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RASHID RIDA ON THE BAHA'I FAITH: A UTILITARIAN THEORY OF THE SPREAD OF RELIGIONS

Juan Ricardo Cole

The Syro-Egyptian Islamic thinker Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935) combined elements of the conservative revivalist and the rationalist reformer in the course of his intellectual career. He admired both the fundamentalist Wahhabis and the heterodox radical Jamalu'd-Din al-Afghani. It is not surprising, therefore, that his encounter with non-Islamic missionaries, both European Christians and Iranian Baha'is, led him to develop a "missiology" (*tariq ad-da'wah*) for Islam which was characterized by both modern pragmatic and traditionalist Islamic aspects. This missiology rested upon a sociological theory which attempted to explain the dynamics of the spread of religions in terms of organization and efficiency rather than in terms of the intrinsic truth of the message or the intervention of a supernatural agency. This secular explanation helped him to account for the successes of Christian missionaries in Africa in converting Muslims, as well as the more limited successes in Iran of the Babi and Baha'i faiths. His theory served a polemical function in allowing him to deny success in mission as a legitimization of such movements. The development of his theory will be examined in terms of Rida's own social context.

I

Rida was born in a village near Tripoli in Ottoman Syria. His family were rural landholders of some local importance.[1] Many of the intellectuals in the Ottoman Empire who undertook to reform Islamic law and theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were from similar backgrounds. These rural notables traditionally dominated political and religious offices in villages. Particularly in Egypt, they also owned a disproportionate amount of land. Increasing European economic influence in the southern Mediterranean in the latter part of the nineteenth century allowed some of these rural notables to transform themselves into agrarian capitalists producing for the world market; others lost their land and moved to the cities. The aristocratic landholders adopted Western culture so avidly that they often had a superficial understanding of Islam and Islamic history, but rural intellectuals like Rashid Rida and Muhammad 'Abduh attempted to combine a traditional education with a modern outlook.

Rida studied at the National Islamic School in Tripoli, founded by Shaykh Husayn al-Jisr (1845–1909). The curriculum offered both traditional subjects normally studied by the 'ulama' and some modern subjects like European languages and mathematics. In the urban setting of Tripoli, Rida rejected what he considered to be the un-Islamic practices of the Mawlawi sufi order, which had a center there. He insisted on the dignified simplicity of the religion of the village notables, and condemned both the elaborate rituals of the aristocrats and the ecstatic excesses of peasants and urban laborers. Much of his later intellectual development might be seen as an attempt to assert the values of his background against urban religious trends like cosmopolitanism, and against working-class popular religion. Rida's desire to reform Islam typifies his class's wish to accommodate the changes accompanying capitalism while retaining elements of traditional culture. This reformism manifested itself when he joined the moderate Naqshbandiyyah sufi order and when he decided to study with the pan-Islamist agitator Jamalu'd-Din Asadabadi "al-Afghani" (1839–1897).[2]

Upon al-Afghani's death, Rida went to Cairo to study with the al-Afghani's most eminent disciple, Muhammad 'Abduh. 'Abduh's father was the headman of a village in the Egyptian delta, and had sent his son to study at al-Azhar in 1896. 'Abduh gradually deserted the quietist sufism of his youth and gravitated to al-Afghani's politicized circle of student malcontents. Like other members of his class, 'Abduh was dissatisfied with the way the Turko-Circassian aristocracy was mismanaging the country's finances. After an abortive plan to assassinate the Khedive Isma'il, this political involvement culminated in his role in the 'Urabi revolt, a role for which he was exiled from Egypt.

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[1] For Rida's life and thought see Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966); Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970, Chapter IX); Ahmad ash-Sharabasi, *Rashid Rida sahib al-Manar* (Cairo: Matabi' al-Ahram at-Tijariyyah, 1970).

[2] See Nikki Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani: A Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism, Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani*, trans. Nikki R. Keddie and Hamid Algar (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968); Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1966).

‘Abduh spent the first few years of his exile in Paris, where he helped al-Afghani issue the anti-British Muslim periodical *al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqa* (The firmest bond). The editors must have thought that the Baha'i faith might be an ally in reform, because al-Afghani mailed a copy of it to Baha'u'llah in ‘Akka.[3] ‘Abduh later taught in Beirut, and eventually broke with al-Afghani. Rejecting the radicalism he had embraced in the seventies and eighties, he returned to Cairo, after the favorable intervention of the British with the Khedive, to pursue educational and language reforms. This conversion to liberalism parallelled a decline in revolutionary fervor among the rural notables in the late 1880s.

While taxes had risen to intolerably high levels under the Khedive Isma‘il (r. 1863–1879), after the British takeover of Egypt in 1882, the threat of more revolts forced the new colonial regime of Evelyn Baring (later Earl of Cromer) to keep taxes down. The landholding families which managed to keep their large holdings together transformed themselves into agrarian capitalists and became urbanized absentee landlords; many of them did not actively oppose British rule, and their nationalism was muted by a conviction that it was only through education and gradual reform that the Egyptians could achieve independence. ‘Abduh became a spokesman for this class. In 1899, he was appointed Grand Mufti (jurisconsult) for all of Egypt through British influence, and he used the office to promulgate liberal reforms in Islamic law and education. ‘Abduh's own belief in Islam, or even in God, has been questioned, and it is entirely possible that he was, at least in his youth, a closet agnostic who believed in using religion to reform society.[4]

That the naive, earnest, and religiously strict young Rida should develop a close relationship with the worldly, broadminded ‘Abduh evokes a sense of irony, and testifies to ‘Abduh's ability to tailor his conversation to the interests of his audience. Equally ironic is the fact that the first major dispute between the two was over the Baha'i faith.

II

The Baha'i faith grew out of the Babi religion founded in 1844 in Shiraz by Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819–1850).[5] Moojan Momen, an

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[3] See Baha'u'llah, *Lawh-i dunya, Majmu‘ah'yi matbu‘ah'yi alvah-i mubarakah* (Cairo: Sa'adah Press, 1920), pp. 298–99.

[4] See Kedourie, *Afghani and ‘Abduh*, p. 45.

[5] For Babi history and doctrines, see Joseph Arthur comte de Gobineau, *Les Religions et philosophies dans l'asie centrale* (Paris: E. Leroux, 3rd. ed. 1900); *Traveller's Narrative,* ed. and trans. Edward G. Browne (Cambridge at the University Press, 1891, 2 vols.); Mirza Huseyn Hamadani, *The Tarikh-i-Jadid* or New History, trans. Edward G. Browne (Cambridge at the University Press, 1893);

Iranian scholar, has recently demonstrated that this was a mass movement with a diversified class base.[6] When violence broke out between the Babis and the Shi‘i Muslims in the late 1840s, government troops intervened and nearly crushed the movement. At the height of these conflicts, the Iranian government executed Shirazi, who had taken the title "the Bab" and claimed in 1848 to be the return of the Twelfth Imam. This brought retaliation by a small splinter group of radical Babis in 1852; they attempted to assassinate the young Nasiru'd-Din Shah. Many Babis were in consequence brutally massacred.

The government exiled the surviving leadership to Baghdad[7] where, in 1863, Mirza Husayn ‘Ali Nuri, "Baha'u'llah" (1817–1892), declared himself to be the promised one foretold by the Bab or *man yuzhiruhu'llah* (He whom God shall make manifest). A few months later the Ottoman rulers exiled him and his retinue still farther from Iran to Istanbul and then to Edirne. Extant writings by Baha'u'llah in the period 1852–63 show that he had been primarily concerned with mystical, ethical, and theological themes. But as the Babi leadership moved into the Levant, new concerns emerged. In the latter years of his stay in Edirne, Baha'u'llah consolidated his position as the leader of a new, post-Babi religion—the Baha'i faith. He began to address world issues like the arms race and advocated a diversion of these funds to the poor.[8] In the ensuing years, especially after his exile to ‘Akka in 1868, Baha'u'llah developed a comprehensive vision of societal reform.

In 1875 Baha'u'llah's eldest son, ‘Abdu'l-Baha ‘Abbas, set forth the Baha'i utopia in his *Risalah-yi madaniyyah* (Treatise on civilization), which he

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Hajji Mirza Jani Kashani, *Kitab-i nuqtatu'l-qaf,* ed. Edward G. Browne (Leyden: E.J. Brill, 1910); Seyyed Ali Mohammad dit le Bab, *Le Beyan Persan,* trans. A.L.M. Nicolas (Paris: Librairie Paul Guethner, 1911, 2 vols.); Muhammad Zarandi 'Nabil-i A‘zam,' *The Dawnbreakers*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (New York: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1932). For the religious background of Babism, see Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785–1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). An important recent scholarly treatment of the Babi movement is Denis MacEoin, "From Shaykhism to Babism: A Study in Charismatic Renewal in Shi‘i Islam" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1979). There is no recent scholarly account of the Baha'i faith itself. For a popular work which does use some scholarly apparatus, see H.M. Balyuzi, *Baha'u'llah King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980).

[6] Moojan Momen, "The Social Basis of the Babi Upheavals (1848–53): A Preliminary Analysis" (unpublished manuscript, 1979).

[7] Kazem Kazemzadeh and Firuz Kazemzadeh, "Baha'u'llah's Prison Sentence: The Official Account," *World Order* 13 (Winter 1978–79): 11–14.

[8] See Baha'u'llah's *Suratu'l-muluk* (Tablet of the kings), composed during his exile in Edirne 1864–1868, in *Alvah-i nazilah khitab bi muluk va ru‘asa-yi ard* (Tehran: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 124 B.E./1967 A.D.), pp. 8–9. Cf. Nikki Keddie, "Is there a Middle East?", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (July 1973): 267.

wrote as an anonymous open letter to the Iranian government.[9] This program depended on governmental reforms and included constitutionalism, parliamentary democracy, measures aimed at reducing class stratification and improving the lot of the working classes, and a world assembly which would prevent wars between the major powers through collective security. In the atmosphere of patrimonial autocracy and religious conservatism which prevailed in the Ottoman Empire during most of this period, the Baha'is presented a liberal and universalist set of proposals.

From Baha'u'llah's arrival in 'Akka in 1868 to the turn of the century, the major population center for the Baha'i faith remained Iran. However, there were Baha'is in other areas of the Middle East, and the Baha'i leadership made deliberate efforts to spread the faith to Egypt. Beginning in the late 1860s, Iranian Baha'is, who were predominantly merchants, began establishing themselves in Alexandria and Cairo. Among these were Hajj Mulla 'Ali Tabrizi and Hajj Muhammad Yazdi. Baha'u'llah specifically sent the latter to Egypt, as well as Mirza Haydar 'Ali Isfahani. At the instigation of the Iranian Consulate, the Khedive Isma'il deported Isfahani from Egypt to prison in the Sudan for his activities in attempting to spread the Baha'i faith.[10] For the most part, however, the Iranian Baha'is in Egypt prospered, though they, like other residents in Egypt, suffered losses during the tumultuous period of the 'Urabi uprising and the British occupation.

The arrival in the mid-1890s of Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani, a renowned scholar who converted to the Baha'i faith after receiving training as a Muslim *'alim*, reinforced the small Iranian Baha'i community in Egypt. Gulpaygani (1844–1914) established an informal circle of students in Cairo, drawn for the most part from those attending al-Azhar. He taught geography, history, dialectical theology (*kalam*), and Qur'an commentary. He gained the trust of some of his Sunni students in spite of the fact that they undoubtedly thought him to be a Shi'ite, a branch of Islam prevalent in Iran that Egyptians generally considered heretical. Over the next few years, Gulpaygani brought more than fourteen students and teachers at al-Azhar into the Baha'i faith.[11] This first influx of native Egyptian intellectuals into

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[9] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *ar-Risalah al-madaniyyah* (Cairo: Kurdistan Science Press, 1329 A.H./1911 A.D.); translated into English by Marzieh Gail as *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1956).

[10] Mirza Haydar 'Ali, *Bahjat as-sudur* (Bombay: Parsi Press, 1912); partial English trans. by A.Q. Faizi, *Stories from the Delight of Hearts*, (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1980). C.F. Moojan Momen, ed., *The Babi and Baha'i Religions, 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), pp. 257–64.

[11] Ruhu'llah Mihrabkhani, *Sharh-i ahval-i jinab-i Mirza Abu'l-Fada'il-i Gulpaygani* (Tehran: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 131 B.E./1974 A.D.), p. 249.

the religion gives some evidence both of the appeal of the Baha'i faith for this group and the persuasiveness of Gulpaygani himself.

In 1896, an assassin with ties to Jamalu'd-Din al-Afghani killed Iran's Nasiru'd-Din Shah. Both in Iran itself and among Iranian expatriates, many blamed the Babis for the incident (few Iranians made any distinction at that time between Babis and Baha'is). Until official word came from Iran that the Baha'is were not involved, many Shi'ite Iranian expatriates were calling for a retaliatory massacre of the Baha'is in Egypt. It was during this period that Gulpaygani openly declared himself to be a Baha'i.[12] He had by this time established contacts with the Egyptian press. When news reports began containing charges that the Babis were behind the Shah's assassination, Ya'qub Sarruf and Faris Nimr asked Gulpaygani for an article on the Babi-Baha'i movement for their secular-minded journal, *al-Muqtataf*. Gulpaygani complied, and thereby brought this movement to the attention of intellectuals throughout the Arab world.[13]

III

Rashid Rida, then a student of Islamic sciences in Tripoli, read Gulpaygani's article. Shortly thereafter, on his arrival in Cairo, Rida sought out Gulpaygani. Rida had found the article perturbing, as it seemed to him heretical in its implication that Baha'u'llah could modify Islamic law. His conversations with Gulpaygani convinced him that the Baha'i faith was a wholly new religion, with its own laws, which accepted the divinity of Baha'u'llah. Since most Baha'is at that time continued to observe Muslim rites for fear of persecution, Rida concluded that they were esotericists pretending to believe in Islam while actually practicing another religion.[14]

Rida was unhappy to hear of 'Abduh's friendship with 'Abdu'l-Baha 'Abbas, who became the head of the Baha'i faith on his father's death in 1892. 'Abduh and 'Abdu'l-Baha met when the former was teaching in Beirut, and apparently struck up quite a warm relationship. Rida brought this up with 'Abduh, asking him directly what he thought of the Babi-Baha'i movement. The latter replied: "This sect is the only one which works for the acquisition of arts and sciences among the Muslims, and there are scholars and sages among them." He went on to say that he did not know whether the charges leveled at them of believing in the incarnation of God were true.[15] 'Abduh also spoke well of Mirza Abu'l-Fadl, though he said he had not met him. For his old friend 'Abdu'l-Baha he had nothing but the highest commendation. Rida said that he had heard of 'Abdu'l-Baha's great knowledge of religious science and his diplomacy (*as-siyasah*), and that he was able to please any audience. 'Abduh replied, "Yes, 'Abbas Effendi is more than that. Indeed, he is a great man; he is the man who deserves to have that epithet applied to him."[16] Rida must have found 'Abduh's almost adulatory attitude toward 'Abdu'l-Baha and his lauding of the Baha'i faith for its liberal ideals rather disconcerting.

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[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 259–61. For an image of the Shi'ite Iranian expatriate community in Egypt around the turn of the century, see Muhammad Yadegari, "The Iranian Settlement in Egypt as seen through the Pages of the Community Paper *Chihrinama* (1904–1966)," *Middle Eastern Studies* 16 (May 1980): 98–114.

[13] Mirza Fadlu'llah al-Irani, "al-Bab wa'l-Babiyyah," *al-Muqtataf* 20 (September 1896): 650–57.

[14] Rashid Rida *Ta'rikh al-ustadh al-imam ash-shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh* (Cairo: al-Manar Press, 1931) 1:930–39.

In addition, 'Abduh expressed agreement with Abu'l-Fadl's argument that the persistence and spread of the Baha'i faith demonstrated its truth, as falsehood cannot endure. This is one of the proofs traditionally put forth by the Babis and Baha'is for the truth of their religions. 'Abduh also argued that no religious movement could demonstrate vitality, endure and spread unless it were essentially true, even though some falsehood might become mixed with it in some of its phases. This falsehood, he maintained, would be accidental and not essential to the movement.[17] This argument supporting the Baha'i stance was unacceptable to Rida, who determined to convince his mentor of its falseness. Rida firmly believed that the Baha'i faith, along with many other religious movements throughout history which demonstrated great persistence and vitality, was essentially false. His attitude did not allow for "partially true" movements.

'Abduh agreed with the Baha'i faith on two other issues. Unlike Rida, he thought the Islamic law allowing polygamy could fruitfully be reinterpreted so as to restrict the ease with which another wife could be taken. Rida was not pro-polygamy, but he objected to Baha'u'llah's arrogation to himself of the right to legislate on this issue anew.[18] 'Abdul also agreed with the Baha'i emphasis on the unity of the great religions and its dedication to working for harmony among their adherents.[19]

Despite his admiration for the Baha'i faith, 'Abduh was not willing to give up even the appearance of Sunni Islam. He complained that reformist movements in Islam at that time tended to be extremist in some way. Perhaps he was thinking of al-Afghani himself, though the example he gave was that of the Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula. He felt that this extremism interfered with the accomplishment of reformist goals, but also seemed to believe that it did not invalidate the essential truth of movements like Wahhabism and the Baha'i faith. He rejected the Baha'i claim that there could be prophets after Muhammad, and viewed terminology like "Manifestation of God" (*mazhar ilahi*), which was applied to prophets by Baha'is, as heretical regardless of which religious tradition it appeared in.[20] But he did not dispute the Baha'i argument that the persistence and growth of a religious movement prove its intrinsic truth. Apparently this intrinsic truth lay in basic tenets and social principles, and remained unaffected by what 'Abduh considered theological eccentricities.

IV

Rida's attempt to refute Abu'l-Fadl's "argument from persistence" for the truth of the Baha'i faith began with an article in *al-Manar* (Lighthouse) entitled "Propaganda is the Life of Religions."[21] He noted that some Muslims despaired when they heard of the success of Christian missionaries in converting Black African Muslims. He argued that such stories should sadden Muslims, but should also galvanize them into action. Moreover, a better understanding of the reasons behind this missionary success would have to be achieved. Rida began by refuting two common explanations for the spread of religions. The first was that religions are spread by governments as a policy tool. He said that government can only facilitate the growth of a religion which is already spreading for other more essential reasons. The second explanation that Rida rejected was that religions and sects spread because they are true in their essence:

> There is among the Muslims a sect which has established a new rite, or rather a new religion. It has begun to spread, and even among students at the al-Azhar there are those who adhere to it. These attempt to prove that the spread of religions and schools is a proof of their truth. They claim that the principles of pagan religions like those of Buddha, Brahma, and Zoroaster are also sound and heavenly. . . . Perhaps if they were asked about the reasons for the success of the Protestant rite, for example, they would say that it is no exception to the rule, and has simply called for the abandonment of blind tradition and the innovations which have crept into the Christian religion, as well as for a closeness to its true sources. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult or

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[15] *Ibid.*, p. 930. Technically, the Baha'i faith does reject incarnationism in favor of theophany.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 931.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Baha'u'llah, *al-Kitab al-aqdas* (Bombay: n.p., n.d.), p. 64.

[19] Rida, *Ta'rikh al-ustadh*, p. 936.

[20] Muhammad 'Abduh, *al-A'mal al-kamilah*, ed. Muhammad al-'Imarah, vol. III (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1972), pp. 214–17.

[21] Rashid Rida, "ad-Da'wah hayat al-adyan," *al-Manar* 3 (September 16, 1900): 457–61.

> impossible for them to establish the truth of pagan religions and other religions and rites which have spread and persisted to this day.[22]

This obviously refers to the Baha'i faith. In Rida's view, this argument fails because demonstrably false pagan religions have spread and persisted. Intrinsic truth cannot, in his opinion, constitute the real reason that any religion enjoys success in propagating itself. The cause behind the spread of religions is active proselytizing.[23]

Rida followed this article with a sequel entitled "Religious Propaganda: Its Rules and Methodology."[24] In it he attempted to demonstrate that the prerequisite for the spread of a religion is that its propaganda be conducted soundly. He noted that a charismatic leader is a real asset to any religious movement, and thought it accounted for some of the success of the Sanusiyyah movement in Libya. He also pointed to the success the Ahmadiyyah movement in India had in attracting Hindus.

Rida asserted that there are two aspects of religious propaganda. One consists of philosophical proofs for the elite of intellectuals, and the other of sermons on morality for the masses. He outlined a set of specialized skills needed by a missionary. These include knowledge of the local language and of local customs and usages; he suggested that the Ahmadiyyah movement was particularly expert in these. He also stressed the need for an acquaintance with the religious sects and rites of the people among whom the missionary is working. The message must be delivered in a way that will awaken minds and thought; kind words must be used in dealing with people. Rida stressed the internal characteristics of the propagandist himself, insisting that he must be convinced of his message and must act according to it. He must evince great patience and a never-failing hope of success. These skills, Rida claimed, explain the spread of religious movements, rather than any element of intrinsic truth. He implied that entirely false religious ideas may be spread with these methods just as successfully as true ones. He concluded the article with a plea that Islam be taken first of all to the Muslims themselves. He seemed to think that the proliferation among Muslims of sufi orders and such movements as the Sanusiyyah, the Ahmadiyyah, Sudanese Mahdism, and the Babi and Baha'i faiths proved that the Muslims were not firmly grounded in the essentials of their own religion. This emphasis on the internal strengthening of the community rather than foreign mission was natural in a situation where many Muslim countries were under European colonial rule. Muslims saw the need for self-

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[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 461-62.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 463.

[24] Rashid Rida, "ad-Da'wah wa tariquha wa adabuha," *al-Manar* 3 (September 25, 1900): 481-90.

defense and self-strengthening as more important, in a situation of economic and political dependency, than the need for an aggressive expansionism.

The next major event which attracted Rida's attention to the Baha'i faith was the publication in the autumn of 1900 of Mirza Abu'l-Fadl's *ad-Durar al-bahiyyah* (Glorious pearls).[25] Rida erroneously said that this was the first Baha'i book published in Egypt; he seemed unaware of Gulpaygani's Persian treatise, *Fara'id*, published in Cairo in 1898. He was incensed that this book was published by a Kurdish student at the al-Azhar, and even sold on the premises of this preeminent Muslim university. Its publication was financed by this student, Fara ju'llah Zaki al-Kurdi, and another Baha'i, Mirza Hasan Khurasani. The book is rationalist in tone, and begins with a discussion of whether historical events mentioned in the Qur'an can be taken at their face value, concluding with Averroes that since prophets speak in terms people can understand, an historian may not assume that events mentioned in scripture are historically accurate.

Rida reported in his biography of Muhammad 'Abduh that this book attracted the favorable notice of prominent Muslim intellectuals like Mustafa Kamil and Shaykh 'Ali Yusuf.[26] Kamil (1874-1908) was a fervently nationalistic spokesman for the lower middle class, and Yusuf was the publisher of the rather more conservative journal *al-Mu'ayyad*. It was probably Gulpaygani's ability to combine Muslim piety with a neoclassical rationalism that appealed to these middle-class thinkers. For a middle class increasingly integrated into the capitalist world system, the rationalization of various sectors of life had created internal conflicts with more intuitional and traditional ways of thinking characteristic of precapitalist societies. A synthesis like that presented by Abu'l-Fadl was therefore attractive to this class.

Rida, however, considered the Baha'i faith an esoteric religion essentially opposed to the free exercise of reason by individuals. He attempted to prevent Abu'l-Fadl's book from receiving favorable reviews, but did not altogether succeed. He did see to it that Faraju'llah Zaki al-Kurdi was reprimanded and eventually expelled from the al-Azhar for having adopted the Baha'i faith and having helped to publish the book. Rida was convinced that Baha'i propaganda represented a far greater danger to Islam than did that of Christian missionaries. Muslims, he said, were not particularly impressed by Christian arguments, but the Islamic appearance of Baha'i literature might lull them into thinking that it was simply a new school of Islam; they might embrace it without realizing they were falling into apostasy.[27] Rida tried to have the book recalled by the government, and warned Muslims not to read it—to return it or burn it.[28]

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[25] Rashid Rida, "ad-Diyanah al-Baha'iyyah wa kitab ad-Durar al-Bahiyyah," *al-Manar* 3 (October 15, 1900): 547-49; Rashid Rida, "Kitab al-Baha'iyyah wa nashiruhu," *al-Manar* 3 (October 25, 1900): 574-75. Cf. E.G. Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion* (Cambridge at the University Press, 1918), p. 195.

[26] Rashid Rida, *Ta'rikh al-ustadh*, p. 937. For Kamil, see F. Steppat, "Nationalismus und Islam bei Mustafa Kamil," *Welt des Islams* 4 (1956); Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr., "The Egyptian Nationalist Party: 1892-1919" in *Political and Social Change in Modern Egypt*, ed. P.M. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Ibrahim Amin Ghali, *L'Egypte nationaliste et libérale de Moustapha Kamel à Saad Zaghloul (1892-1927)* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969).

Over the next couple of years, Rida had his contacts in Tehran send him copies of Babi and Baha'i books. In 1904, he published a long piece in refutation of the Babi-Baha'i movement based on the thesis that it was opposed to the very freedom of thought and use of human reason which was indispensable to Islam andIslamic reform.[29] The article, entitled "Mankind's Ability to Dispense with a New Religion," began with the claim that Islam abrogates all past religions but cannot itself ever be abrogated because it is the religion most attuned to man's own natural state (*din al-fitrah*), wherein man can work out his own salvation independently.[30] The idea of charismatic leaders who invariably stifle free thought was foreign to Rida's vision of Islam, and he felt that the urge of the masses to follow such a leader was wholly irrational and so un-Islamic. Here the rationalism of the new middle class came into stark conflict with the modes of irrational group solidarity, such as mahdism and ecstatic sufi orders prevalent among the working classes and the traditional lower middle classes.

Rida admitted that Islam had grown weak, and that this weakness necessitated reform. But he insisted that there were only two means of reform. One consisted in a return to the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet, and the other in the recognition of a mahdi, or messianic figure, who would restore the Muslim golden age of the time of Muhammad. He said that the messianic beliefs current among Muslims were harmful to Islam, and used the Babi movement as an example of what great harm can come of such a belief. He depicted the Bab as the promulgator of a religion that, by virtue of the Babi doctrine of theophany, stood in contradiction to Sunni Islam's transcendental monotheism. Babism, he said, attacked independence of thought and demanded the submission of all. Rida argued that the demand for blind obedience to a charismatic leader which he attributed to Babism stemmed from the Shi'ite belief in *taqlid*, or the emulation of traditional authorities. He asserted that this belief in blind tradition was antithetical to true Islam, and pointed out that the Qur'an teaches people to use their reason and to ask for proof (*burhan*). Babism, he

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[27] Rida, "ad-Diyanah al-Baha'iyyah," p. 548.

[28] Rashid Rida, "Kitab al-Baha'iyyah," *al-Manar* 3 (November 14, 1900): 624.

[29] Rashid Rida, "Istighna' al-bashar 'an din jadid," *al-Manar* 7 (1904):338–55.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 341–42.

objected, demanded that they accept everything that the Bab told them without question. Further, Rida objected to the Babi claims concerning the miracles their leader performed, citing this as another example of irrational, unsubstantiated arguments typical of Babism. In Islam, he asserted, the Prophet's only miracle was his extraordinary literary ability, as is appropriate to a religion of reason. Here, Rida ignored the propensity of most Muslims in most ages to believe in miracle stories about the Prophet Muhammad, and opposed his rationalist middle-class version of Islam to some aspects of popular Babism. Ironically, Baha'i intellectuals like Gulpaygani took a similarly rationalist approach to miracles, seeing them as metaphors.

Rida showed particular displeasure with the Bab's ban on the study of logic, metaphysics, theology, and the principles of jurisprudence.[31] He insisted that the Qur'an encourages science, but that the Bab's strictures against rational sciences meant that all knowledge was forbidden save that which derived from him. Rida did admit that Baha'u'llah abrogated this prohibition in his *al-Kitab al-aqdas* (Most holy book),[32] but went on to argue that even though the Baha'is were right on this point they still based themselves on the religion of the Bab. He asserted that what is founded upon falsehood is itself necessarily false.

While the Bab's demands that his mission be recognized as divine were in actuality probably no more uncompromising than those of the Qur'an, Rida correctly perceived that Babism was a more intuitional, esoteric religion. He erred, however, in failing to distinguish between Babism and the Baha'i faith. The latter was quite rationalistic, with an emphasis on Neoplatonic philosophy and the value of modern technology and science. This was part of its appeal for middle-class, reform-minded Muslims like 'Abduh. The new bourgeoisies were employing aspects of Neoplatonic rationalism to come to terms with the rationalism required by modern capitalism.[33] Rida realized that the Baha'i stance itself was not so far removed from his own, but felt that the Baha'i recognition of the Babi movement as part of its own heritage indicated an implicit acceptance of the irrational bases and modes of thought which he claimed characterized it.

Rida next addressed the question of why the Baha'is had success in converting Muslims while the Christians did not. He replied that Muslim ignorance of Islam was a major factor. He complained that Muslims did not know the Qur'an, were often ignorant of the biography of the Prophet and his practice, and were weak in an understanding of classical Arabic, upon which comprehension of the Qur'an is based. A better knowledge of Arabic, he argued, would have led Muslims to scoff at the Bab's idiosyncratic Arabic. He also lamented that Muslims had grown used to accepting whatever their 'ulama' told them. Moreover, they had a tendency to obey anyone who claimed to be righteous or a mystic, and they often held obscure and meaningless sufi works in universal esteem. This, he said, made it easier for people to accept the Bab's interpretation of the Qur'anic story of Joseph as a reference to the Iman Husayn. Finally, he cited the exaggerated respect in which Muslims held descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (called *sayyid* or *sharif*). He depicted Babism as a phenomenon typical of working-class, popular religion which was alien to the literate Islam of the middle classes, and wished to combat it by spreading literacy and religious education among the masses.[34] However, Rida's analysis fails to account for the significant percentage of the early believers in Babism in Iran who were 'ulama of the Shaykhi school and who were hardly ignorant of Islamic sciences. It also does not account for the Azharites who became Baha'is through Gulpaygani.

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[31] Seyyed Ali Mohammad, *Le Béyan Persan* 1:131 (IV:10).

[32] Baha'u'llah, *al-Kitab al-aqdas*, pp. 81–82.

[33] For an example of this cultural phenomenon in Egypt at an earlier period, see Juan Ricardo Cole, "Rifa'a al-Tahtawi and the Revival of Practical Philosophy," *The Muslim World* 70 (January 1980): 29–46. Cf. Peter Gran, *The Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt 1760–1840* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 151–64. Gran has a more strictly materialist approach to the sociology of knowledge than I do, and does not place the same emphasis on philosophy.

V

Rida's reaction to the Baha'i faith and his development of a utilitarian missiology must be understood in the context of his own cultural, confessional, and socioeconomic background. Particularly important are his Sunni West Syrian religious training; his dislike of the cosmopolitan, which he associated with Western imperialism; his rural notable disdain for the excesses of popular religion; and European capitalism's increasing impact in Egypt and the Levant, leading to the rationalization of many sectors of life.[35]

Rida's Sunni co-religionists in western Syria were surrounded by various Christian communities, as well as by several Shi'ite groups. Among the latter were 'Alawites, Druze, Imami Shi'ites, and Isma'ilis. They thus felt a greater need to develop a clear sense of identity than did Egyptian Sunni Muslims. Confessional identity in this region formed an important basis of

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[34] Rida, "Istighna' al-bashar," pp. 343–44.

[35] For the rationalization of sufi *tariqah* organization in modern Egypt, see Michael Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt* (Oxford at the University Press, 1973).

social closure; there was much competition among these religious communities for economic and political power.[36] The alliance of the Druze with the British, the Maronites with the French, and the Sunnis with the Ottomans at the turn of the century demonstrates the extent to which these millets acted almost like statelets. Given Rida's loyalty to the Ottoman caliphate, the Western imperialist connections of some of these millets were especially galling to him.

Rida was particularly distrustful of Shi'ism; he was very far from those Sunni ecumenists who have suggested that Imami Shi'ism could be accepted as a fifth juridical rite, the Ja'fari *madhhab*. Rather, he saw all Shi'ites as potential extremists *(ghulah)*.[37] Egyptian Sunnis like Muhammad 'Abduh viewed the Baha'is as a creative minority which was striving to modernize Shi'ite Islam and whose ideas were relevant to Islamic reform in general. But Rida perceived them as a recrudescence of the same kind of esotericism which had spawned the Isma'ilis, Druze, and 'Alawites, whom he viewed as pernicious internal threats to the integrity of "true" (Sunni) Islam. He saw himself as a latter-day al-Ghazali (d. 1111 A.D.), who championed a moderate sort of Islam and battled Shi'ism through his polemics against the Fatimid Isma'ilis in Egypt. Rida viewed the Baha'is as the modern equivalents of the Fatimids, in spite of the fact that this religion developed out of Imami rather than Isma'ili Islam.

Shi'ism has a strong messianic or mahdist component, and Rida associated charismatic mahdi figures with lower-class folk religion. As a member of the literate notable class and a urban journalist, he was convinced that reforms could only be effected in Islam through the use of reason, the spread of mass literacy and education, and a return to the basic sources. While it is true that many mahdist or proto-mahdist movements, like the Sanusiyyah or that of the Sudanese Mahdi, arose among tribes-people and peasants at the peripheries of the Islamic world, Babism was a largely urban phenomenon with significant participation from 'ulama and merchants. Rida was mistaken, therefore, in seeing mahdism solely as an irrational manifestation of lower-class ignorance. It might, however, be true that the middle classes in more economically developed areas of the Middle East, such as those directly bordering the Mediterranean, because they had developed rationalized means of dealing with rapid social change, were less open to the blandishments of messianism and millenarianism than their counterparts in less-developed areas such as Iran. The most appealing aspects of the Baha'i faith for middle-class Egyptian intellectuals seem to have been the reform measures adopted by Baha'u'llah after his exile to the Mediterranean areas of the Ottoman Empire. Rida seems to have appreciated these as well, but felt their value was vitiated by the irrational, messianic basis upon which, in his view, they were promulgated.

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[36] For a neo-Weberian discussion of closure, see Frank Parkins, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

[37] Rashid Rida, "Al-Batiniyyah wa akhiru firaqihim al-Babiyyah al-Baha'iy-yah", *al-Manar* 13 (December 2, 1910: 833–40; 13 (January 10, 1914): 922–32; 14 (February 1911): 138–43.

Rida began life as the scion of a village notable family with a semimodern education and an income of fifty Egyptian pounds a year from his orchards. But as a lower middle-class journalist in Egypt, he invested more than he could afford in his journal and gradually got into increasing debt. He died owing two thousand pounds and with a mortgage on his house. Somewhere along the way he lost his lands.[38] Whether because of his downward mobility or simply in conjunction with it, Rida increasingly adopted more conservative positions. He was also increasingly outspoken against the "Westernizers" (*mutafarnijun*). As a defender of local values, and as a member of a professional petty bourgeoisie in competiton with Europeans, Rida found the religious and cultural universalism of the Baha'i faith repugnant. The Baha'is obviously represented a cosmopolitan ideology, an attempt to come to terms culturally with the fact that modern capitalism and its technology had created a planetary economic and political system. Rida, meanwhile, was desperately attempting to maintain a rationalized version of the Sunni Islam of his village notable family in the face of his own reduction to the lowest rung of Cairo's middle classes.

Rida's theory of the spread of religions, which depended upon efficient organization rather than intrinsic truth, reflected the increasing impact of capitalism upon Egyptian society. In capitalism, success is linked to competition and efficiency, and truth is irrelevant. Just as the village notables in the Middle East had lost their hereditary right to status and wealth, and could keep it only by transforming themselves into efficient, organized capitalists, so the Islamic values of the village notables could be maintained only by efficient proselytization, not by their intrinsic metaphysical truth. And just as foreign businessmen could get the upper hand over the Muslim village notables by better economic techniques, so could Christian and Baha'i missionaries score victories over Sunni Islam by a more sophisticated approach to missiology. The emergence of this theory of the spread of religions, a theory older thinkers like 'Abduh could not accept, is a symptom of the breakdown of the precapitalist value structure. In its utilitarian, rationalized emphases, Rida's missiology is distinguished from earlier Muslim theories of the spread of religions, even sociological ones like that of Ibn Khaldun (1332–1405 A.D.). The latter had argued that no religion could succeed without the help of irrational group solidarity (*al-'asabiyyah*);[39] even religious movements had to operate within the constraints of natural and sociological laws, such as kinship allegiance. In this sense, there is a parallel between his theory of religious movements and that of Rida. But Rida, while he recognized the importance of irrational factors like personal allegiance to a popular leader, put most of his emphasis on utilitarian and rationalized techniques of mission. This emphasis was natural in a society like turn-of-the-century Egypt, where periphery capitalism had established itself.[40]

In summary, Rashid Rida's theory of successful religious propaganda grew out of his struggle against Christian and Baha'i missionary activity among Muslims. He began by rejecting an explanation of success in mission through governmental support. He next denied the Babi-Baha'i argument that any religion which survives and spreads must be intrinsically true. He went on the suggest that success in mission could be accounted for by practical techniques adopted by the missionaries, and that these techniques could be used to promulgate any religion, true or false. He further argued that messianic and millenarian religious movements can be spread more effortlessly among the lower classes, owing to the latter's illiteracy and ignorance of Islam and the Qur'an. It has been suggested that Rida's position strongly reflected his confessional and class background, and that his pragmatic approach to the sociology of mission may have reflected the socioeconomic changes in the Middle East in the late nineteenth century. Chief among these was the burgeoning of dependency capitalism and the accompanying growth of utilitarianism and realism as middle-class social philosophies.

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[38] See Sharabasi, *Rashid Rida*, pp. 166–69.

[39] 'Abdu'r-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddima*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, 3 vols.) I: 321 ff. (Chapter 3, subheading 6). Cf. Oliver Carré, "A Prospos de la sociologie politique d'Ib n Khaldun," *Revue Française de Sociologie* 14, no. 1 (January-March 1973):121.

[40] Cf. Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism*, pp. 179–80. For the growth and effects of dependency capitalism in modern Egypt and Lebanon, see Bryan S. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), chapter I. For Egypt, see also Eric M. Davis, "Bank Misr and the Political Economy of Industrialization in Egypt, 1920–1941" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1977).