muhammad's daughter. These Imams came to be regarded as inerrant and immaculate, the only real and rightful rulers of the Islamic community, who sustained and interpreted the faith in succession to the prophetic revelation of Muhammad. The line of Imams ended in AH 260 (AD 873) with the death of the Eleventh Imam and the mysterious disappearance of his supposed son, the Twelfth Imam. Hidden from the eyes of all but his special representatives or 'gates' (*abwáb*, sing. *báb*), the Twelfth Imam lived in concealment (*ghayba*) for a while (873–940), until the fourth gate died and the greater concealment or 'occultation' began. During this occultation, the Hidden Imam functioned as 'the *axia mundi*, the invisible ruler of the universe',² sustaining his *Shi'ā* in the realm of the spirit. He would return at the end of time as the Imam Mahdi, the divinely guided redeemer of the iniquitous world.

The ulama and dissent

In centralized Islamic societies, learning and education were traditionally dominated by religious concerns. Those who became learned were

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distinguished as members of a religiously defined status group, the *ʿulamá*. Distinctive robes and turbans were worn as signs of this status. The ulama were not a homogeneous grouping, however. Whilst many subsisted as jurisconsults, teachers, preachers and charity administrators, in Iranian Shi'ism at least, there was no clearly defined clerical career. With the exception of some Sufi leaders, recognition as a member of the ulama derived from attendance at one of the *madrásas* (seminaries), which constituted the only advanced institutes of learning. Through patronage and a few years study students might gain appointment as village or neighbourhood mullas, as teachers at the lowly Quranic schools, or as minor religious functionaries. To rise to the ranks of the higher ulama required further years of study and the acquisition of a reputation for religious learning. Unlike the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, Qajar Iran had no distinct hierarchy of state-sponsored judicial and educational posts. Thus, whilst a few of the higher ulama had stipendiary posts as Friday prayer leaders at the larger mosques (*Imám-Jum'íhs*) or as titular heads of the local ulama (*Shaykhu'l-Isláms*), most were independent jurisconsults and teachers who earned their livelihoods from a variety of fees and bequests, and in some cases from land-ownership and trade. The leading ulama also collected and disbursed the religious taxes and controlled the religious endowments which together ensured the financial independence of the ulama as an institution.

A considerable degree of political independence was also gained. At a national level, this was acquired adventitiously by the inability of the Qajar state to incorporate within its realms the *ʿAtabát*, the holy 'thresholds' in Ottoman Iraq in which many of the Shi'í Imams were buried. From an Iranian viewpoint, these clergy-dominated cities – Karbalá, Najaf, Kázimayn and Sámmará – effectively constituted an independent state free from Qajar control. At a local level, the independence of the higher clergy was acquired through their involvement in patrician politics and their deployment of their students and the local 'rowdies' (*lú'ís*) to act as their strong-arm supporters.

Comparatively free from state interference, the Shi'í ulama regulated their own institutions. Thus, at a formal level, increasing stress came to be placed on the distinction between those ulama who were qualified as *mujtabids* – that is, who had the right to make independent legal judgements (*ijtihád*) – and the rest. To become a *mujtabid* required the granting of a certificate of competence (*ijázá*) from an established *mujtabid*, but otherwise required no standardized procedure of appointment. The dominance of the *mujtabids* over the other ulama was effectively

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accomplished by the end of the eighteenth century, after a prolonged and bitter struggle with considerable recourse to physical intimidation and violence. Thereafter, the great *mujtabids* presented themselves as uniquely authoritative defenders of Islamic orthodoxy, readily gaining a place as members of the local and national notability of Qajar society. Whilst often competing between themselves for power and influence, the leading *mujtabids* came to resemble a self-perpetuating caste, linked by family ties and closely regulating the admission of new members. There was a tendency for a few *mujtabids* to be recognized as supreme exemplars, but no definite hierarchy came into being until the present century.

The rise of the *mujtabids* to dominance within the ranks of the ulama had considerable implications for religious dissent. Traditionally, Shi'ism has not been confined to a narrow orthodoxy. Although dominated by legalistic concerns, Shi'ic intellectual life has readily encompassed the implicitly dissenting traditions of speculative theology, philosophy and gnosis (*irfān*), albeit within certain limits of public expression. The dominance of the *mujtabids* – custodians of the holy law – redefined the role of dissent, leading to the persecution of the most organized traditions of intellectual dissent and putting pressure on individual exponents of speculative thought to observe strict outward conformity. This marginalization of the minority attracted by speculative thought provoked reaction, most notably amongst the adepts of Shaykhism, who powerfully challenged the intellectual control of the *mujtabids*, accusing them of narrow legalism and seeking to delegitimize their claim to unique authority.

EARLY SHAYKHISM

Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī (1753–1826) was an Arab from a small village in the Ḥasā region near the Gulf coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Whilst his family had been Shi'is for generations, he appears to have been the first of them to have become a cleric. During the early 1790s he migrated to the Ḥatabāt. With a fast-growing reputation for piety and erudition, Shaykh Aḥmad, now in his forties, began to attract a personal following, not only in his homeland, but also in southern Iraq and in Iran, in both of which he travelled extensively. Remaining in Iran from 1806 until 1822, Shaykh Aḥmad, gained considerable support, not only from the ulama, but also from various members of the Qajar family, including Fatḥ 'Alī Shāh himself and the powerful governor of Kirmanshah, Muḥammad 'Alī Mīrzā. In about 1822, he was accused of holding heretical views by Ḥājī

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Mullá Muḥammad Taqí Baraghání, one of the leading ulama of Qazvin. After a vigorous campaign of denunciation, Baraghání's views were accepted by various ulama, including several influential figures at the 'Atabát. Whilst Shaykh Aḥmad retained the sympathy of many leading ulama, the effect of this denunciation, as it gained wider support, was to mark off the particular followers of the Shaykh as being members of a separate school (*madhhab*) of Shi'ism.

This tendency towards separation increased during the period of the Shaykh's successor, the Iranian-born Sayyid Kázim Rashtí (died 1843/4). Clearly designated as the authorized expounder of the Shaykh's teachings, Sayyid Kázim provided the focus around which a distinct Shaykhi sect might emerge. Following a largely peripatetic existence, Shaykh Aḥmad had made no attempt to form his followers into a separate congregation, and there seems to have been no clear distinction made between those who were his immediate disciples and the larger group of admirers and sympathizers. Again, even after the order of excommunication had been pronounced against him by Baraghání, his prestige and influence were such that this order had only limited effect. Sayyid Kázim, by contrast, was initially a less prestigious figure amongst the ranks of the ulama and was more easily made the victim of a concerted campaign of denunciation, the distinction between the orthodox *Bálásaris* and the heterodox Shaykhis eventually coming to be generally accepted.³ Remaining for the most part in Karbalá and exercising effective leadership, Sayyid Kázim provided the amorphous group of the Shaykh's followers with a clear centre to which they might turn in response to the attacks directed against their former master. Whilst continuing to try to reintegrate the Shaykhi school within mainstream Shi'ism, Sayyid Kázim's forceful defence of the Shaykh's teachings, and the apologias written by his disciples, served only to emphasize the separate identity of the school.

Despite sustained opposition to Shaykhism on the part of certain ulama, the movement flourished under Sayyid Kázim's leadership. A considerable number of adherents were gained (or their support was consolidated) throughout Iran, as well as in the southern part of Arab Iraq. Some small towns and villages seem to have become almost entirely Shaykhi. Significantly, several Qajar courtiers and princes also became his followers, including most of the family of the crown prince, 'Abbás Mírzá. Additionally, Sayyid Kázim enjoyed the respect not only of a large number of 'orthodox' Shi'i ulama in Iran and the 'Atabát who were unwilling to accept the pronouncements of Baraghání and his allies, but also of Shi'i ulama in Syria, Arabia and India, and even of Sunni

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dignitaries, such as the mufti of Baghdad, al-Alúsi, and ʿAlí Ríza Pasha, its governor. The Sayyid also gained considerable local prominence, both as one of the leading Shiʿi ulama of the ʿ*Atabát* and as a community leader in Karbalá.

Shaykhi doctrine

Shaykh Aḥmad's role in the history of modern Shiʿi thought has yet to be properly evaluated. He has been described as an ʿ*aríf* (gnostic) amongst the ulama and an ʿ*alim* (cleric) amongst the gnostics,⁴ and it is perhaps this combination of perspectives which constituted his distinctive contribution to modern Shiʿism. Early Shaykhism, from this standpoint, may be seen as an attempted bridge between the main intellectual traditions of the contemporary Shiʿi world: seeking to reconcile revelation with the use of reason, and theology with philosophy. As such, it was a precarious vision, which, deriving much of its driving power from the particular loyalty displayed towards its founders, perished with their deaths.

Although many of Shaykh Aḥmad's views seriously diverged from those of the theosophical thinkers of the Safavid period (whom he condemned repeatedly and severely), his main intellectual roots are clearly within that same general tradition. Similarly, part at least of his appeal is likely to have stemmed from his powerful reassertion of the concerns of Shiʿi esotericism at a time when that tradition had no great master to promulgate its teachings.⁵ Shaykh Aḥmad's own prestige, erudition and pious reputation made him more than merely a theosophical master, however, and whilst Shaykhism crystallized into a distinct and anathematized school under the leadership of Sayyid Kázim, it nevertheless retained a broader appeal and importance. That this broader appeal was possible was doubtless due in part to the two leaders' facility in combining exoteric and esoteric viewpoints and statuses. Thus, both Shaykh Aḥmad and Sayyid Kázim possessed the exoteric authority of 'orthodox' ulama, as well as the esoteric authority based on their own special claims. In this regard, both were leading *mujtahids*, each with a following of theological students, lesser ulama and laity. Sayyid Kázim also acted as an important community leader. Again, whilst never entirely concealed, the full import of their esoteric teachings and claims were veiled in the obscure style of much of their writings, the Shaykhi leaders adopting the common esotericist strategy of writing and speaking in different ways for different levels of audience, reserving their more controversial teachings for the trusted audience of their closer disciples.

Central to Shaykh Aḥmad's teachings was the belief that it was essential

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for Shi'ism to be purified from intellectual innovations by a return to infallible sources of guidance. Overtly, these sources were the Quran, the *ḥadīths* (Islamic traditions), and the Imams. At the same time, however, whilst many Quranic verses were clear in their meaning and directly in harmony with reason, others were not, and these were interpreted with the aid of reason and (the Shaykh's) esoteric knowledge, which was derived from intimate spiritual communion with the Imams. Herein lay the Shaykh's evident and implicit heterodoxy, for not only was Shaykh Aḥmad's imamology highly suspect, coming perilously close to the deification of the Imams – a charge which was certainly levelled against him – but his own esoteric relationship with the Imams formed the basis for an implicit claim to unique authority. Thus, according to the Shaykh, as God's essence was totally beyond the reach and comprehension of man, it was necessary for there to be intermediaries in order for man to gain access to any of the divine attributes and teachings. These intermediaries, themselves in their essence neither God nor men, were the prophets and Imams, who, as the causal and creative agents of the Primal Will, occupied a status almost of demiurges. Given that God was inaccessible, these holy, infallible and sinless beings were the manifestations of God's grace to mankind, and as such they constituted the sole refuge for all created things. The distinctively Shaykhi addition to this schema was the doctrine of the Fourth Support. After logically reducing the traditional Shi'ī beliefs which constituted the foundations of true religion to three – beliefs in the unity of God (*tawḥīd*), in prophethood (*nubuwwa*) and in the imamate (*imāma*) – the Shaykhis added a Fourth Support (*ruknu³r-rābi^c*) of their own, namely the doctrine that there must always exist amongst the Shi'īs those capable of acting as the agents of grace between the Hidden Imam and his followers. It seems clear that, at least by their immediate disciples, Shaykh Aḥmad and after him Sayyid Kāẓim were each regarded as in some way the 'bearer' of this Fourth Support, that is, as the perfect Shi'īs who were the intermediaries of the Imam.

The nature of the Shaykhi leaders' special relationship with the Imams emerges from their own writings. Thus, Shaykh Aḥmad himself described a series of visionary experiences in which he met various Imams and also the Prophet, receiving from these personages certificates of competence (*ijāzāt*), as well as special verses by which he might consult the Imams directly when needing to elucidate some problem. He also claimed to have imbibed the saliva of the Imam Ḥasan and of the Prophet in these initiatory visions, an image redolent of the transmission of spiritual power (*baraka*). Thus whilst other ulama derived their knowledge from each