

Both violence and non-violence are important themes in the Bahá'í Faith, but their relationship is not straightforward. Violence – in the form of persecution of the Bahá'í community – is an ongoing theme in Bahá'í history, one that continues today in Iran, Yemen, and a smattering of other nations. Non-violence is a central corollary to the major principles of Bahá'í theology, which seeks to create a world of justice where violence is absolutely minimized, discriminatory treatment is eliminated, justice reigns, and opportunity for all is abundant.

But it would not be correct to attribute the Bahá'í emphasis on non-violence to be a consequence of its experience of violence. Rather, the Bahá'í scriptures¹ see violence in the world – not just against Bahá'ís, but against everyone – as being a consequence of the immature state of human society and culture. The Bahá'í scriptures claim to offer principles for transforming human character and for building a new, more mature culture and civilization where violence is minimized or eliminated. In particular, the

¹ The Bahá'í scriptures constitute the writings of the 'Alí-Muhammad of Shiraz, titled Báb (1819–50), Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí of Núr, titled Bahá'u'lláh (1817–92), and 'Abbás Effendí, titled 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921). The first two men claimed to be Manifestations of God, messengers infallibly empowered to deliver divine revelation to humanity. The third was Bahá'u'lláh's son, who said 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the Faith's authoritative and infallible interpreter. The literary corpus of each is vast: 2,000, 18,000, and 30,000 extant works respectively, involving at least 5 million, 6 million, and 5 million words respectively. While the Báb wrote numerous treatises and books, all three wrote books, essays, poetry, and especially letters, which form the bulk of their writing. They wrote in Persian, Arabic, and in a complex literary mix of both. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá also wrote tablets to Zoroastrians in “pure Persian” – that is, Persian with no use of Arabic words. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in Ottoman Turkish as well. In addition to the Bahá'í scriptures, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, wrote 36,000 works, almost all letters, totaling over 5 million words, and the Universal House of Justice, the current head of the Faith, has written or overseen the writing of innumerable letters, statements, cables, and emails. The writings of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice are not considered scripture, but they are authoritative texts (as are the scriptural works). Its vast literary corpus is an important aspect of the Bahá'í Faith to understand.

scriptures seek to define the values of a world where structural violence – social structures that perpetuate inequity and injustice, thereby causing preventable suffering – have been eliminated.² They go on to state that “God’s purpose for sending His Prophets” has always been “twofold”: to free humanity from the “darkness of ignorance”; and to “ensure the peace and tranquility of mankind, and to provide all the means by which they can be established.” They urge human beings to “regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.” They even say that “religion must be conducive to love and unity among mankind; for if it be the cause of enmity and strife, the absence of religion is preferable.”³

1 The Forerunner Movement: The Bábí Faith

The Bahá'í Faith and its antecedent movement, the Bábí Faith, arose from the Shí'í Islam of nineteenth-century Iran⁴ and was fiercely opposed by the clergy and eventually the government of the country, resulting in the deaths of thousands of believers. The founder, 'Alí-Muhammad of Shiraz (1819–50), who took the title of the Báb, made the claim that he was the Qá'im or Return of the Twelfth Imám, the messianic figure expected by the Twelver Shí'is then dominating Iran. He began his movement on May 22, 1844, at

² There are various definitions of structural violence. Here I refer to the work of Johan Galtung. See “What Is Social Violence” for a simple overview at www.thoughtco.com/structural-violence-4174956.

³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 79–80; Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 164; 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 127.

⁴ Upon the death of Muhammad (632 CE) Islam split into two major divisions, one maintaining that Muhammad had appointed his cousin and son-in-law 'Alí to be his successor as Imám (“leader”) of the Faith, the other maintaining that the community could choose a Caliph (“successor” or “deputy”) to lead them. Throughout most of Islamic history, the Shi'ites have been the minority. Since the sixteenth century they have dominated Iran. The form of Shi'ism in that country maintains that Muhammad was succeeded by twelve infallible and sinless Imáms, and that the twelfth one will return at the end of time.

the age of twenty-four. In the next six years he gradually and progressively revealed his claim in his extensive writings – thousands of letters, Qur'án commentaries, treatises, and prayers, of which over 2,000 works and 5 million words are still extant – to be a Manifestation of God of stature as great as Muhammad, receiving revelation as profound as the Qur'án.⁵

Such a polarizing message both attracted and repelled. Some seminarians were enchanted by the power of the Báb's writing in both Arabic and Persian and went out to proclaim the new faith, attracting perhaps a hundred thousand out of Iran's population of around 5 million. Urban merchants, artisans, and the poor became his followers. Some villagers converted, usually through members of their local mosque. Rural tribesmen were less successfully reached. Notably, at least one Iranian Jew and one Iranian Zoroastrian converted, which reflected the faith's desire to reach beyond religious difference and create a diverse community. The teachings of the Báb were not known in detail, however, because only hand copies of a few of his writings were available – the Báb was imprisoned in 1845 – and there was no opportunity to organize communities because persecution began immediately.

The Shí'í clergy were the immediate opponents of the Bábí movement because the Báb's messianic claim, if accepted, would have stripped them of their authority. Islam had a long history of false claimants who often used their claim to foment rebellion. Under pressure from the clergy, the royal government put the Báb under house arrest in 1845, transferred him to remote castles in the mountains of Azerbaijan in the northwestern corner of the country in 1847, put him on trial for blasphemy in 1848, and executed him in 1850. The Bábí community was under able leadership at first from several of the “Letters of the Living” the Báb had appointed, and they circulated hand copies of what writings of his they had. They were also able to maintain limited correspondence with him and on one occasion one was even able to visit him.

⁵ The Bahá'í authoritative texts use the terms prophet, messenger, and Manifestation somewhat interchangeably, but nevertheless recognize a distinction between the major prophets who establish a new religion (like Moses) and lesser prophets who work under the shadow of a major prophet (like Isaiah or Ezekiel). In this essay, the term “Manifestation” is restricted in use to refer to the founders of religions only.

2 The Writings of the Báb

The Báb's writings as they relate to violence and non-violence have been subject to various interpretations. They contain the Arabic word *jihád*, which literally means "struggle or striving to achieve something." In Islam it carries a multitude of meanings including striving to serve God and control one's ego and passions; non-violent defense of one's faith through such efforts as preaching and writing; defensive military action to protect the Muslim community from violent attack; and, finally, offensive warfare against an enemy of the Faith. In Islam it is often divided into two types: an inner moral or spiritual struggle; and an outer struggle, usually using arms.

In his earlier writings the Báb often endorsed basic Islamic teachings (including *jihád*) so that "the people might not be seized with perturbation."⁶ But his later writings (1848–50), in particular the Persian *Bayán*, the principal repository of the Báb's legal teachings – the main source of the Bábí sharí'ah – provides a complex elaboration on the subject of *jihád*. Initially, the writings appeared to endorse violence, but they subjected it to so many restrictions as to render it impossible and countered it with numerous peaceable, moral strivings. Among the commandments in the *Bayán*, for example, the Báb commands that all non-Bábís be expelled from the five main provinces of Iran, that their property be confiscated, and that their books be burned. But the Báb adds that no individual Bábí can initiate such a *jihád*. Instead it is conditioned on two prerequisites: "the exaltation of the Cause of the Báb"; and that a Bábí state had already been created. The Báb also says that the "exaltation" of his cause will follow after the "exaltation" of the cause of the Promised One, who would appear in nine or nineteen years after him. In other words, the Báb anticipated that another Manifestation would appear first and that such a Manifestation would succeed to spread his cause. Such a Manifestation would also have the divine authority to accept or nullify all the Báb's teachings. Consequently, the Báb appears to have created purely symbolic principles of violent *jihád* – ones that could never be utilized by the Bábís themselves – as a way to use existing Islamic principles to point to the coming of his successor.⁷ In many of the Báb's

⁶ The Báb, *Dalá'il-i-Sab'ih*, in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, 119.

⁷ Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 364.

later works he wrote extensively about the importance of the next Manifestation of God, whom he referred to as “He whom God shall make manifest.” He implied the Manifestation would be called “Bahá” and enjoined acceptance of him in no uncertain terms.

The teachings related to violent jihád are actually a small portion of the Bayán. The bulk of the work elaborates on the basic ethical principle that, even if people wrong you, you must forgive them, do good to them, and behave toward them as God would when he gives grace to those who ungratefully repudiate Him. In short, they call for an inner jihád of spiritual transformation.⁸ One must be content with God, with the laws of God, with one’s parents, and with oneself. The Báb calls for perfection and refinement in a variety of senses: in keeping rivers pure and unpolluted; in producing crafts and goods of the highest quality; in building beautiful dwellings with doors high enough for even the tallest person to enter; in the creation of beautiful art; in bathing regularly; in wearing clean and spotless clothing; in the spread of prosperity to all; and even in the drinking of tea. He forbade causing grief and sadness to anyone and said this was “doubly binding” in the treatment of women, implying a new status of women in society. He also forbade the physical punishment and humiliation of children. The Báb saw all of these actions as expressions of the beauty and virtue of God in one’s life and as forms of worship.⁹ He sought to spiritualize one’s understanding of the world, including a symbolic description of time itself through the introduction of a calendar of nineteen months, each with nineteen days, with the days and months named after attributes of God.¹⁰ In short, the Báb sought to create an entirely new sort of community, one focused on unity, love, and service to others and one where there would be no role for violence, except perhaps occasionally in the restraint of criminals. In this

⁸ Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 302–3. ⁹ Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 303–25.

¹⁰ The Badí’ calendar established by the Báb and accepted by Bahá’u’lláh is the standard calendar used by the Bahá’í Faith today. It has nineteen months of nineteen days (which total 361 days) with four additional days to bring the total to 365 days (five additional days in a leap year). Months are named for attributes of God such as Bahá (splendor), Jalál (glory), Jamál (beauty), ‘Azamat (grandeur), Núr (light), etc.

larger context of love and peace, any teachings about violent jihád are utterly incongruous.

While the Báb did not outright proclaim a new status for women, he did recognize one woman as a member of his inner circle of disciples, one of the nineteen Letters of the Living. Ṭáhirih (ca. 1814–52) came to play a very prominent role in the leadership. She was one of the three hosts at an important conference of prominent Bábís at a hamlet named Badasht, which had as one of its purposes the implementation of the teachings in the Bayán. She understood that implementation of the Bayán meant a break with Islam. One day she appeared unveiled before the men of the gathering, proclaiming that it was a new day. One man, shocked by her exposed face, slit his own throat and ran from the meeting. Others immediately abandoned the Bábí Faith and left. But for most it was the decisive event that proclaimed their independence from the Islamic shari'ah. The fact that a woman brought about the break from Islam has become an important fact for Bahá'ís, as is the fact that the conference occurred just weeks before the Seneca Falls Convention in upstate New York, which symbolically marked the beginning of the struggle for women's rights in the United States. Ṭáhirih's last words, right before she was strangled to death for being a prominent Bábí in 1852, allegedly were "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women."¹¹ The significance of the emancipation of woman to the issue of violence is twofold: first, that women are often the greatest recipients of physical violence, and their emancipation is a factor in the reduction of that violence; second, that it is impossible to create a society free of structural violence as long as women are oppressed.

3 The Bábí Community and Persecution

The Bábí community's familiarity with the Báb's teachings was limited by its very short duration (six years from the Báb's declaration to his execution), its lack of access to his writings, and the severe persecution

¹¹ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 32–3, 75; Nabíl-i-Zarandí, *The Dawn-Breakers*, 293–6.

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it soon faced. In two small cities – Zanján in northern Iran and Nayríz in the south – mosque leaders became Bábís, they were followed into the Bábí Faith by their congregations, and as a result, an entire urban quarter became Bábí. In the case of Zanján, the Bábís were Turkic speaking and followers of Akhbári Shí'ism, rather than the Usúlí Shí'ism that dominated the rest of Iran, so preexisting ethnic and religious differences were involved. In both cities, opposition forced the Bábís to barricade themselves into their quarter and defend themselves, the army arrived, a bloody siege of many months ensued, and thousands of men, women, and children lost their lives.

A third upheaval wiped out much of the movement's remaining leadership. In early 1848, Mullá Ḥusayn, the most important of the Letters of the Living, met with the Báb in his castle imprisonment in northwestern Iran and then went to the city of Mashhad in the far northeastern corner of Iran to proclaim the *qiyáma* or "Day of Resurrection." Notably, no violent *jihád* was declared by the Báb or his followers. Quddús, the other leading Letter of the Living, set out westward from Mashhad in June 1848 with a band of men flying the black standard, a flag denoting the latter days. As they marched westward they were joined by other Bábís and by excited converts. In October, as they reached the forests along the Caspian Sea, Iran's shah died in Tehran, and the new shah was frightened that their symbolic act demonstrating the start of the latter days would initiate a rebellion. Eventually the band of men, led by Mullá Ḥusayn and Quddús, was forced to stop, defend itself, and fortify itself in an ancient shrine to a prominent scholar named Shaykh Ṭabarsí. An army of 12,000 men pinned them down. Their sorties into the army camp allowed them to capture ammunition and supplies and demoralize the professional army. After a six-month siege that claimed the lives of both Mullá Ḥusayn and Quddús, the survivors surrendered on the promise that they would be allowed to go free, but the army massacred them instead.

All three cases – Nayríz, Zanján, and Shaykh Ṭabarsí – involved defensive action on the part of Bábís, who were surrounded and under attack from the Iranian army. They were essentially examples of defensive *jihád* as would be practiced in Islam, though no *jihád* was declared. The symbolic power of their sacrifice for the new religion was not lost on

subsequent generations, however, and their stories have been transmuted into glorious examples of martyrdom for the faith. They serve to inspire Bahá'ís right up to this day, not to go out and fight but rather to be living sacrifices in their service to Bahá'u'lláh.¹²

4 Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí of Núr, Bahá'u'lláh

One of the earliest followers of the Báb was Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí (1817–92), who later took the title of Bahá'u'lláh and founded the Bahá'í Faith. He was a member of the aristocratic class, his father being a minister of the Shah. Bahá'u'lláh turned down offers for various government positions and devoted himself to the care of Tehran's poor. In adulthood, Bahá'u'lláh wrote about a remarkable experience he had as a child. At one point he read a book about the Medina period of Muhammad's life and the betrayal of the defenses of that city by the Banú Qurayzah, a Jewish tribe, when the Meccans attacked. After the Meccans were unable to take Medina and returned home, the Banú Qurayzah were brought to justice for their treason. A judge who was otherwise a friend of the tribe decreed (possibly based on the commands to the Israelite army in Deuteronomy 20:12–14) that all the men should be beheaded and all their women, children, and property should be distributed to the Muslim army. Muhammad and the tribe accepted this decision, and Muhammad carried out the punishment. Bahá'u'lláh, however, was profoundly grieved and beseeched God “to bring about whatever would be the cause of love, fellowship, and unity among all the peoples of the earth.” Before sunrise on his birthday (we are not told the year) he experienced a transformation that recurred repeatedly over the next twelve days, “after which waves of the sea of utterance became manifest and the effulgences of the orb of assurance shone forth until it culminated in the advent of His Revelation.”¹³

¹² The story of the defenders of Nayríz, Zanján, and Shaykh Ṭabarsí was a central part of an early translation into English of *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, a translation published specifically to inspire the Western Bahá'ís to serve their new religion.

¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Nader Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization*, 305.

In short, Bahá'u'lláh is saying that this event, apparently in his childhood, triggered his first experience of revelation. This would have been years before the Báb declared his mission in 1844 and decades before the symbolic beginning of Bahá'u'lláh's mission in 1853 or his first public declaration of prophethood in 1863. The trigger was an event that represented the divine will in the seventh century – the punishment of an entire tribe for treason in the midst of a violent, lawless world – but which was an ethically inadequate response based on the needs of the modern world.

Bahá'u'lláh goes on to note that his writings provided “that which is the cause of unity and fellowship.”¹⁴ By the time of his passing in 1892, he had composed at least 18,000 works (mostly letters, referred to as “tablets”) totaling over 6 million words.¹⁵ He is known to have composed tablets as early as 1848 at Badasht, but the oldest extant text, a mystic poem titled the *Rashh-i-Amá* (sometimes translated “Sprinklings from the Cloud of Unknowing”), dates to his imprisonment in the Black Pit of Tehran in late 1852. It marked the symbolic beginning of his ministry.

After his release from the Black Pit, Bahá'u'lláh was exiled to Ottoman Iraq, where he arrived in the spring of 1853. Because of contention caused by his half brother and disunity in the Bábí community of Baghdad, he left the city for two years in the mountains of Kurdistan, a period somewhat similar to Jesus's forty days in the wilderness. Upon his return to Baghdad in 1858, Bahá'u'lláh penned several significant works focusing on the spiritual journey of the believer. The Hidden Words provided a series of pithy ethical and spiritual aphorisms “revealed unto the Prophets of old” but “clothed” in the “garment of brevity.” It called on people to “possess a pure kindly and radiant heart,” noted that the “best beloved” of all things in God's sight is “justice,” warned people to “breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art thyself a sinner,” proclaimed death “a messenger of joy to thee,” and reminded the believer to “busy not thyself with this world, for

¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization*, 305.

¹⁵ The latest estimates of the quantity of writings created by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and currently available in the archives of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, are found in the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice to the Universal House of Justice, October 1, 2010.

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with fire We test the gold and with gold We test Our servants.” It repeatedly emphasized that people are “noble” and “rich,” that they are immortal, and that they can find the divine and all divine qualities within themselves. It rejected confession of one’s sins to others and urged the believer to “bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.”¹⁶

Bahá'u'lláh's mystic work called *The Seven Valleys* was revealed for Shaykh Muhiyud-Dín, a Sufi of the Qádirí order. Structured similarly to Farídu'd-dín Attár's *The Conference of the Birds* and utilizing Sufi technical terminology, it described the seven “stages that mark the wayfarer's journey from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland.” The *Four Valleys*, a work revealed for yet another prominent Sufi, Shaykh 'Abdu'r-Rahmán Tálabání of Kirkúk, noted that “those who progress in mystic wayfaring are of four kinds” and explored the nature of each.¹⁷

The *Gems of Divine Mysteries* continued on the theme of spiritual development, but it also explained how the Báb was the promised Qá'im of Shí'í Islam. It offered commentaries on qur'ánic and biblical texts and interpretations of such concepts as resurrection, the Day of Judgment, and life after death. The *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (*The Book of Certitude*), revealed in January 1861, capped this period of Bahá'u'lláh's life with a lengthy and extensive interpretation of qur'ánic and biblical prophecies, explanations about the crucial importance of prayer and fasting, and elucidation about the spiritual journey of the soul. A subtheme of the work is Bahá'u'lláh's messianic secret, hints of his future claim to be “He whom God shall make manifest,” the messianic successor of the Báb.

An important subsection of the work, often called “The Tablet of the True Seeker,” addresses the true nature of spiritual striving, *jihád* in the inner, personal, non-violent sense. In the original Persian one can see references to the one who conducts personal *jihád*, the *mujáhid*, as well as the qur'ánic term *jáhadú*, referring to “effort” or “striving”:

¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic, nos. 1, 2, 27, 32, 55, 13, 14, 31.

¹⁷ *The Seven Valleys*, 4; *The Four Valleys*, 49.