THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO ISLAM, CHRISTIANITY, AND JUDAISM: A BRIEF HISTORY

By ADAM BERRY

The origin of the Bahá'í faith can be traced to the city of Shiraz in southwest Iran, where, in 1844, Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi confided to a select group of Shaykhi Shí'a Muslims that he was the Báb, the gate to the Hidden Imam of the Shí'a. The Báb took eighteen Shaykhis as his disciples, whom he called the "Letters of the Living."[1] The Bábí movement met with much official resistance, both from Qajar and clerical authorities, as it recruited new adherents and became a significant insurgency movement. In an effort to quash the insurrections erupting in parts of Iran, the Qajar government executed the Báb on July 9, 1850.[2]

Following the Báb's death, the movement fragmented, with a group led by the Báb's apparent successor, Mirza Yahya Nuri, known as Sobh-e Azal, or Morning of Eternity, becoming the most significant faction. Conflicting claims of leadership forced many Bábís back into mainstream Shí'ísm, or into *taqiyya*, the practice of hiding one's faith under a veneer of orthodoxy for the purpose of survival. In 1866, Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri, the older half-brother of Sobh-e Azal, publicly proclaimed himself to be *Man-yuzhiruhu'l-lah*, or He Whom God Shall Make Manifest, the successor of the Báb.[3] Known as Bahá'u'lláh, the Glory of God, he emerged as the leader of the majority of Bábís, and his followers adopted the label Bahá'ís. A small group of Sobh-e Azal's followers who remained loyal to Mirza Yahya Nuri became known as Azalis, a religious group that has since dwindled over time, and is for all purposes dying out.[4]

Bahá'u'lláh was forced into exile numerous times, even before his 1866 proclamation, at the urging of several different governments. First, in 1853, he left Tehran for Baghdad. Then, in 1863, he left Baghdad for Istanbul; later that year he was exiled to Edirne in Rumelia. Five years later he was sent to Akka, north of Haifa in modern day Israel, then in Ottoman Palestine.[5] In 1877, the Ottoman governor of Akka ended Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment. His son Abbas Effendi (usually known as 'Abdu'l-Bahá) purchased for his father the Mazra'ih estate near Akka, which he left in 1879 to take up residence at the Bahji estate until his death in 1892.[6] Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, inherited the leadership of the Bahá'ís after a legal battle over the ownership of Bahji. The matter was settled in 1922, when a British court ruled in favor of Shoghi Effendi.[7] Despite several fragmentations and disputes, the Bahá'í faith survived its formative period and established its world center in Haifa. Today the Universal House of Justice, an elected body, handles the administrative and theological affairs of the faith.

The history of the Bahá'ís and their relations with other religious groups and governments over the last 150 years is as complex as the story of the journeys of Bahá'u'lláh.

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Bahá'ís in Iran generally met with hostility from all of the other Abrahamic faiths, particularly among religious minorities from which the faith has drawn many converts. However, the animosity of the *ulama* (religious scholars and clergy) remains unmatched in intensity compared to that of any other clerical body in Iran. In the diaspora, Bahá'ís have generally been accepted in Christian society, though such tolerance has been of a wary and suspicious nature. Most recently, the relatively warm reception of the Bahá'í in predominately Jewish Israel has broken with the patterns of the past, and embodies a fundamental change from the cool reception of the Persian Jews who resented the cause of their co-religionists' apostasy.

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The hostility of the Shí'í *ulama* to the Bahá'ís started with the emergence of the Bábí movement. Not surprisingly, the notion that Muhammad would be followed by additional prophets or that any text, such as the Báb's *Bayan*, could supplant the *Qur'an* was deemed heretical. The *ulama* used the occasion of the Báb's imprisonment to interrogate him in the city of Tabriz, and to disprove his claims while publicly humiliating him. Accounts of this incident differ greatly, depending on whether Shí'í, Bábí, or Bahá'í sources are consulted. Yet, as the historian Mongol Boyat observes, "[r]egardless of the discrepancies, all the accounts clearly indicate that the examiners were merely interested in refuting the Báb's claims to be the expected Imam by pointing at (1) his allegedly deficient knowledge of Arabic, theology, and philosophy, and of basic sciences such as medicine and astronomy; and, (2) his inability to perform miracles."[8]

While theological differences between the Shí'a and the Bahá'ís proved even greater than those between the Shí'a and the Bábís, the *ulama's* attitude towards the Bahá'ís predictably hardened. Over time, "the clerical view of Babism-Baha'ism had become fixed and hostile. The movement was now unambiguously perceived as anti-clerical and heretical.....However, some [members of the civil elite] were aware of the distinction between Babi militancy and Baha'i quietism and were prepared to tolerate Baha'i activity."[9] By the end of the Qajar dynasty (1796-1925), the growing rift between *ulama* and government was evident in their conflicting attitudes toward the Bahá'ís. The clergy, perceiving a twofold threat from the Bahá'í successes at conversion and their rejection of clerical authority that the clergy feared would spread to the Shí'í population, embraced a policy of unmitigated hostility towards the Bahá'ís. Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the shah of Iran from 1941 to 1979, would embrace this policy in his efforts to mend governmental relations with the hierocracy.

The scope of conversions to the Bahá'í faith, as well as the success of Bahá'í missionary efforts, partially explains clerical hostility to the faith. First, among the long-extant religious minorities within Iran, both Jews and Zoroastrians proved among the most eager converts to the Bahá'í faith.[10] This is partly due to the tactics and efforts of the Bahá'í missionaries which included:

> non-observance of the divisive practice of ritual purity, respect for the minority religions...Jewish and Zoroastrian eschatological prophecy to support their claims...the example of sacrificial martyrdom ...appeals to Iranian and minority cultural symbols...and the relative modernism, rationality and tolerance of Baha'í ideas when compared with the traditionalist Judaism and Zoroastrianism then prevalent in Iran.[11]

By engaging minority groups with their own symbolism and religious discourse, the Bahá'ís represented an inviting alternative to the dominant Shí'í hierocracy. In light of the isolation of these Iranian religious minorities from their co-religionists,[12] it is not surprising that, when presented with a new religion that accepted many of their beliefs and offered a rationalist, modern worldview, many Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians became Bahá'ís.

Without doubt, acceptance of the Bahá'í faith by many Bábís greatly displeased the *ulama* who had hoped to see the movement die with the Báb. This was most evident in villages which previously had large concentrations of Bábís, which now had equally sizable Bahá'í populations. Combined with "effective missionary activity [which]...broadened the network of rural Bahá'í communities," the popularity of the Bahá'í faith among rural Iranians presented a dire threat to the *ulama* as the Bahá'ís encroached on one of their more reliable sources of religious and political support, the villages.[13] The conversion of many urban, well-educated, and well-off Iranians also represented an encroachment on the *ulama's* critical urban power base, the *bazaaris*.[14] This diverse (though certainly not exclusive) makeup of Bahá'í converts suggests that, in addition to directly absorbing some of the clergy's most reliable political supporters, the Bahá'ís, because of their successes in converting Jews and Zoroastrians, directly challenged the primacy of the hierocracy within Iran. The Shí'í *ulama* likely viewed the religious minorities in Iran as prospective converts to Islam; these were effectively "their" religious minorities. The Bahá'ís' success among these groups was a feat the *ulama* had been unable to achieve despite enjoying several centuries of religious monopoly in Iran. Regardless of the relatively small numbers of converts involved (especially as a portion of Iran's total population), the *ulama* saw this development as undermining their authority and support.

While the attitudes and actions of the Shí'í clergy were relatively consistent and predictable, this was not necessarily the case regarding the government's attitude toward the Bahá'ís. The Qajar government dealt with the Bábís mostly in accordance with the wishes of the clergy. This is to no small extent due to numerous armed uprisings by the Bábís, which the government naturally tried to suppress. This policy would ultimately culminate in the execution of the Báb.[15] An attempt to assassinate Nasr al-Din Shah, ruler of Iran from 1848 to 1896, masterminded by the Bábí Shaikh Ali Azim, one of the Báb's Letters of the Living, triggered additional government hostility toward the Bábís.[16]

Despite Bahá'u'lláh's advocacy of constitutionalism, parliamentarianism, and an end to arbitrary exercise of governmental power, all stances which challenged the shah's autocratic rule, the Bahá'ís managed to maintain better relations with the Iranian government than did the Bábís, in part due to their political quietism as opposed to Bábí militancy.[17] This is not just an expeditious choice on the part of the Bahá'ís, but rather a part of their religious doctrine:

> ...the conduct of the Faith eschews any involvement in "party" or competitive types of government. Baha'is are forbidden to participate in partisan politics, as Shoghi Effendi emphasized...[18]

Bahá'u'lláh shared this view, as the following excerpt from the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* attests:

> None must contend with those who wield authority over the people; leave unto them that which is theirs, and direct your attention to men's hearts.[19]

While such beliefs may have quieted Qajar fears of Bahá'í insurgency, the government allowed persecutions of the Bahá'ís when it served official interests. In most instances, this took the form of non-intervention in anti-Bahá'í riots or persecutions. At times, the government initiated or encouraged violence against the Bahá'ís when it could benefit, particularly during the early twentieth century when Reza Khan Pahlavi tried to regain clerical support after the conscription and republican campaigns.[20] Reza Khan's son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, proved equally adept at encouraging violence against the Bahá'ís to placate the clergy. As historian Ali Gheissari notes, "...in 1955 the government launched a campaign against the Bahá'ís, and the army occupied their central temple in Tehran. The move dampened the opposition among the *ulama* to the negotiations with the consortium of oil companies and to Iran's partnership in the Baghdad Pact."[21] It is perhaps one of the sadder ironies of Bahá'í-government relations in Iran that the Pahlavis occasionally used the Bahá'ís, advocates of modernization themselves, as bargaining chips with the *ulama* to advance their own modernization programs.

The government even used Bahá'í advocacy of constitutionalism and reform against constitutionalists during the late Qajar period. During the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, *shabnamehs* ("night letters" which were posted in the dead of night, out of sight of police) became an important method of communicating political ideas and dissent. Conservative clerics allied with the Qajars tried to discredit their constitutionalist opponents in the public eye by posting fake *shabnamehs* praising constitutionalism, bearing the forged signatures of prominent Bábís and Bahá'ís, in an effort to associate the reformists with religious heterodoxy.[22]

Despite this willingness to exploit religious hatred for political expediency, the Qajars continued to appoint Bahá'ís to numerous governmental positions, exhibiting a lesser degree of hostility toward the Bahá'ís than the *ulama*. As historian Peter Smith notes, "in the late Qajar period, a number of eminent Baha'is were incorporated into the civil elite as provincial viziers, financial administrators, and even governors."[23] The Bahá'ís' relations with the Iranian government in the Qajar and Pahlavi periods thus were defined by degrees of official hostility, lesser or greater, depending on the needs of the ruler at the time. At no time was the government officially supportive of the Bahá'ís, though individual officials may have been sympathetic to the Bahá'ís themselves. That would change after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The government established after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and its policies towards the Bahá'ís offers a negative impression of contemporary clerical views of the Bahá'í faith. Several prominent government officials made unambiguous remarks expressing official views on the Bahá'ís, including Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This is evident in the following exchange between Khomeini and Professor James Cockroft of Rutgers University in December 1978:

> Question [Cockroft]: "Will there be either religious or political freedom for the Bahá'ís under an Islamic government?"
> Answer [Khomeini]: "They are a political faction; they are harmful. They will not be accepted."
> Question: "How about their freedom of religion-religious practice?"
> Answer: "No."[24]

The Iranian government thus refused to recognize the Bahá'í faith as a religion, instead labeling it a seditious political group. This characterization justified crackdowns and discrimination against the Bahá'ís who remained in Iran after the revolution.

Despite international pressure, the Islamic government of Iran held to this view of the Bahá'ís. Official government policy regarding the Bahá'ís is best expressed in a letter from Aireza Farrakhrouz, the *chargé d'affaires* at the Iranian embassy in London, to Ken Weetch, Member of Parliament for Ipswich. The Iranian envoy wrote:

> Bahaism is in fact not a religion but an ideology created by colonial powers to help the past illegitimate government of Iran in their oppression of the brave people of Iran and to invalidate Islam as a divine religion and revolutionary ideology...The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has never oppressed them, although their beliefs have not and will never be considered as a recognized religion by Iranian authorities and therefore, unlike Christians, Jews, etc. they do not have priorities such as the right to elect representatives for the Parliament.[25]

This view was effectively codified in Articles 13 and 14 of the Iranian Constitution.

> **"Article 13 [Recognized Religious Minorities]**
> Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.
>
> **Article 14 [Non-Muslims' Rights]**
> In accordance with the sacred verse *"God does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with those who have not fought against you because of your religion and who have not expelled you from your homes"* [Q60:8], the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights. **This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran.**[26]

By denying the Bahá'í faith official status as a religion, and maintaining its stance that the Bahá'ís represent a seditious movement, the Islamic Republic of Iran has relied on several provisions of the constitution, especially the final stipulation of Article 14, to serve as legal justification for effectively denying any rights to the Bahá'ís.[27] Other provisions, such as Article 22, offer the government the explicit option of using the law to circumvent the constitution, thus rendering these constitutional protections even more worthless. Perhaps more frightening than this constitutional maneuvering is a ruling by Ayatullah Muhammad Saduqi, Khomeini's former aide, "[which] publicly declared Baha'is...*mahdur al-dam* (those of uselessly squandered blood)...[meaning] that the blood of Baha'is was *halal* (permitted) and therefore lawful to shed."[28]

There is ample evidence available that since the 1979 Islamic Revolution the Iranian government has persecuted the Bahá'ís extensively. According to Human Rights Watch:

> Baha'is ...continued to face persecution, including being denied permission to worship or to carry out other communal affairs publicly. At least four

> Baha'is were serving prison terms for their religious beliefs. Bihnam Mithaqi and Kayvan Khalajabadi, imprisoned since 1989, were informed ...that their sentences would run until 2004. Musa Talibi, imprisoned in 1994, was held in Isfahan. It was not clear whether his death sentence had been commuted. Zhabihullah Mahrami, imprisoned since 1995 and convicted of apostasy, had his death sentence commuted....[29]

Amnesty International reports that:

> It has been reported that more than 200 Baha'is have been executed since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. On 21 July 1998, Ruhollah Rouhani was executed, allegedly on charges of converting a Muslim woman to the Baha'i faith. The woman, who was not arrested, claims that she has always been a Baha'i.[30]

Such mistreatment prompted many Bahá'ís to flee Iran following the Iranian Revolution, some immigrating to the United States, which now has a well-established Bahá'í community.

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The story of Bahá'í-Christian relations begins in Iran with the writings of Christian missionaries stationed throughout that country in the mid-nineteenth century. The success of the Bahá'ís in Iran led to a vicious response from Christian missionaries stationed there. According to Bahá'í scholars William Hatcher and Douglas Martin:

> ...the missionaries join[ed] with their Muslim counterparts in publishing bitter attacks on Baha'i motives and practices. A faith which had been the object of barbarous persecutions in the East now found itself subject in the West to misrepresentations of its history and teachings and efforts to represent it as hostile to Christianity.[31]

Ironically, the Bahá'ís posed little threat of converting Iranian Christians who "had a strong sense of superiority, nationalist aspirations, and an early identity with the West," unlike Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians, communities where the Bahá'ís were more successful in their conversion efforts.[32]

Texts written by missionaries returned from Iran in the early twentieth century are, for the most part, critical, inflammatory, and strangely captivating reading. These books, according to Hatcher and Martin, nonetheless merit attention:

> While their use of documentation and other forms of historical evidence would be dismissed by scholars, it is likely that the authors achieve a degree of the success they seek. The academic packaging gives such works an air of thoroughness and authority which may well deceive many general readers who lack a basis upon which to assess the material.[33]

A cursory review of these books is sufficient to give an impression of their contents. This author gained some insight into Bahá'í views from these particular volumes, as one atten-

tive Bahá'í reader had written in his own commentary alongside that offered by missionary Samuel Graham Wilson in his book *Bahaism and its Claims* (1915).[34] The comment found on the dedication page of this book, "To the sincere seeker after truth-read the writings of Bahá'u'lláh themselves," serves as an appropriate warning of the book's contents. The text accuses the Bahá'ís of "[d]ethron[ing] Christ," "[i]ntermarriage of [r]aces,"[35] "[a]ddiction to alcohol and opium," (Bahá'ís are forbidden to consume alcohol or drugs) and of being a religious "fad" or "cult."[36] A synopsis of the contents on page two claims that "Many of [the Bahá'í faith's] principles are culled from the Christian religion which it insidiously seeks to supplant. What this Oriental cult is, what it stands for, and what it aims at, is told in a volume which forms a notable addition to the History of Comparative Religions."[37] This volume is indeed notable, perhaps not for the reasons its author intended, but as representative of the views of some American clerics at the time.

The accusation that the Bahá'ís sought to supplant Christianity is repeated in other writings, including William Miller's *Baha'ism* (1932).[38] Miller accuses the Bahá'ís of stealing their theology from Christianity. He writes:

> [n]o religion has been so widely misrepresented in its presentation in the West...voluntary missionaries have represented the faith as an enlightened humanism with a new and original message of universal peace. As a matter of fact, there is not one truth in these Occidental representations of Baha'ism that is not borrowed from Christianity...[39]

Miller, a minister, was so concerned about the appeal of the Bahá'í faith to Christians that he dedicated an entire chapter in his book to the question "Can a Christian Become a Baha'i?"[40] Samuel Graham Wilson, in another of his writings, offers an analogue to Miller's belief that Christians can not be Bahá'ís by enumerating six reasons for characterizing the Bahá'í faith as "antichristian":

1. It lowered Christianity to the same level as other religions.
2. The Bahá'í Faith claimed to supersede Christianity with a new revelation.
3. The Bahá'í Faith dethroned Christ and saw him as one manifestation of God among many.
4. It assumed falsely that Bahá'u'lláh is Christ returned.
5. It argued that biblical prophecies were fulfilled by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.
6. It denied Christ's miracles and his bodily resurrection.[41]

There may have been good reasons for some American Protestants to exhibit such hostility towards the Bahá'ís. Historian Robert Stockman describes four types of American Bahá'ís, one of which he labels the "Scripturalist" type. They "were likely to be mainstream Protestants, but could include persons raised Protestant who become disillusioned with their church for a variety of reasons. Generally they were not strongly attached to evangelical doctrine or a traditional interpretation of the Bible."[42] That Stockman considers these individuals the "most important type" of American Bahá'ís bespeaks the threat they presented to Protestants, for these individuals were essentially mainstream Christians. Wilson hints at these Scripturalists in *Bahaism and its Claims*, stating that "[s]ome adherents regard Bahaism as Christianity continued...."[43] He levels his criticisms at other Christians whom he sees as too sympathetic to the Bahá'í faith, including Thomas Cheyne,

an Oxford professor and priest. The ideas and tenor of Cheyne's book, *The Reconciliation of Races and Religions* (1914), would likely draw accusations of syncretism were it published today for it is too sympathetic to the Bahá'ís.[44] Despite such vitriolic clerical opposition, the Bahá'ís survived in America, and won some converts from Christianity.

Since the initial interfaith contact in the late nineteenth century, Christian polemics regarding the Bahá'í faith have changed from their early, almost sensationalist portrayals to a more serious disputation of theological principles. Though many themes are shared by past and current Christian writers, especially their objection to Bahá'í views on the Trinity, resurrection, and the hypostatic union of Christ, more recent writings are marked by an effort not only towards greater historical accuracy but a more thorough attempt at refutation from a Christian viewpoint. For example, Francis Beckwith, a scholar of Christianity, makes several arguments that are paradigmatic of modern Christian responses to the Bahá'í faith. Using mostly, though not exclusively, biblical sources, Beckwith critiques Bahá'í doctrine and beliefs, devoting chapters to "The Baha'i Use of the Bible" and the "Truth of Christianity." Unlike most earlier texts, Beckwith's work is marked by a reasonably accurate history of the faith, though as part of his argument he emphasizes several purportedly false prophecies and schisms which in actuality have played a relatively minor role in the development of Bahá'í.[45] While the focus of such literature is still primarily inoculatory, it has lost much of its vitriol over the years.

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The story of Bahá'ís in America begins with Ibrahim Kheiralla and Anton Haddad, "both of whom were Syrians and converts to the Bahá'í faith from the Orthodox Melkite church."[46] They slowly won over converts in Chicago, Kenosha, Wisconsin, and New York City as the first Bahá'í House of Worship in the United States was built in Wilmette, *Illinois.*[47] *Meanwhile, early twentieth century American reaction to the Bahá'ís, while not* as harsh as that of the missionaries, was still a bit confused and distrustful. Prominent newspapers and publications described the Bahá'ís in tabloid fashion. A *New York Times* headline in 1904 warned "Babist Propaganda Making Headway Here." The same newspaper contained feature sketches of "Abbas Effendi...Present High Priest [of] this New Oriental Cult."[48] The *North American,* in 1902, marveled at the "Astonishing Spread of Babism," and the conversion of hundreds to "Abbas Effendi in Baltimore."[49] Early twentieth-century Americans thus viewed the Bahá'í faith as a strange Eastern cult, an image which would only be overcome after a century's worth of effort.

The process of social normalization of the faith was not teleological; rather, a combination of factors explain the development of the American Bahá'í community. Mike McMullen, a sociologist, describes the demographic makeup of the Atlanta Bahá'í community, and explains how the religious backgrounds of converts helped to bring the faith into the American mainstream. The mainly Christian converts to the faith in Atlanta helped to demystify its image in the West, and earned it recognition as a mainstream religion rather than an "Oriental cult."

McMullen's book, while focusing on the Bahá'í community of Atlanta, nonetheless depicts several trends which help to explain Christian attitudes towards the Bahá'ís. Among his most fascinating findings are the survey results concerning the previous religious affiliation of Atlanta Bahá'ís. When the totals for all Christian denominations, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox, are added up, they constitute 61.1% of respondents,

over twice the proportion (29.7%) of respondents who had been raised as Bahá'ís.[50] Clearly, the faith found some success among the American Christian community. Contrary to the fears expressed by some of the earlier missionary writers, only about ten percent of McMullen's respondents stated that "it was the claims of the Baha'i faith to be the fulfillment of Biblical Christian prophecy that most convinced them to become Baha'is."[51] While this is certainly an important group, it hardly represents a majority of Bahá'ís. About thirty-six percent reported "an affinity for the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh" while approximately twenty percent reported "love for one of the Central Figures of the Faith (defined as the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and Abdu'l-Baha)" as the main reason for their conversion.[52] Thus, while fulfillment of Christian prophecy may not have been a primary motive for most, prophecy in some form was an important motive for many converts.

The testimony of some converts interviewed by McMullen shows that those from Christianity did not come easily; rather, spiritual reconciliation took time and effort. As one convert explains:

> It was difficult to some extent to switch loyalties. Because Christianity is centered on Christ, and he is your only door to heaven, so if you turn your back on Christ, you're doomed, you know? So it is a very serious consideration...So the only way that I could make the switch was when I realized that I had the same feelings towards Bahá'u'lláh as I did towards Christ, and there was no conflict between them. That was it. When I realized that Bahá'u'lláh had the same loyalty, and I wasn't diminishing my feelings towards Christ and my loyalty towards him. Bahá'u'lláh kind of stepped into Christ's spot, yea, but without Christ moving.[53]

Perhaps more typical of the Bahá'í converts are those who found the rational, logical aspect of the faith to be the most compelling:

> I remember at one period I really started studying some of the other religions. I came back and said, you know, they all claim to be right. They can't all be right. How do you sort this stuff out? [The man who taught her the Baha'i Faith] turned to me and said, 'Well, they were all right for their time.' It was like light bulbs went off. God! Of course! ...The concept of progressive revelation was what makes perfect sense. So that really attracted me.[54]

McMullen's explanation for these aspects of the faith's appeal is that "the 'pull' of the attractiveness of social and spiritual principles in a rational, progressive religion, and the 'push' of being disillusioned with one's religion-of-birth and subsequent religious search" combine to motivate the convert into becoming a Bahá'í.[55] This pull/push interaction is significant. While this dynamic does not necessarily hold true for all converts, it helps to explain the thawing of American Christian attitudes towards the Bahá'ís. After all, converts experiencing a "push" from disillusionment would likely leave their religion-of-birth in any case (indeed, about twenty percent of converts had switched religions before becoming Bahá'ís),[56] meaning that these new Bahá'ís did not represent an infringement on Christian congregations by the Bahá'í faith. The fact that no wave of conversions from Christian churches materialized in the United States,[57] together with the establishment of a community infrastructure over time, as well as the ability of the Bahá'ís to adapt to the

social environment of the United States, combined over the course of twentieth century to "normalize" the faith and incorporate it into the larger social structure of the American religious community.[58] For example, the adaptability of the Bahá'ís is evident in their effective adoption of national culture to help spread the faith. This is apparent in their creative media use, such as the publication of Bahá'í children's books.[59]

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The Bahá'ís' relations with Judaism over the past century and a half are among the least well-attested aspects of the faith's history. Shortly after the emergence of the Bahá'í faith, the Iranian Jewish community, along with Iranian Zoroastrians, underwent "widespread conversions," depleting further the numbers of the Jewish minority in Iran. Historian Peter Smith finds two reasons for these conversions in the isolation of the Persian Jews from their coreligionists and the tolerance towards Jewish and Zoroastrian religious traditions the Bahá'ís exhibited.[60] In light of the push/pull components of the conversion process explained by McMullen, one can see that the process of alienation (from one's religion-of-birth) and attraction (to the new religion) follows a similar path to that of converts in modern Atlanta. The isolation of the Iranian Jewish community, when combined with the unique Bahá'í missionary approach (one which differed significantly from that of Christian missionaries), likely facilitated conversions for the same reasons expressed in the testimonies cited above. By claiming continuity and incorporation of the Jews' and Zoroastrians' religious traditions, rather than trying to replace or abrogate their religions,[61] the Bahá'ís achieved far better results in their conversion efforts.

Jews living outside of Iran had a very different take on these events, however. Judaic scholar Walter Fischel's account of the emergence of the Bahá'í and Bábí movements is not entirely dispassionate vis-à-vis the Jews; even his language is telling of his views. He refers not to the conversion of Jews, but the "apostasy of considerable numbers of Persian Jews."[62] One of Fischel's observations demonstrates the degree to which the Persian Jewish community was isolated from the rest of world Jewry:

> Had Persian Jews possessed spiritual leaders of a high cultural standing in the last centuries, had the rabbis and schools taught and asserted a Judaism free from superstitious notions, empty formalism and medieval prejudices, had they shown a true sense for Judaism and its ethics, the conception of God, its ideas of the messiah, its national aspirations, its contribution to world culture, Bahaism would hardly have won any Jewish hearts.[63]

The condescending tone of this particular passage is astonishing. If Persian Jews met with such an attitude from their co-religionists, it is little wonder that they converted. Fischel cites Samual Graham Wilson and J.R. Richards, another missionary, as authorities to justify his low estimates for the number of Jews converting to the Bahá'í faith. To his credit, Fishel has consulted the generally reliable E.G. Browne (the first Westerner to study the Bábís and Bahá'ís), but the use of these hardly dispassionate missionary accounts is more indicative of Fischel's attitude towards these conversions than of any attempt at refutation.[64]

At the time of Fischel's writing, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had approved Shoghi Effendi's request to lease the Mazra'ih estate. Meanwhile, between 1949 and 1953 the Bahá'í World Center was built on Mount Carmel in Haifa.[65] The compound

would be completed in 1982 with the opening of the Universal House of Justice (the meeting place of the Bahá'í legislative chamber).[66] While some Jews may have held relatively unfavorable views of the Bahá'ís, the Jewish state itself proved far friendlier to the faith than virtually any other nation. Perhaps the presence of so many sacred sites within Israel's borders helped to foster a tolerant attitude towards the presence of religious groups. Rather than risk the political consequences of choosing groups to allow into Israel, the state, within reason, permitted groups with a religious purpose to establish themselves free of interference. Additionally, the Jewish worldview after World War II was drastically altered. The history of the Bahá'ís in Iran had to conjure up images of similar pogroms and persecutions in Europe. This likely became more apparent in 1955 when the shah of Iran deliberately incited anti-Bahá'í violence in Iran.[67] Considering the staunch political quietism of the Bahá'ís, as well as the fact that the faith's goals of social reform likely appealed to the quasi-socialist ethics of the kibbutzim (a more important political constituency in Israel at that time than at present), the decision to allow the Bahá'ís to control and construct their sacred sites probably caused little controversy. Furthermore, the fact that "[t]he Bahai [*sic*] do not engage in any missionary activity in Israel" removed any putative religious threat posed by the faith.[68] Indeed, at least in the present day, the reaction seems to have been a positive one overall. The construction of the Bahá'í Gardens near the Shrine of the Báb and the Universal House of Justice was welcomed by some residents of Haifa:

> Haifa's Mayor Amram Mitzna describe[d] the new garden as the eighth wonder of the world. 'We have been very lucky,' he sa[id], 'not many cities get a park that is so incredibly beautiful–free of charge.'[69]

It is quite apparent that the Bahá'ís have thus far fared better in Israel than in many other parts of the world. Despite some problems in the early relations between the Bahá'ís and non-Iranian Jews (who likely viewed them with distain for causing the apostasy of their co-religionists), distance, both temporal and geographic, helped heal these wounds. The result is the present state of interfaith relations, which looks far brighter than many could have hoped.

* * * * *

The question of how the other Abrahamic faiths have reacted to the Bahá'ís thus has neither an easy nor static answer. Those groups that felt most threatened by the Bahá'ís, mostly the clergy and political authorities in Iran and the United States, were either Shí'í or Christian. The Bahá'ís, through adaptation to the local culture and political climate, were able to survive periods of initial hostility to achieve a more tenable state of relations in the United States; in Iran conditions have been almost uniformly bad, with a further deterioration following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. While little literature is available on the subject, Jewish reaction to the Bahá'ís seems to have been the least hostile initially, and the most positive at present. The interactions of these three faiths over the past 150 years have settled into the pattern of hostility from Islam, a grudging tolerance by Christianity, and a slightly positive acceptance by Judaism. This can be explained by the threat the Bahá'ís purportedly posed to each religion, a hypothesis which finds parallels in the relations between the first three Abrahamic faiths. Each religion seems to have per-

ceived its greatest threat as coming from that faith which immediately followed it. Judaism historically perceived Christianity as more of a threat than Islam, while Christianity felt most threatened by Islam, and Islam viewed the Bahá'ís with the greatest hostility. Perhaps the saddest conclusion one can deduce is that this cycle indicates that the Bahá'ís, despite their tenet of progressive revelation, will likely find their greatest challenge from the rise of the next religion claiming to continue the chain of prophecy. Hopefully, this future religion will have learned from the past few millennia of religious strife, thus proving this to be a false prediction. There are far worse things to hope for.

ENDNOTES

[1]Peter Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shí'ísm to a World Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 14.

[2]Ibid., 29.

[3]Ibid., 57.

[4]This introduction offers an abbreviated account of the origins of the Bábí and Bahá'í movements derived largely from Smith's study. For further information on the Bábí movement and the origins of the Bahá'í faith, see Amanat Abbas, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bábí Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). See also William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984); Moojan Momen, *The Bahá'í Faith: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2002). Regarding the declining Azali population, E.G. Browne, in 1909, estimated that "for every hundred Bahais there were only three or four Azalis (for a total of 2,000 to 4,000 Azalis, if our estimates are correct)." See Juan R.I. Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the 19th Century," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24 (February 1992):2. The Azalis have shown no signs of growth since Browne's assertion, giving one reason to conclude that they will cease to exist in the none-too-distant future.

[5]Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions,* 66-69.

[6]Idit Luzia, "The Bahá'í Center in Israel," in *The Land That Became Israel: Studies in Historical Geography*, ed. Ruth Kark (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989), 120-32.

[7]Ibid., 129-30.

[8]Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 99-100.

[9]Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions,* 92.

[10]The precise number of Jewish converts to the Bahá'í faith is difficult to determine. Susan Maneck cites figures from George Curzon and Habib Levy, establishing the percentage of Jewish converts at roughly twenty percent in Hamedan, fifty percent in Kashan, and seventy-five percent in Gulpaygan. She incorrectly cites the figures for Kashan, which Curzon lists as fifty converts, not fifty percent of Kashani Jewry. See Susan Maneck, "Conversion of Religious Minorities to the Bahá'í Faith in Iran: Some Preliminary Observations," http://bahai-library.com/?file=maneck_conversion_minorities_iran.html, (accessed August 23, 2004), 1. Her data is derived from George Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1966), I:500. Maneck cites the 1892 edition of Curzon's book. The 1966 reprint is cited here due to its greater availability. Curzon's estimates are dubious, however. According to his figures, approximately thirteen percent of Iran's population would have been Bahá'ís at that time.

He estimates around one million Bahá'ís out of a total Iranian population of approximately eight million in 1891. Numerous other questions surround Curzon's mostly anecdotal data. An English version of Levy's book is available, although it only includes conversion data from Hamedan (423). Habib Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999).

[11]Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, 92.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., 96-97.

[15]Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent,* 118-26.

[16]Ibid.,128. The Bahá'í later denounced the plot to kill Nasr al-Din Shah as the work of a madman deranged by grief over the Báb's death.

[17]The term "political quietism" refers to a Shí'í (and Bahá'í) tradition of clerical nonparticipation in political activity. The term is often used today to describe Grand Ayatollah Ali as-Sistani in Iraq. For Bahá'u'lláh's views on government, see Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the 19th Century," 1-26.

[18]*Historical Dictionary of the Bahá'í Faith*, s.v. "politics."

[19]Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-I-Aqdas (The Most Holy Book)* (Mona Vale, Australia: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1993), 54.

[20]Nikki Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan, 1796-1925* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999), 86.

[21]Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998), 75. This was two years after the 1953 coup that removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq who favored nationalization of Iranian oil. The shah's willingness to cooperate with Great Britain regarding oil policy had engendered strong public opposition, and the Baghdad Pact would have similarly angered many.

[22]Said Amir Arjomand, "The Ulama's Traditionalist Opposition to Parliamentarianism, 1907-1909," *Middle Eastern Studies* 17:2 (April 1981):185.

[23]Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions,* 92.

[24]Douglas Martin, "The Persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran: 1844-1984," *Bahá'í Studies* 12/13 (1984): 31.

[25]Quoted in Geoffrey Nash, *Iran's Secret Pogrom* (Sudbury, UK: Suffolk, Neville, Spearman, 1982), 118.

[26]Emphasis added. "Human Rights & Islam: The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran," http://courses.washington.edu/laws/LAWS-WEBSITE/iran-const.htm (accessed April 29, 2004), 6. For a copy of the Iranian Constitution, see "Iran-Constitution," http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/ir00t___.html (accessed April 29, 2004).

[27]For a detailed discussion of the legal status of the Bahá'ís in Iran, see Felipe Duque, "From Taqiyya to Hikmat: Bábí and Bahá'í Identity Management and Responses to Stigmatization," (Unpublished Honors Thesis, Emory University, 2002), 45-52.

[28]Ibid., 52.

[29]World Report 2003, "Iran: Human Rights Developments," http://www.hrw.org/wr2k3/mideast3.html (accessed April 29, 2004), 4.

[30] "Worldwide Appeal: Dhabihullah Mahrami and Musa Talibi- Update," http://web.amnesty.org/appeals/index/irn-010497-wwa-eng (accesed April 29, 2004), 1.

[31]Hatcher and Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith*, 200.

[32]Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, 93.

[33]Hatcher and Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith*, 201.

[34]Samuel Graham Wilson, *Bahaism and its Claims* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1915).

[35]At least this section is nearly honest. The Bahá'ís were early advocates of racial equality in all aspects of life, including interracial marriage. This particular reference, however, is little more than a facile appeal to racist sentiment.

[36]Ibid., 7-9.

[37]Ibid., 2.

[38]William Miller, *Baha'ism* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1932).

[39]Ibid., 7-8.

[40]Ibid., 181-88.

[41]This is Robert Stockman's summary of Wilson's writing. See Samuel Graham Wilson, "Bahaism an Antichristian System," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 72, No. 285 (January 1915), 9; Robert H. Stockman, "The Bahá'í Faith and American Protestantism" (Th.D. diss., Harvard Divinity School, 1990), 121-22.

[42]Stockman, "The Bahá'í Faith and American Protestantism," 54.

[43]Wilson, "Bahaism an Antichristian System," 13.

[44]Thomas Cheyne, *The Reconciliation of the Races and Religions* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1914).

[45]Francis Beckwith, *Baha'i: A Christian Response to Baha'ism, the Religion which Aims toward One World Government and One Common Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985).

[46]Stockman, "The Bahá'í Faith and American Protestantism," 13.

[47]"Bahá'í House of Worship," http://www.us.bahai.org/how/default.htm (accessed April 29, 2004), 1.

[48]E.G. Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1918), 152.

[49]Ibid., 151.

[50]Michael McMullen, *The Bahá'í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 18.

[51]Ibid., 22.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid., 27.

[54]Ibid., 26.

[55]Ibid., 204n16.

[56]Ibid., 18.

[57]While there were a substantial number of conversions to the faith between 1970 and 1973, these were largely among the "unchurched" in America, and thus did not represent a threat to Christian congregations. Dr. Franklin Lewis, interview by Adam Berry, March 23, 2004, transcript, possession of author.

[58]This discussion is not a thorough analysis of all the factors involved in the development of the Bahá'í community. McMullen's study contains many more details on the dynamics of conversion (*The Bahá'í,* 15-34); Stockman's thesis contains a more inclusive narrative account of the American Bahá'í community.

[59]One such book reviewed by the author is Janet Lindstrom, *The Kingdoms of God* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1961).

[60]Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, 93.

[61]The Christian missionaries would have required an abrogation of Islamic beliefs, which also explains why some Shí'a were willing converts to the Bahá'í faith, but resisted Christianity—it was much easier for them to build upon their Islamic foundations than to deconstruct them.

[62]Walter Fischel, "The Jews of Persia, 1795-1940," *Jewish Social Studies* 12:1 (April 1950): 155.

[63]Ibid., 156.

[64]Ibid. Regarding refutation, Fischel cites Richards as "refut[ing] the statement of Abdul Bahai [sic] that 'the day is not far off when there will not be a Jew in Persia who has not become a Bahai' (Ibid.). Combined with his "apostasy" comment, it becomes apparent that Fischel is more indignant than interested in examining the causes of this phenomenon.

[65]Luzia, "The Bahá'í Center in Israel," 130.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century*, 75.

[68]Simon Griver, "The Bahá'í Gardens," *Jewish Virtual Library*, http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/bahaig.html (accessed April 29, 2004), 2.

[69]Ibid.