

THE BAHÁ'IS OF IRAN

Socio-historical studies

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ANATOMY OF PREJUDICE

Reflections on secular anti-Baha'ism in Iran

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No Prophet is accepted in his own country.
Luke 4:24

The Baha'i religion challenges one of the key tenets of Islam: that Muḥammad was the last of the prophets (*khātam al-anbīā*). It is thus as impossible for a Muslim believer to admit the divine mission of Baha'ullah, as it is for a Jew to recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah, or for a Christian to concede that Mānī or Muḥammad were the recipients of divine revelations that superseded the message of Christ. In the Abrahamic tradition, a religion can make a place for preceding ones, but not for one that, implicitly, declares it to be obsolete. In the Middle Ages, Christians did not tolerate Muslims in their midst in Europe, as their expulsion from Spain shows, and in the nineteenth century the prophet Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon religion, was killed by a lynch mob while jailed in Carthage, Illinois; his followers found peace and security only in distant and inhospitable Utah.¹ A traditional Muslim's hostility to the Baha'i Faith, a creed that is from the point of view of Islam by definition heretical, is therefore not astonishing.² But, as Chesterton reminds us, no heretic has ever thought of himself as a heretic (Chesterton 1923: 11), and a secular attitude to religion can be expected to entail a definition of religion that is not informed by the tenets of one *particular* religion. One widely accepted definition is that of Emile Durkheim, who defined religion as 'a system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community . . . all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim 1965: 62). Consequently, 'there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion' (Durkheim 1965: 15). Which means that a secular Iranian could be logically expected to grant the Baha'i religion as much respect, or, for that matter, disrespect, as Islam or the so-called 'recognized' minority religions of Iran.

The real mystery is therefore not believing Muslims' antipathy to the Baha'i Faith,³ but secular and anti-clerical Iranians' frequent hostility to it. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that until very recently any discussion of the Baha'is and their religion that did not use abusive, disparaging, or at least sarcastic language was suspected of being an apologia, and that any writer or speaker who talked about Baha'is in respectful or even in a merely matter-of-fact way was suspected of being a Baha'i.⁴ While secular opponents of Iran's Islamist regime are quick to condemn its human rights abuses, the murder of close to 300 Baha'is since the revolution has elicited relatively little public outrage from non-Baha'i Iranian defenders of human rights.⁵ As late as 1998, while Iranians both inside and outside Iran waxed eloquent about 'civil' society, the killing of five Muslim-identified dissidents generated far more criticism than the contemporaneous renewal of attacks against Baha'is.⁶ This silence was broken by Shirin Ebady, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, who in her keynote address to the Fifth Biennial Conference on Iranian Studies in 2004 said: 'the rights of the followers of other beliefs, people such as the Baha'is in Iran . . . are overlooked and neglected' (Ebady 2004: 18).⁷

Many secular Iranians find it difficult to approach the Baha'i religion in an emic way, in other words, to accept that the Baha'i Faith is a religion simply because Baha'is *act* like a religious community – and, one might add, have often paid with their lives for doing so. Looked at from a global perspective, new religions are not a rare phenomenon, and they are still sprouting up. Mormons were once reviled in the United States, but today they are respected members of the American nation, and are envied for their higher life expectancy and lower incidence of diseases. In Iran, the Ilāhī sect (an offshoot of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq that has effected a rapprochement with Twelver Shi'ism) has been growing since the revolution without eliciting the same negative reaction (Mir-Hosseini 1997: 175–176; 185–192), although it should be noted that no new members have been officially admitted to the Baha'i community of Iran since the revolution of 1978–79. Baha'is and their religion have been a somewhat taboo topic in Iranian studies, which is all the more astonishing as Baha'is are much more integrated into the mainstream of Iranian life than other, 'recognized', religious minorities.⁸ One indicator of this is the much higher incidence of mixed marriages with Muslims among them. So why do so many secular Iranians evince misgivings about Baha'is?

A sober discussion of the place of the Baha'i religion in Iranian society is not helped by the fact that, as Denis MacEoin has pointed out, 'Baha'i studies' is a tiny field, whose practitioners are mostly either Baha'is or ex-Baha'is.⁹ While one might agree or disagree with the implication that scholarship by Baha'is or ex-Baha'is on issues pertaining to the faith is *necessarily* biased, commitment, disillusion, and disappointment can confer a certain emotional charge to one's analysis, especially in our post-modern

ing for objectivity.¹⁰ ... the very possibility, or indeed desirability, of striving for objectivity.¹⁰

The object of this chapter is not state attitudes toward Baha'is, but social attitudes. This is not to say that state attitudes do not matter: Nāṣir al-Dīn Shah's Iran persecuted Babis and Baha'is, under Rīdā Shah all Baha'i-run schools in Iran were closed down, including the famous Tarbiyat boys' and girls' schools in Tehran, and under the last Shah the Hazrat al-Quds (the Baha'i community centre in Tehran) was partially demolished, and the state at times tolerated the most vicious anti-Baha'i propaganda and economic boycotts.¹¹ Under the Islamic Republic one Baha'i in a thousand has been executed for his or her religious beliefs, representing the largest proportion of any religious group. But state attitudes have been studied elsewhere,¹² for which reason here they are not mentioned except in passing.

It would seem that there are three basic secular anti-Baha'i lines of argumentation. The first asserts that Baha'is (and other religions and sects) are causes of division. On that basis, many go farther to claim that Baha'is have been used by foreign powers in ways that are harmful for the national interest of Iran. Finally, it is often asserted that Baha'is were disproportionately represented in the inner circles of power, the assumption being that those who were in key positions used their political influence to advance the interests of their community. We will look at these arguments in turn, before attempting an explanation of the phenomenon.

Anti-Baha'i arguments

Causing Division in the Nation

In this line of argument, Baha'is are considered as a manifestation of a phenomenon that also includes Shaykhism and Isma'ilism. One very influential proponent of this view is the prominent and highly influential Iranian historian Firaydūn Ādamīyat, who wrote in 1944:

The innovations of the Bab caused religious dissension in Iran, and what greater calamity is there than when a nation wallows in religious beliefs and wastes its time on [religious] disputes that lack the slightest scientific value. . . .

As long as Iranians do not come to see the truth behind the many rebellions that were staged in the country in the 13th century of the *hijra*, and as long as religious beliefs do not crumble as a result of familiarity with the modern sciences, these dangerous dissensions will not disappear.

(Ādamīyat 1944: 258)

Similarly, Aḥmad Kasravī, wrote in the 1940s that Baha'ism was based on Babism, which was based on Shaykhism, which was based on Shi'i messianism, and since the latter was false, all that was built upon it was false as well (Kasravī 1996: 61–62).

Conspiracy Theories

Together with Jews and freemasons, Baha'is figure very prominently in Iranian conspiracy belief.¹³ In the above-mentioned work by the historian Ādamīyat, he avers that Baha'is were first supported by the Russians and later by the British, and concludes:

If the Babi and Baha'i religions had not acquired a political coloration, and if the hands of the foreigners had not watered its roots, they would certainly have been buried in the nooks and crannies of this vast land, like the thousands of other sects that spring up every now and then in this or that corner of Iran. Then, they would not have caused all this brouhaha.

(Ādamīyat 1944: 258)

Aḥmad Kasravī, for his part, writes:

It is indisputable that Baha'is are the enemies of the masses . . . and that they wish them ill from the bottom of their hearts. The reason is that they have suffered tremendously and in the past hundred years have not been able to gain freedom for themselves, which means that in order to achieve freedom they have to hope for the country's breakdown.¹⁴

(Kasravī 1996: 99–100)

Unlike other anti-Baha'i writers, Kasravī acknowledges the suffering of Babis and Baha'is (Kasravī 1996: 50–51), but ascribes it to the 'people', who 'never miss an opportunity to harm them' (Kasravī 1996: 99).

The foundational text of the attribution of conspiratorial proclivities to Baha'is is a fictitious memoir attributed to Prince Dimitri Ivanovich Dolgorukov, who was Russian ambassador to Persia in 1846–54. In it, Dolgorukov purportedly describes how he created the Babi-Baha'i religion so as to weaken Iran and Shi'ism. This document is in many ways a functional equivalent of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (which was first circulated in Iran in the late 1930s), and although it was soon shown to be a forgery,¹⁵ it is still reprinted on occasion and referred to in anti-Baha'i polemics.

Ultimately, it is the Baha'is' patriotism that is impugned. While it is true that historically Baha'is have shown no xenophobia and that their leaders

have no record of fighting the imperial powers, the Baha'i leaders' dealings with outside powers have to be viewed (and if one is so inclined, judged) in the context of their times, which were marked by widespread persecution in Iran.

It is ironic that while Baha'is were suspected of anti-Iranian activities in Iran, in neighbouring Iraq they were also suspect and liable to be arrested and killed ('Alīkhānī 1993: 70). Under the Ba'thists, sweeping pardons or exemptions from prison sentences invariably excluded 'those who [were] sentenced for cases of espionage, masonry, Bahā'iyya and sabotage' (al-Khalīl 1990: 135).

Prominence in the Shah's Regime

The final justification one often hears for anti-Baha'i sentiment is their prominence in key positions under the Shah. This view is common among secular critics of the Shah's regime but could be found even among people who occupied high positions in it. Thus in the summer of 1973, the influential Minister of Court, Asadullāh 'Alam, wrote in his diary:

Today I went to the celebration of the birthday of the Imam of the Age at Gulistan Palace. Usually I do not attend the religious ceremonies of the Court, as I have no time. But this feast day I always attend, to distinguish myself from the Baha'is. These fatherlandless (*bī-vaṭān*) Baha'is have infiltrated all walks of public life. It is thought that half the cabinet is Baha'i, causing a lot of dissatisfaction among the people. General Ayādī, the Shah's personal physician, is known to be a Baha'i, which hurts the Shāhanshāh a lot.¹⁶

('Alīkhānī 1995: 166)

Oddly enough, it seems that there is not a single empirical study that would endeavour to ascertain the truth of this often asserted claim. One problem that arises is the definition of 'Baha'i'. Islam is in sociological terms a 'church': a person with at least one Muslim progenitor is considered a Muslim,¹⁷ apostasy is potentially punishable by death, and one remains a Muslim whether one performs the duties of a Muslim or not. Baha'is, by contrast, are in sociological terms more akin to a 'sect', which is 'a voluntary association and admits only persons with specific religious qualifications' (Weber 1978: 56).¹⁸ In other words, one normally chooses to become, remain, or cease to be a Baha'i, although one can also be expelled.¹⁹ Many people of Muslim background, however, seem to project a Muslim understanding of community membership to Baha'is, whereby individuals are considered Baha'is if one of their parents happens to have been one, or if they themselves had been one at some point. Baha'is use the term *Bahā'izāda*, meaning child of a Baha'i, for people with a Baha'i background who are not themselves

members of the religious community, a term for which there is no Muslim equivalent.²⁰ With these caveats in mind, let us first look at the presence of Baha'is, real or imagined, in the inner circle of the Shah's regime, and then try to interpret the reactions they elicited.

It is true that some Baha'is occupied a few sensitive positions in the 1960s and 1970s. The best known was the Shah's personal physician, General 'Abd al-Karīm Ayādī. There were a number of other Baha'i army officers, and Baha'is were also numerous in the National Iranian Oil Company. Paradoxically, the fact that the Baha'i Faith was not officially recognized as a minority religion allowed its adherents to occupy positions of influence, since officially they were not members of a non-Muslim minority. While Farhang Mihr, arguably Iran's most prominent Zoroastrian before the revolution, could not become minister of finance and headed the ministry while the prime minister was acting minister of finance (Alphonse 2000: 78–107), Asadullāh Ṣanī'ī could become minister of defence. And while the Baha'i community of Iran revoked Ṣanī'ī's administrative rights within the Baha'i community (*tard-i idārī*) for having accepted a political (as opposed to bureaucratic) appointment, he continued to be associated in the public mind with his earlier religion, for reasons pointed out earlier.

Others who were associated with the religion were either *Bahā'izādas*, former Baha'is, or unconnected with the religion altogether. The best example for the first category was Prime Minister Amīr-'Abbās Huvaydā, one of Iran's longest-serving prime ministers (1965–1977). As Abbas Milani has conclusively shown in his recent biography, his father had been a Baha'i but had left the faith, and Huvaydā himself was not religious in any way while acting in a way that a Muslim whose faith is not strong is expected to behave in a Muslim society, in the sense that he did not make his disbelief public and paid lip service to Islam to the point where he actually went on a pilgrimage to Mecca (Milani 2000).²¹ Fu'ād Rawḥānī, another high-level technocrat of those years who was the first secretary general of OPEC (1961–64), had been brought up as a Baha'i but had stopped identifying with it by the time he entered politics. In fact, in his post-revolutionary exile he wrote a book about the Qur'an (Milani 2005: 81–89).²² Mahnāz Afkhamī, Iran's first minister of women's affairs, is the daughter of a Baha'i mother and a Shaykhi father, while Iran's first female cabinet member, Farrukhrū Pārsā, also widely rumoured to belong to the community and executed soon after the revolution in 1979, had no connection to it at all. Allegations such as 'Alam's that 'half the cabinet' was Baha'i are therefore fanciful and, given the persecution Baha'is have suffered since 1979, highly irresponsible exaggerations.

The most unpopular official identified with the Baha'i Faith was Parvīz Thābitī, a high-ranking official of the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, who was that agency's public face on account of his appearances on national television as a *maqām-i amniātī* (security official). Thābitī had indeed been brought up

as a Baha'i, but he left the faith and was not an active member of the community by the time of his employment with the secret police.

Even if Baha'is had been as numerous in the inner circles of the regime as was claimed, from a strictly secular point of view this should have been objectionable only if it could be proven that they were less qualified for the jobs they were doing than Muslim-identified Iranians, a contention for which there is no evidence. While Iran under the Shah was certainly not a meritocracy, one of the criteria by which those who served the regime were chosen was reliability, and given their precarious situation in society, Baha'is were trusted by the Shah. In fact, it could be argued that all those with a Baha'i connection were among the least corrupt members of the Shah's circle, and someone like Fu'ād Rawḥānī is still widely admired for his administrative skills and cultured personality. The one exception seems to have been General Ayādī, whose business interests raised eyebrows.

More fundamentally, however, the fallacy of the argument can be shown by turning it around. Even if we were to agree that half the cabinet was Baha'i, this means that the other half was presumably Muslim, since members of recognized minorities could not accede to cabinet positions. Why does the latter fact not lead to resentment against Muslims? Presumably because being Muslim is 'normal'. But the mere fact of considering the religious background of the majority 'normal' is tantamount to Othering those who are of a different religion, which shows that resentment against Baha'is cannot *result* from their prominence in the inner circles of power and in fact is what renders this prominence politically objectionable in the first place. After all, few, if any, people objected to the prominence of graduates of Dār al-Funūn and Alburz high schools in the political elite (Zonis 1971: 168–169). In other words, one finds the disproportionate presence of members of a minority in high office only objectionable if one has a low opinion of that minority to begin with. In the United States, for instance, Unitarians have been disproportionately represented in the Senate, without this ever becoming a political issue or leading to anti-Unitarian polemics. And this, although most Unitarians deny the divinity of Christ, a belief to which most Americans probably subscribe. There is of course the crucial difference that the United States does not have an established religion but that Iran does, but to the extent that an established religion entails discrimination against those citizens who happen not to adhere to it, one would expect an honest and intellectually coherent secularist not to invoke that constitutional arrangement in defence of a type of discrimination that violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Iran is a signatory.

Anti-Baha'i *ressentiment* was also caused by the existence of a small number of very rich Baha'i businessmen, whose success was probably ascribed to their good connections. The most talked about were Ḥabīb Thābit and Hujabr Yazdānī.²³ While the former was generally well respected except by those who held his faith against him, few admire the business practices of

the latter, which are deplored by many Baha'is in private conversation. But there were, and, more importantly, are, plenty of Muslims whose practices do not conform to traditional Islamic business ethics, and no one would impute such businessmen's ways to their religion. *Ressentiment* was also probably caused by the perception that Baha'is were generally better off than the rest of the population, a perception that was probably due to a somewhat greater awareness of hygiene and perhaps a higher level of education among Baha'is.²⁴ One might even wonder whether Iranian Baha'is' frequently *soigné* appearance may not have contributed to generating an elitist image of them.²⁵

One final impetus for anti-Baha'ism is their perceived conservatism. Although a few men of Baha'i background did join the Tūda party and other leftist organizations, the community's disinclination to get involved in partisan politics was often interpreted as a preference for the status quo. In the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, criticism of the Baha'is in the Confederation of Iranian Students centred on this point.²⁶

While the reign of the last Shah was in many ways a golden age for Iran's religious minorities, in the case of the Baha'is the picture is mixed. True, Baha'is did find easy employment in the oil company and in the army, but in the latter they had to contend at times with Muslim superiors who disliked them for their faith. One Colonel Mu'minī, for instance, was put under arrest at the garrison for a month as punishment for having allowed Baha'i recruits to go home for a religious holiday.²⁷ In academia Baha'is were present but occasionally viewed with suspicion. In the 1950s the Yale historian Firuz Kazemzadeh was denied a teaching position in Iran because of his faith (Frye 2005: 100), and in the 1970s at least one university was pressured by SAVAK to avoid appointing Baha'i professors if they were not indispensable, as that would elicit a hostile reaction from the students.²⁸

Let us now attempt to explain the above attitudes.

Nationalism and anti-cosmopolitanism

I would like to suggest that the anti-Baha'i prejudices of many secular Iranians derive from the anti-cosmopolitan outlook of Iranian nationalism. I will first discuss Baha'i cosmopolitanism, then offer a few thoughts on Iranian anti-cosmopolitanism, and conclude with an alternative view of Baha'is' connection with Iran.

Baha'i cosmopolitanism

The Baha'i Faith is explicitly cosmopolitan in its orientation. It affirms the unity of mankind, equality of all races, gender equality, calls for an international auxiliary language (Esperanto was for some time supported), and even advocates world government. To the extent that it spread to the United

States very early and that many members of the second generation of Baha'i community leaders in Iran had enjoyed an American education (Hollinger 2006), the Baha'i religion spans the Western world and the Third World to a degree that Islam, which remains essentially a Third World religion,²⁹ does not. Moreover, Iran's Baha'is adopted English as their primary foreign language at a time when most other educated Iranians learned French, which gave them an early advantage in dealing with Westerners when English replaced French in Iran sometime after World War II. Moreover, at equal levels of religious observance and commitment, Iranian Baha'is are more at ease in their interactions with Westerners than Iranian Muslims, perhaps because they lack the concept of *nijāsāt* (ritual impurity, a quality non-Muslims have in common with pigs and dogs according to many Shi'i *mujtahids*, including Khumaynī), and it is perhaps precisely the effortless social ease with which Baha'is seem to bridge what leftists and nationalists perceive to be a gap between Westerners and Iranians³⁰ that breeds resentment: Hamid Dabashi, for instance, has disparaged their 'graceless universalism'.³¹

The cosmopolitan values of Baha'is find a reflection in the film *Bāshū*, whose writer/director, Bahrām Baydā'i, is of Baha'i background without being an active member of the community.³² The very idea of making an Arab-Iranian boy the main and title character of a film produced during the Iraq-Iran War and having that war as a backdrop, is bold and goes against the grain of Persian nationalism, which, although not espoused by the Iranian state during the war, went through a revival among secular Iranians in the 1980s. *Bāshū* faces skin colour prejudice, a reality of Iranian life few have acknowledged, and finds refuge with a strong and beautiful woman in Gilan. The film acknowledges the multilingual character of Iranian society, which most secular Iranian nationalists deplore or feign to ignore, but points out the practical usefulness of a common language for everyone when Arab-speaking *Bāshū* and his Gīlakī-speaking tormenters find out that they can communicate in Persian, an epiphany which puts an end to their fighting.³³

Iranian nationalism and the internal other

Iranian nationalism, which has been espoused by a majority of secular Iranians, has contained strong xenophobic elements from the beginning.³⁴ While hostility to Arabs has been motivated primarily by the fact that many secular Iranians blame their country's backwardness on Islam, a religion they see as having been forced on Iran by Arabs, suspicion of Westerners has more tangible reasons, given the peculiar geopolitical situation in which the country found itself: while its sovereignty was recognized on paper, Britain and Russia continuously meddled in its affairs and manipulated groups within Iranian society for the purpose of furthering their own interests. Groups that cultivate trans-national ties, like Jews, freemasons, and Baha'is,

are therefore almost by definition suspect to Iranian nationalists. The cosmopolitanism of Baha'is thus renders them a prime target for conspiracy theorists, who attribute 'anti-Iranian' proclivities to them. Even the worldly Amīr Asadullāh 'Alam asked rhetorically: 'Is it possible to be a freemason, an internationalist, a member of the CIA, a Baha'i, and still have the interests of his nation at heart?' (Alīkhānī 1993: 362).

For Jalāl Āl-i Aḥmad, the theoretician of 'westoxication' (*gharbzadagī*), Baha'is embodied that affliction: 'Their westoxication and the services they render to the oppression and injustice (*ẓulm*) of the current government are so obvious that no further comment is needed'. He admits that Baha'is were oppressed for years and that their house of worship was destroyed, but adds that in the years since the nationalization of oil 'since our governments repress religion and need more westoxication, [the Baha'is] have become more active, and like any other *parvenu* minority have so lost themselves that I fear for their well-being'. He then recounts how, when the flood gates of the Diz dam stopped working on a 15th of Sha'bān (the birthday of the Twelfth Imam) and as a result electricity went out in some cities with a mixed Sunni and Shi'i population in Khuzistan, Shi'is, who were more assertive in such a setting, blamed the engine trouble on the Baha'is (Āl-i Aḥmad n.d.: 412). In Āl-i Aḥmad's novel *Nifrīn-i zamīn* ('The Curse of the Earth'; Āl-i Aḥmad 1967), a 'Jew who has become a Baha'i'³⁵ sets up a chicken farm near a village and is rumoured to want to import one-day-old chicks, artificially inseminate cows, and plant Dutch alfalfa. While the novel's narrator pokes fun at the old land-owner who sees a British conspiracy behind this, he does liken the chicken farm to a 'parasite that attaches to the bottom of a tree and derives nourishment from its water, soil, and fertilizer',³⁶ combining the old anti-Semitic topos of the greedy Jew who enriches himself *at the expense* of others with criticism of innovation as a sign of westoxication.

In his study of Iran's political elite in the heyday of the Shah, Marvin Zonis noted that 'in many respects, the Baha'is of Iran are subjects to the criticisms frequently leveled against the Jews in the West' (Zonis 1971: 275–34). Studies of gentile attitudes towards Jews often distinguish between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, where the first denotes merely disdain for Jews while the latter sees a danger in them. Iranian anti-Baha'ism is more akin to anti-Semitism, in that Baha'is are not only despised or pitied for adhering to a 'false' doctrine, but feared as the fifth column of sinister outside powers who threaten the cultural integrity of society. The link with anti-semitism actually goes farther than a mere parallel, for Baha'is are commonly associated with 'Zionism'. The reasons for this are well known. First, the world centre of the religion is in what is now Israel, a historic accident,³⁷ and second, a good number of Iranian Baha'is are of Jewish origin,³⁸ which, incidentally, worried many Jews when the conversions were occurring (Fischel 1934). Another factor is that the 'return' of Jews to the Holy Land was

prophesied to coincide with the coming of the Messiah, and Baha'ullah claimed to be the fulfilment of the messianic expectation of the Jews. Connections thus do exist between Baha'is and Jews, and by expressing prejudice against Baha'is, a bigoted Iranian can kill two birds with one stone, as it were.

If the association of Baha'is with Jews has a factual base, that with freemasonry is quite absurd, as Iranian masons did not accept Baha'is and the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran did not permit Iranian Baha'is to join lodges. This has not prevented the appearance of the term 'neomasonry' to designate Baha'is (Afrāsīābī 1989). In sum, the Baha'i is the quintessential internal Other of the nationalist imagination.

Baha'is as carriers of Persian culture

While the cosmopolitan spirit of the Baha'i religion militates against a preferential attachment to the state of Iran by non-Iranian Baha'is or the espousal of an exclusivist nationalism by Iranian Baha'is, the fact remains that given the Iranian origins of both Babism and the Baha'i Faith, Iran is considered *Mahd-i Amrullāh*, the Cradle of the Cause of God, in which capacity it commands a certain degree of affection for Baha'is around the world. Moreover, there is good evidence that at least 'Abdu'l-Baha harboured feelings of Iranian patriotism bordering on nationalism. This can be seen in his *Risāla-yi madaniyya* ('Treatise on Civilization'), whose authoritative English title for Baha'is is *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. He writes that every effort must be made so that 'this blessed (*mubārak*) land of Iran becomes the centre of the manifestation of human perfections in all matters'. He asserts that 'in olden times Iran was the heart of the world and shone like a lit candle on the horizon', . . . 'the wisdom (*hikmat*) of its government astonished the great leaders of the world, its political laws were followed by the rulers of the four corners of the world, [and] the Iranian nation was distinguished among the nations of the world by their world-conquests, culture, and civilization', while Iran was the 'centre of science and arts (*funūn*), the source of industry and innovation, and the mine of human virtues'. 'The knowledge and intelligence of [Iranians] astonished the wise of the world', and although they were 'the noblest of nations (*ashraf-i milal*)', they had regressed to a pitiful state and were in dire need of reform ('Abdu'l-Baha 1984: 6–11).³⁹ This is hardly the language of one who despises Iran and its people.

The same is true for the Persian language, which is, together with Arabic, a sacred language for Baha'is, many of whose scriptures are written in it. In the diaspora, Persian language retention is higher among Baha'is (and Jews) than among Muslims (Adelkhah 2001: 23), and at a time when the spread and the knowledge of Persian has declined outside Iran,⁴⁰ it is Baha'i pioneers who carry the language to distant islands and awaken interest in it in the

converts they make. When Samoans learn Persian or Ugandans celebrate *Naw-Rúz*, when South African parents name their daughter Ṭāhirih or American parents their son Badī', it is, in a sense, Iranian culture that is being diffused, albeit by means of an old-fashioned transliteration system. From the perspective of a pragmatic Iranian nationalist, Baha'is could be seen as ambassadors of Iranian culture, although Baha'is themselves might not see it that way. The role of women is particularly noteworthy here. At a time when most urban Muslim women kept to themselves, Baha'i Iranian women settled in the most inhospitable places to spread their faith. Even one who might sneer at their motivation should not but admire their courage and initiative. Awareness of this dimension of Babism-Baha'ism is slowly spreading in Iran, as the growing popularity of Ṭāhira, Qurrat al-'Ayn among Iranian feminists shows.⁴¹ In 2001 a women's calendar published in Iran featured her picture and explained that she was 'an erudite poet, philosopher, and lecturer', adding that she 'was executed by orders of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shah'.⁴²

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show that for many Iranians, Baha'is constitute the internal Other. It is interesting that colloquial Persian and scholarly English designate the opposition between 'self' and 'other' in a similar way: Iranians speak of *khudī* and *ghayr-i khudī*, 'self' and 'other-than-self', words that have connotations not unlike those of 'self' and 'other' as used in scholarly discourse. It would seem that many secular Iranians are still wedded to a confessional conception of Iranian nationhood, one that follows from the fact that Iran in many ways conforms to the model of the 'nation-church-state' that Bryan Turner proposed to conceptualize the role of religion in state-building and nation-building in Europe (Turner 1988: 330). To be a 'true' Iranian, it would seem, one has to be at least *culturally* from a Twelver Shi'i background. In the words of Afsaneh Najmabadi, 'until recent years, and even now only as a small minoritarian voice, Iranian modernity has not openly and explicitly inscribed Baha'is in the category Iranian' (Najmabadi 2005: 299 n41). In this sense, Iranian nationalism is not different from, say, Polish or Lithuanian nationalisms, which never quite accepted Protestants or Jews as integral members of the nation. The fact that Muslim Iranian 'credocentricity', to coin a neologism by analogy with 'ethnocentricity', is hardly unique does not make it less objectionable. As John Boswell put it in his magisterial study of tolerance and intolerance in Europe, 'almost all prejudice purports to be a rational response to some threat or danger: every despised group is claimed to threaten those who despise it; but it is usually easy to show that even if some danger exists, it is not the origin of the prejudice' (Boswell 1980: 7).

Notes

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- 1 Matters are different in Eastern religions: Hinduism made the Buddha the ninth avatar of Vishnu, and in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan a plethora of new religions flourish alongside the established ones. See Lanczkowski 1974.
- 2 Although a Muslim believer might wish to ponder the fact that of all religions other than Islam, the Baha'i Faith is the only one which considers Muḥammad to have been a prophet of God and the Qur'an to be the word of God.
- 3 See Tavakoli-Targhi's chapter in this book.
- 4 This author was once asked after a lecture in which he alluded ever so briefly to the plight of Jews and Baha'is in Iran after the revolution whether he was Jewish or Baha'i. The answer, to put the kind reader's mind at rest, is: 'Neither'.
- 5 For notable exceptions, see Sanasarian 2000 and Afshari 2001.
- 6 In late 1998 over 500 Baha'i homes were looted in 14 cities throughout Iran, and an informal university in which Baha'i professors who had been purged from Iranian universities taught Baha'i youth who are barred from entering Iranian universities was closed down, their animators arrested.
- 7 Ebady has mentioned Baha'is on other occasions as well.
- 8 For a general study of Iran's religious minorities since the revolution, see Sanasarian 2000.
- 9 MacEoin 1990: 55–61. See also MacEoin 1991.
- 10 As defined by Max Weber in his seminal 'Objectivity in Social Science', in Weber 1949.
- 11 For an example see Muntaziri 2001: 94–96.
- 12 See chapters in this volume by Tavakoli-Targhi and Afshari.
- 13 See Chehabi and Ashraf forthcoming.
- 14 This is in the epilogue to the second edition of the book. For further discussion of Ādamīyat's penchant for conspiracy theories see Ibid.
- 15 [Iqbāl] 1949: 148; Kasravi 1996: 95–97; Mīnuvī 1963: 22–26.
- 16 The symbolic charge of 'Ālam's presence may be greater than he acknowledges, for the 'Lord of the Age' is, after all, the Twelfth Imam, whose return Twelver Shi'is expect while Baha'is believe that his return was embodied in the mission of the Bab.
- 17 See, for instance, Makkī al-Āmilī 1996: vol. 2, 192, where an apostate is defined as an individual, one of whose parents was a Muslim at the time of conception.
- 18 Note that 'sect' and 'church' are used here in the sociological sense; no pejorative connotation is intended for the former, and no Christianizing for the latter. It has to be kept in mind that both terms denote ideal types rather than categories – in other words, they are not standards *to* which religious organizations are compared, but *by* which they are compared. For an excellent introduction to the use of the two terms in the sociology of religion, see Swatos 1998: 90–93.
- 19 As time passes, it could be argued that the Baha'i community is perhaps moving towards the church model, and a distinct Baha'i identity divorced from actual practice may be emerging. But this is a matter for empirical investigation.
- 20 In recent times some 'Muslim-identified' Iranians without faith have begun calling themselves *Musalmanzāda*.
- 21 Huvaydā even refused to intervene with the authorities in 1955 when the Baha'is of Ardistan were in the danger of being massacred, and in the end Ḥabīb Thābit sent Pepsi-Cola trucks to evacuate them. Personal communication from Abbas

Amanat, whose father had urged Huvaydā to do something.

- 22 Rawḥānī's pseudonym was Fāruq Sharīf.
- 23 On the former, see his autobiography Thābit 1993.
- 24 See for instance Fecharaki 1977: 89–91, where she shows that the Baha'i neighbourhood of Najafabad was better planned and generally more 'modern' than the rest of the town.
- 25 Baha'is share this trait with the Shaykhi sect, who are known in Kirman to dress more carefully and with greater attention to the strictures of good taste than non-Shaykhi ('*bālāsari*') Shi'is.
- 26 Touraj Atabaki, a former member of the Confederation, personal communication, 27 July 2006.
- 27 Maythamī (n.d.): 259–260.
- 28 Farḥād Rīahī, vice-president for academic affairs of Āryāmīhr University (now Sharīf University), personal communication.
- 29 On this point, see Keddīe 1995.
- 30 On the occasional limits of such intercultural harmony in practice, see Cole 2000.
- 31 Dabashi 2000: 495.
- 32 On him, see Mottahedeh 1999.
- 33 This is further developed in Rahimieh 1996.
- 34 See, for instance, Bayat Philipp 1974.
- 35 The Persian is *yahūdī-yi bahā'ī-shuda*, Āl-i Aḥmad, 1967: 199.
- 36 Ibid.: 254 and 261. Botanists, of course, might quibble with this description of a parasite.
- 37 It could easily have been on Cyprus if the Ottomans had sent Baha'ullah to Cyprus and his half-brother Mīrzā Yahyā, Şubḥ-i Azal to Palestine rather than the other way round!
- 38 See Mehrdad Amanat's chapter in this volume.
- 39 On this work, see Cole 1998: 81–91.
- 40 The evidence for this contention is presented in Fragner n.d..
- 41 See, for instance, Milani 1992: 77–99.
- 42 Aḥmadī Khurāsānī 2001: first week of November.

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