



MANAKJI LIMJI HATARI
with his wife

EARLY ZOROASTRIAN CONVERSIONS TO THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN YAZD, IRAN

by Susan Stiles

This study examines the conversion of Zoroastrians to the Bahá'í Faith in Yazd from the early 1880s until 1921. This early appeal to persons of non-Muslim background was essential to the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith as an independent world religion. It involved two processes. First, Bahá'ís were challenged to distinguish themselves from the religious matrix out of which they had come, namely Islam. Further, they learned to make a convincing appeal of sufficient universality to attract the hearts and minds of non-Muslims and convince them to embrace the Bahá'í Faith. This paper will explore the factors which inclined Zoroastrians to become Bahá'ís and the effect of such a conversion movement on the Zoroastrian community. Finally, it will examine the processes by which Zoroastrian Bahá'ís began to distinguish themselves from their former religious community, develop separate social institutions, and incorporate themselves into the larger Bahá'í community.

Napier Malcolm, a minister of the Church Missionary Society living in Yazd at the turn of the century, described the town, located in central Persia, as insular and provincial. Muslims often mistreated the religious minorities, who were mainly Zoroastrians or Jews. Malcolm wrote in 1907:

Up to 1895 no Parsi [Zoroastrian] was allowed to carry an umbrella. Even during the time that I was in Yazd they could not carry one in

town. Up to 1895 there was a strong prohibition upon eye-glasses and spectacles; up to 1885 they were prevented from wearing rings; their girdles had to be made of rough canvas. . . . Up to 1886 the Parsis were obliged to twist their turbans instead of folding them. . . . Up to 1891 all Zoroastrians had to walk in town, and even in the desert they had to dismount if they met a big Mussulman. . . .

Up to about 1860 Parsis could not engage in trade. They used to hide things in their cellar rooms, and sell them secretly. They can now trade in the caravanserais or hostelrys, but not in the bazaars, nor may they trade in linen drapery. Up to 1870 they were not permitted to have school for their children.¹

Zoroastrianism. Perhaps the oldest prophetic religion is Zoroastrianism. The ultimate human issue for its followers is the choice between good and evil. Their central creed is not a statement of theology, but a moral code: good thoughts, good words, good deeds.

Mazdean cultic practices appear to predate Zoroaster and are similar to those of the Rig Veda. Zoroastrians venerate the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. Fire, as the symbol of Divine Truth, provides the center of Zoroastrian ritual life. For this reason outsiders have often dubbed them "fire-worshippers." Laymen tend sacred fires in their own homes while priests, known as *mawbads* and *dastúrs*, care for those of the fire temples which are located in towns and larger villages. Zoroastrians strictly adhere to standards of ritual purity. For them the dead are highly polluting. Rather than desecrate either the earth or the fire by burning or burying their dead, Zoroastrians have, until recently, preferred to leave corpses on bare mountainsides or in towers of silence (*dakhmih*) where they are quickly consumed by scavengers.

Zoroastrians are initiated into the faith of their fathers when they are invested with a sacred cord (*kushtf*) which consists of seventy-two strands. This cord is ritually tied and untied during their obligatory prayers which are performed five times daily. They are also given a sacred shirt (*sadrih*) which is worn next to the skin at all times. In the past, investiture took place when a

youth reached fifteen. Today children are invested at about seven or eight. Zoroastrians celebrate six seasonal festivals (*gahambar*) each year. Communal meals are offered at these events and portions of their sacred scriptures, the Avesta, are read.

Zoroastrian eschatology is one of the richest in the world, and from it much of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahá'í eschatology is drawn. Unfortunately, very little information is available on it in the English language, and much of this information is conflicting. While most Zoroastrian eschatology was written after the time of Alexander the Great (and some during the Islamic period), the Gathas, the earliest scriptures, themselves definitely allude to "the end of the world" and foretell its final renovation with a new resurrected humanity. At this time the Lie, the Gathic symbol of evil, will be utterly destroyed. Zoroastrians came to believe that a series of three Sayoshants (*sayásháns*), or Benefactors, would appear in intervals of a millennium. All would be born of virgins impregnated by the seed of Zoroaster which has been miraculously preserved in a lake.

While Zoroastrianism was once the principal religions of Iran, it gradually diminished after the Arab invasions. The disintegration of the Islamic Empire into smaller states, and the subsequent Mongol invasions, further threatened the remnant of that community. Many fled to India and established themselves in Gujarat, while the remainder hovered around Yazd and Kerman. The Iranian and Indian communities developed on entirely different levels. The Parsis or Indian Zoroastrians, under protection of the British, became increasingly westernized as they prospered in trade and commerce. The remnant of Zoroastrians in Iran, known derisively as *gabr*, was restricted to agriculture, sunk into the deepest poverty, and remained oppressed and culturally stagnant.

Among the values which Iranian Zoroastrians adopted from the Shí'í Muslims was the attitude they held toward suffering, persecution and oppression. The Shí'ís perceived of themselves as dispossessed. They maintained that self-perception, despite numerical and ideological dominance in Iran, by continually representing the meaning of their sacred history in terms of the

sufferings endured by Muḥammad's descendents, the Imams, at the hands of the oppressive Sunnī state. They rejected the triumphalism sometimes associated with Sunnī Islam, and instead regarded persecution in the path of God as an indication of legitimacy. Jews and Zoroastrians found this motif uniquely suited to their own situation. They came to interpret their own sacred history in similar terms, for if suffering and persecution lent legitimacy to a religion, they were manifestly legitimate.

In 1854, the Parsis established The Society for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Zoroastrians in Persia (*Anjuman-i Binayán*) for the purpose of alleviating the oppression and poverty to which their Iranian co-religionists were subject. Agents were sent from Bombay who raised the standard of living and status of Zoroastrians within Iran, but at the same time disrupted the internal equilibrium of that community. The agents' influence, along with growing trade relations between Yazd and Bombay in which Zoroastrians played a prominent role, led to the emergence of a merchant and professional class similar to what had long existed among the Parsis of India. By fostering rapid economic and social change, the Parsi agents set the stage for potential ideological change as well.

Manakji Limji Hatari. The first Parsi agent brought the Zoroastrian community into their initial, direct contact with a vehicle of ideological change, the Bahá'í Faith. Their first emissary was Manakji Limji Hatari, known in Iran as Mánikchí Šáhib.

Manakji traveled to Persia via Baghdad in 1854, where he met Bahá'u'lláh. Correspondence between Manakji and Bahá'u'lláh continued for a number of years. At least one of Bahá'u'lláh's letters to Manakji has been translated into English.² Manakji remained on friendly terms with the Bahá'ís throughout his life, as did subsequent Parsi agents. This had a marked impact on the Zoroastrian community in Iran and favorably affected their attitudes toward Bahá'ís.

In 1864, Manakji returned to India for a short period where he presented the plight of the Iranian Zoroastrians to their sister community in Bombay. He returned in 1865 with additional funds to establish schools for Zoroastrian children on the West-

ern model. The first of these schools opened in Tehran with some forty children. Manakji and his wife at first attempted to manage this school with only the assistance of volunteers. However, their knowledge of Persian proved inadequate, and other educated Zoroastrians were not available to teach.

Around 1876 Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl Gulpáygání, who later became the most erudite Bahá'í scholar of his time, was expelled from his position as a teacher in a religious school in Tehran when his Bahá'í conversion was discovered. Manakji heard of Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's predicament and knew of his skill in writing pure Persian without any words with Arabic roots. Being well-disposed toward the Bahá'ís and taking advantage of the opportunity, he asked Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl to teach Persian literature in his new school and serve as Manakji's personal secretary as well. Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl accepted the position. Many of his Zoroastrian students became devoted to this former *mullá* and later were among the earliest Zoroastrian Bahá'ís.³

Through Manakji's efforts, life for Zoroastrians greatly improved. According to Malcolm, the Zoroastrians themselves credited the Bahá'ís with at least some of the improvement. He himself noted that although the Bahá'í Faith was a semi-secret sect, their open pleas for general religious freedom and toleration had created an atmosphere conducive to the better treatment of minorities.⁴

Earliest Converts. The first Zoroastrian to become a Bahá'í was Kay-Khusraw Khudádád, a Yazdi who operated a textile store in Kashan and converted there. He investigated the Bahá'í Faith after witnessing the torture and death of a believer.⁵ I mentioned before that several of Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's students became Bahá'ís. The most well-known of these was Ustád Javán-Mard, whom Bahá'u'lláh entitled *Shír-Mard*, or Lion of a Man. Later, Ustád Javán-Mard became the principal of the first Zoroastrian school in Yazd. He remained a prominent member of the Zoroastrian community his entire life despite his conversion.

Once he wrote to Bahá'u'lláh asking seven questions concerning rituals, relations with those of other religions, eschatological matters, and Bahá'u'lláh's genealogy.

Bahá'u'lláh responded by proclaiming himself to be Sháh Bahrám (a title sometimes applied to one of the Sayoshants). He further maintained that the Judgment Day was present with his own Manifestation. As to his genealogy, Bahá'u'lláh referred Ustád Javán-Mard to the one previously compiled by Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl.⁶ In it, Bahá'u'lláh's descent was traced through to Yazdigird III, last of the Sassanian monarchs. Bahá'u'lláh's genealogy must have been compiled while Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl was working for Manakji. As we shall see, it proved of particular significance to Zoroastrian converts.⁷

One of the most important early converts was Mullá Bahrám Akhtar-i Khavari. Having thoroughly studied the apocalyptic literature of his religion, Mullá Bahrám became firmly convinced that the prophecies would soon be fulfilled. For a time Mullá Bahrám lived in Tehran where he and seven other Zoroastrians worked the land of one of the ministers of court. Their supervisor was a member of the 'Alí-Alláhi sect.⁸ While the supervisor endeavored to convert Mullá Bahrám to his religion, Mullá Bahrám tried to convince him of the validity of his own. The proofs Mullá Bahrám adduced were those regarding the miracles said to be associated with Zoroaster and the persecutions endured by the Prophet and his followers. The supervisor, Hájí Malik, questioned the truth of the miracles; as to the persecutions, he said, "To be killed in the path of faith is not proof of the truth, for several years ago they killed eighty people of the Bábí sect by the order of Násiru'd-Dín Sháh at the foot of the gallows, yet the falsehood of the Bábí sect is evident."⁹

Mullá Bahrám's curiosity was thus aroused. When he finished his work in Tehran, he traveled to Kashan where Kay-Khusraw Khudádád employed him in his store and taught him the Bahá'í Faith. When Mullá Bahrám returned to Yazd, he contacted members of the Bahá'í community there. These Bahá'ís introduced him to Hájí Muḥammad Táhír Malmírí. Hájí Muḥammad Táhír wrote of that meeting:

Up to that time [1882 or 1883] no one from among the Zoroastrians [in Yazd] had accepted the Faith. Indeed, the Bahá'ís could not imagine that these people would embrace the Faith, because they were

not involved in the early history and events associated with the Manifestations of God and were not included in any discussions concerning the Faith. However that day I spoke about the Faith to Mullá Bahrám. He came the next day, and after a few days he acknowledged the truth of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.¹⁰

Another prominent Zoroastrian convert was Siyávash Safidvash. Siyávash's father was a merchant who lived for a time in Tehran. His father related to his son how he had witnessed the cruel executions of the Bábís in 1852. He vividly described the death of Hájí Suláyman Khán, in whose flesh were inserted burning candles before he was paraded through the streets to the town gates where his body was cleft in two. Siyávash's father expressed his admiration for the courage displayed by the Bábís, for whom he felt great sympathy. Siyávash Safidvash, however, avoided all contacts with Bahá'ís since the *dastúrs* disapproved of them and he adhered strictly to the dictates of his religion.¹¹

In 1895 Siyávash, along with three other Zoroastrians, took up business selling textiles in the Muslim shrine city of Qum. Being the only Zoroastrians residing in that city, they found that the Bahá'ís (themselves merchants from another town) were the only people willing to associate with them. Once a Bahá'í presented Siyávash with a copy of the *Kitáb-i Iqán*. He read one or two pages, but when he came upon some quotations from the *Qur'an*, he immediately returned the book.

It happened that the father of Siyávash passed away in Sultanabad. There being no Zoroastrians in the town to see to his funeral arrangements, a Jewish Bahá'í arranged for his burial and relayed news of his death to Siyávash via telegram. Siyávash immediately left to retrieve his father's remains, since it was contrary to Zoroastrian law to bury the dead. Siyávash's father appeared to him in a dream and pleaded with him not to disinter his body. When he arrived in Sultanabad the Jewish Bahá'í sought likewise to dissuade him. Nevertheless, in the heat of summer, Siyávash transported his father's remains to a cave on the side of a mountain and left them there.

Despite his disapproval of the burial, Siyávash did appreciate

the kindness shown by the Jewish Bahá'í who was unfamiliar with Zoroastrian customs.¹² When he returned to Qum his attitude toward Bahá'ís became much more open. He accepted materials offered to him by Bahá'ís including the Tablet of Seven Questions [*Lawh-i Haft Fursish*] written on behalf of Ustád Javán-Mard. Siyávash was most impressed with the genealogy of Bahá'u'lláh. Previously, he had not been willing to accept the Bábí Faith since the Báb was a descendent of Muḥammad. The destruction wrought by the Arab invaders, he said, combined with the present oppressive behavior of Muslims in their dealings with Zoroastrians made him reluctant to accept anything relating to Islam. But since Bahá'u'lláh was a descendent from Sassanian kings, he was in Siyávash's eyes more acceptable. After perusing many of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, he and all three of his companions embraced the Bahá'í Faith in Qum.¹³

As the account of Siyávash's conversion indicates, the greatest impediment to Zoroastrians in accepting the Bahá'í religion was the necessity of accepting the Prophethood of Muḥammad as well. One Zoroastrian Bahá'í recounted that before he investigated the Bahá'í Faith, he had always assumed that Bahá'ís could not possibly believe in Muḥammad because Muslims treated them so badly. He therefore felt great sympathy toward Bahá'ís. At one point he witnessed a Bahá'í being torn to pieces by a mob and watched them set his corpse on fire. This Zoroastrian showed great eagerness to study the Bahá'í sacred writings. But then to his dismay, he discovered that Bahá'ís did indeed accept the validity of the Islamic revelation. The Bahá'ís urged their Zoroastrian friend not to judge Islam on the basis of the religion's present followers. Instead, they suggested, he should read the Qur'an for himself and determine its validity. The Zoroastrian pointed out that since the Qur'an was in Arabic he could not possibly read it. A Bahá'í who was also one of the ulama among the Muslims, Mullá 'Abdu'l-Qaní, then offered to read it with him. They studied that text for over two years before this Zoroastrian became a Bahá'í.

The kindness demonstrated by Bahá'ís in their dealings with minorities greatly impressed the Zoroastrians. A Zoroastrian youth named Ardishír visited the home of Mullá 'Abdu'l-Qaní.

Mullá 'Abdu'l-Qaní graciously received him. He served him tea and then deliberately violated the strictures of *najas* (ritual cleanliness) by drinking out of the same glass with him. Turning to his surprised guest he said, "You must have heard how, in the days of the advent of the promised Lord, the lamb and the wolf will drink from the same stream and graze in the same meadow. Do you still doubt that we are living in that Day?"¹⁴

The greater rationalism exhibited by Bahá'ís also encouraged conversions. Michael Fischer, an anthropologist, gives this account of a more recent conversion:

A Yazdí Zoroastrian now resident in Bombay tells of his conversion: He went to Firuz Bahman High School in Teheran and being Zoroastrian attended the religion class for Zoroastrians. One day a Bahá'í friend asked if he understood what he was memorizing. He replied no, and agreed that he should. When the next day he demanded explanations, he was beaten. The Muslim instructor at the school heard of this and invited him to his Qur'an class promising full explanation there. He went and soon became the number one student in the Qur'an class. For this he was rebuked by the Zoroastrian Anjoman. Then his Bahai friend came and said, 'What is this that you have become Muslim? Religion is not a shirt you change everyday, today you are Muslim, tomorrow Jewish, the next day Christian!' and he explained the Bahai tenet that all religions have the same eternal message, only the civil rules of life must change with the times. When the boy now announced to his mother that he had become a Bahai, she threw him out of the house crying, 'You Muslim! From today on the mother's milk I gave you from my breast has run dry!' And so he emigrated to Bombay where his father was living.¹⁵

These conversion stories share a number of factors in common. All of the early converts were drawn from the new educated elite which Manakji's reforms, growing trade relations with Bombay, and the changing conditions within Iran had combined to create. Some were professionals, others merchants, while still others were the more prosperous agriculturalists. Those conversions were catalytic to other conversions among the poorer peasants who associated with the others. Relatives

frequently converted soon after the conversions of these key individuals, who formed the leadership of the Zoroastrian Bahá'ís.

The earliest converts tended to be much more mobile than other Zoroastrians. They had all developed extensive relationships outside their insular Zoroastrian community. At the same time, they are all pictured as deeply religious, struggling heroically to maintain strict orthopraxy in an environment which could not accommodate it. Within this context the Bahá'í Faith presented these persons with an alternative way to affirm their heritage, remain religious, and yet make appropriate adjustments to the changing circumstances of turn-of-the-century Iran.

In regard to this, the eschatological component provided the bridge between the two communities. As soon as contacts between Zoroastrians and Bahá'ís began, Bahá'ís presented Bahá'u'lláh as the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Zoroastrian texts. By using pure Persian in his correspondence with Zoroastrians, Bahá'u'lláh himself played down the Islamic background of the faith in favor of its Persian aspects. Bahá'u'lláh's genealogy served the same function. By presenting the Bahá'í Faith as the culmination of all religious traditions, Bahá'ís were able to present effectively their religion to minorities, both as an affirmation of their past as well as a new possibility for facing the future.

At a time when Western rationalism was affecting the Iranian scene, the response from all religious communities tended to be reactionary. They strove defensively to adhere all the more stringently to their ancient rules and rituals. The Bahá'ís' insistence on the independent investigation of religious truth provided a refreshing alternative. At the same time, Bahá'ís made use of motifs common to nearly all religions in Iran. Minority reactions to the sufferings and persecutions endured by Bahá'ís is an example of this. Zoroastrian sympathies were aroused toward the Bahá'ís since they saw them as fellow sufferers. But more importantly, they addressed the perceptions of legitimacy shared by most Iranians, and derived from Shí'í theology, that see persecution and suffering as signs of a true religion. A final

factor seems to be the greater kindness and toleration exhibited by Bahá'ís, in an atmosphere where Muslims often took every opportunity to humiliate minorities.

The Confluence of Religion. The earliest conflicts between the Zoroastrian community and the early Bahá'í converts were precipitated by the repeated violation, by those Bahá'ís, of ethnic group boundaries in their relations with Bahá'ís of Muslim background. Muslim Bahá'ís and Zoroastrian Bahá'ís frequently invited each other to their homes and entertained each other in their respective neighborhoods. Among Muslim Bahá'ís this sometimes had to be done secretly at night, but the Zoroastrian Bahá'ís openly received their guests in hopes this would attract the attention of their Zoroastrian neighbors and cause them to inquire about the Bahá'í Faith.

During the disturbances related to the gruesome execution of seven Bahá'ís in Yazd in 1891,¹⁵ the Zoroastrian Bahá'ís found themselves in a better position to defend other Bahá'ís since the ulama were more likely to ignore them. While the bodies of the Bahá'ís were being dragged through the streets, the mob spotted two Zoroastrian Bahá'ís named Námdár Míhrabán and Firaydún Ardírshír. Not suspecting that they too were Bahá'ís, the mob forced them to come along and to bury the bodies after they had been dumped in a well. Through those two Zoroastrian Bahá'ís, the other Bahá'ís were able to locate the remains that night and provide them with a decent burial.¹⁶

In nineteenth-century Iran, when a Jew, Christian, or Zoroastrian converted to Islam, the change was as dramatic as it was decisive. Physically as well as spiritually, the convert left the community of his ancestors, leaving behind his former customs, dress and name. He would now adopt the lifestyle, laws and residence of the people whose religion he had embraced. In the early days of the Bahá'í Faith, before it had established many distinctive features of its own social life in Iran, and while it was still the object of fierce persecution, such a radical conversion was considered neither necessary, possible, nor desirable.

Although Bahá'u'lláh had provided in his writings for the

necessary laws and social institutions upon which a distinctive community life could be constructed, conditions were not at all favorable to their development, since they would subject the Bahá'ís to more persecution. Then, too, the essential issue for Bahá'ís in developing to an independent character was to divorce themselves from Islamic particularism. As such, the emphasis of Bahá'ís when reaching out to minorities, was on the universal aspects of their religion. They sought to affirm as many elements of the other's religion as possible, regarding no religion as essentially wrong. All emanated from the same source and found their culmination in Bahá'u'lláh.

The early converts remained within their ancestral community, often abiding by their customary laws and supporting their social institutions. At the same time, Zoroastrian Bahá'ís sought to convince other Zoroastrians of the truth of the Bahá'í revelation. Meanwhile they freely associated with Bahá'ís of other backgrounds.

The first ones to oppose the activities of the Zoroastrian Bahá'ís were, predictably, the Zoroastrian clergy. They used the persecutions of 1891 as an excuse to bring pressure to bear on the converts. Dastúr Tírándáz, the chief priest, drew up a list of Zoroastrian Bahá'ís and sent it to the headman of Maryamábád where many of them lived. Those listed were summoned to a meeting held in Yazd. When they had gathered the *dastúr* began to abuse them, calling them apostates and threatening to have their leaders executed and the hands and ears of others amputated. Isfandiyár Bahmán, the brother of Mullá Bahrám, asked what crime they were being accused of. At this the *dastúr* became enraged and shouted that he, in particular, had been spotted in the desert performing the Bahá'í obligatory prayers. Mullá Bahrám pointed out that for them to be justly punished it would have to be established that they had broken a specific law of their religion. Since he was unable to do this, the *dastúr* eventually dismissed them.²⁸

When Manakji passed away in 1890, the Amelioration Society of India sent out another representative by the name of Kay-Khusraw Jí Şahib. The most notable achievement of this agent was to establish the *Anjuman-i Nāşiri*, an elected body of

Zoroastrian leaders, principally laymen, who would oversee the activities of the Zoroastrian community. He patterned it after similar societies of Parsis in India. This body replaced the traditional council of elders in Yazd who held positions based on heredity. *Dastúrs* had a separate council which ruled on strictly religious matters. Under the old system, the council of elders oversaw the secular affairs of the community and did not interfere with the Zoroastrian clergy. Greatly concerned over the corruption of the *dastúrs*, Kay-Khusraw Jí Şahib urged this new *Anjuman* to regulate their activities as well. The *Anjuman* also represented the community in its relations to the outside world and defended its rights when necessary. According to Mullá Bahrám's memoirs, of the twenty-three members originally elected, the majority were either Bahá'ís or highly sympathetic to the Bahá'í Faith.²⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent a tablet (a letter) congratulating the Zoroastrian community on the establishment of this *Anjuman*.

Kay-Khusraw Jí Şahib returned to India for a time. In his absence, the *dastúrs*, greatly threatened by his reforms, conspired to dispose of him. According to Bahá'í sources, a *mao-bad*, Ardishír Khudábandih, poisoned Kay-Khusraw after he returned to Iran and killed him. When news of his death reached India, another agent, Ardishír Jí Şahib, was sent.²⁹

During this period Aqá Ghulám Husayn Banakí, a Bahá'í of Muslim background was tortured to death by the order of one of the leading ulama of Yazd, Shaykh Sabzivári. In response to this Mullá Bahrám sent a petition to the Prime Minister, Amínu's-Sultán by way of Siyávash who at this time was still in Qum. The Prime Minister ordered Shaykh Sabzivári expelled from Yazd and sent a copy of his order, along with Mullá Bahrám's petition, to the wealthy Zoroastrian entrepreneur, Arbáb Jamshíd, thinking no doubt this would win his favor. Arbáb Jamshíd, however, was disturbed to hear of a Zoroastrian intervening on behalf of a Muslim heretic and thereby possibly endangering the Zoroastrian community. He complained of this action to the *Anjuman* which pressured Mullá Bahrám to resign. But the rest of the Bahá'ís remained members in good standing.²¹

During the riots and massacre of Bahá'ís in Yazd in 1903, Zoroastrian Bahá'ís did not fare well. A number of them resided in a village owned by Jalálu'd-Dawlih and were expelled from it. Nonetheless, their Zoroastrian background was what allowed them to escape with their lives. When the mobs started an attack on them, the ulama turned them back saying they were a protected minority.²³ Many Zoroastrian Bahá'ís were forced to flee to Tehran, where they were taken in by none other than Arbáb Jamshíd.

Arbáb Jamshíd rose from modest beginnings as an illiterate textile worker in Yazd to become one of the wealthiest men in Iran. Although his trading house, *Jamshídiyan*, had branches in Shiraz, Yazd, Kerman, Baghdad, Bombay, Calcutta, and Paris, he himself operated out of Tehran where he made a considerable profit from land speculation. His activities as a *ṣarráf*, or traditional financier, brought a significant number of government officials under obligation to him. When the first Parliament of Iran was formed in 1906, Arbáb Jamshíd served as the Zoroastrian representative. Arbáb Jamshíd encouraged other Zoroastrians to move to Tehran to work for him. He was just as willing to hire Zoroastrian Bahá'ís. Before the massacres of 1903, Siyávash had already come to work for Arbáb Jamshíd. Afterwards other Bahá'ís, including Mullá Bahrám, were hired as well. Mullá Bahrám and Siyávash worked for Arbáb Jamshíd for some fourteen years.

The close association of Bahá'ís with Arbáb Jamshíd lent much to their prestige within the Zoroastrian community. 'Abdu'l-Bahá corresponded with him regularly. He urged the Bahá'ís to serve Arbáb Jamshíd faithfully and to regard service to him as service to 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself. Although Arbáb Jamshíd never became a Bahá'í, he remained their lifelong friend and protector.

The Emergence of a Distinctive Identity. Many years before Mullá Bahrám moved to Tehran, his daughter had died. When he tried to take his daughter's body to the *dakhnih* to be left exposed, the Zoroastrian clergy prevented him on the grounds



A GROUP OF ZOROASTRIAN BAHÁ'ÍS
assembled in the schoolhouse of a village near Yazd, Iran.

that he was no longer a Zoroastrian. For two days the body remained at home, until finally one of the more prestigious Zoroastrian laymen intervened on his behalf and forced the *dastúrs* to perform the necessary rituals.²⁴

When Siyávash Safidvash returned to Yazd around 1915, he experienced similar difficulties. Siyávash had alienated the Zoroastrian clergy by publishing a series of pamphlets relating Zoroastrian prophecies to the Bahá'í Faith. These were distributed in Yazd, Tehran, Shiraz, Kashan, Bombay, and Poona. The *dastúrs* published a notice warning Zoroastrians, on pain of expulsion, not to associate with Siyávash, for he might mislead the ignorant. Some Zoroastrian Bahá'ís responded to this notice by writing a letter which argued that since, as the notice claimed, the ignorant could be easily misled, it was necessary for all persons to become informed and investigate all matters fully for themselves so that no ignorance would remain.²⁴

After this incident, Siyávash knew he could not expect the *dastúrs* to officiate at the marriage of his brother Mihrabán Tashakkur. In Siyávash's view this "worked for the good of the Bahá'í community because it allowed them to distinguish themselves, acquire independence and released them from the shackles of past religions."²⁵ He considered it "wisdom" (*hikmat*), however, to approach the problem through the proper channels so that the Bahá'ís would be immune from criticism for their subsequent actions. They wrote to Dastúr Námdár and asked him clearly to state his position on the performance of marriage ceremonies for Zoroastrian Bahá'ís. When after two or three requests, no reply was received, the Bahá'ís asked for a decision from the *Anjuman*. After much debate, the *Anjuman* decided to send a delegation to the *dastúrs* to negotiate for the marriage. Among those sent were Ustád Javán-Mard Shír-Mard, a Bahá'í, and Ustád Khudábakhsh, president of the *Anjuman*, who was highly sympathetic toward Bahá'ís. The delegation failed to reach a compromise with the *dastúrs* who adamantly refused to perform the ceremony. When the delegation issued its report, the *Anjuman* ruled that the marriage could be performed by a layman familiar with the Avesta since

their scriptures did not explicitly state that it must be performed by a *dastúr*.

Over one hundred respected Zoroastrians attended the wedding, including several members of the *Anjuman*. Before the actual ceremony was performed, a letter from the Parsi agent, Ardishír Jí Šáhib was read urging unity and reconciliation between all Zoroastrians. Then an announcement prepared by the groom was read:

Dear Brothers:

Be aware that the *dastúrs*, particularly Dastúr Námdár, have refused to officiate this marriage contract despite the advice of the *Anjuman* and its respected leaders. Since nowhere in the Avesta does it say that a person, without the assistance of a *dastúr*, cannot be married according to Zoroastrian law, any Zoroastrian layman may perform the ceremony. Therefore today with joy and happiness, the marriage of Mihrabán and Farangís, daughter of Húshang will be officiated by Firúz Tírandáz. My hope is that in the future all of the Zoroastrian laymen will henceforth be aware of their own religion in order that all affairs and matters may be taken into their own hands and done by them.²⁵

Aside from the absence of the *dastúrs*, the Bahá'ís were careful to perform the ceremony in accordance with Zoroastrian custom. But, this incident posed a serious threat to the position of the *dastúrs* since, by denying their ritual necessity, the *Anjuman* had challenged the very basis of their priestly power. Thus the situation was indicative, not only of the tensions existing between the Bahá'í converts and the traditional Zoroastrians, but of those existing between the orthodox clergy and the secular reformers represented by the *Anjuman*.

As the tensions between the *Anjuman* and the traditional clergy had led to a separation of Zoroastrian Bahá'ís in the performance of marriage ceremonies, the same tensions induced the Bahá'ís to establish a cemetery. When the mother of Siyávash suffered a stroke, a certain *mawbad* came to call on her. Taking Siyávash aside, he began to threaten him saying: "You Bahá'ís have yourselves performed your own marriages and thus interfered with the work of the *dastúrs*. What will you do if

your mother dies and they don't let her into the *dakhmih*?" Siyávas̄h's mother overheard the conversation. Despite her illness and pain she shouted back at the *matবাদ* that she would have nothing to do with either *dakhmihs* or *dastúrs*. When she died she intended to be buried according to Bahá'í law and would not forgive her children if they did anything else.

As it was, she lived an additional twenty-three years. But the Bahá'ís now realized that since the *dastúrs* had been unable to achieve their purpose by withholding their services to Bahá'ís at *gahambars* and marriages, they would try again, as they had with Mullá Bahrám, to prevent the Bahá'ís from having access to the *dakhmihs*. The Zoroastrian Bahá'ís consulted together and decided to form a *vaqf* (religious foundation) in order to establish their own cemetery. This cemetery was given the same name that was applied to Bahá'í cemeteries throughout Iran, *gulistán-i jávid* (eternal garden). The Zoroastrian Bahá'ís received a tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá applauding their efforts to end what he termed the noxious practice of leaving dead bodies exposed to vultures and scavengers. He urged them, however, to proceed with the utmost caution and not provide the *dastúrs* with any excuse to create further disturbances.²⁶

Accordingly, the Bahá'ís wrote to the great *dastúr* of Kerman, Kay-Khusraw Rustam and asked his opinion on the matters under dispute. This is a part of his response:

Q: If any Zoroastrian layman has a *gahambar* and a *dastúr* is not available or refuses to come, may this duty still be performed?

A: Any Zoroastrian layman who can read the Avesta may perform the ceremonies.

Q: Regarding marriage, if a *matবাদ* is not available or refuses to come, what is the Mazdean law?

A: In my opinion, if a *matবাদ* is not available or refuses to come, any Zoroastrian who reads Zend may read the prayers of blessing in the presence of the faithful and thereby fulfill the conditions and requirements. In order to join two parties the basic requirement is the presence of two witnesses.

Q: What was the custom of the *dakhmih* at the time of Zoroastor and the status of burial?

A: As determined by the Holy Text, the status of burial in the time

of this great personage was as follows: According to the *Dinkard*, the body was left in a stone crypt far from human habitation. The *dakhmih* was made of stone, chalk, clay and mud, far from any settlement that the body may be meat for the vultures. But in ancient times it was preferable to make a crypt out of a single stone in the hills and close off the top. This is clearly not contrary to the Good Religion. Many such crypts were the burial places of kings. As I understand it, usually the *dakhmih* included the poor and as much as possible limited the contamination of the land and water supply. It is not opposed to religion to bury the dead in a place surrounded by stone, with the top closed, providing it is far from any habitation.²⁷

Siyávas̄h states in his autobiography that the Bahá'ís sought this opinion from the *dastúr* of Kerman to forestall any opposition which might arise. He considered it important as well to establish that Bahá'ís did not believe it right to treat religion as something to be manipulated according to one's own desires. Therefore, the Bahá'ís sought to prove they were acting in accordance with Zoroastrian law.²⁸

Apparently, the Bahá'ís had not made sufficient inroads into the Zoroastrian community of Kerman to pose any threat to the priesthood there. Hence the *dastúr* demonstrated no antagonism toward the Bahá'ís (if in fact, he knew them to be so). In appealing to an outside authority, the Bahá'ís were once again undermining the *dastúrs* of Yazd. From the letter, it would appear that the *dastúr* of Kerman was unusually liberal in his thinking and had a broadly based education. In all likelihood, he was chosen for that reason.

The *Anjuman* vigorously supported the decision of this *dastúr*, much to the dismay of the priests in Yazd. The *dastúrs* held rallies at the fire temples and wrote tracts refuting his position in regard to burial. A member of the *Anjuman* responded to those tracts:

If none but a *dastúr* can perform religious ceremonies, all the Zoroastrians of Tehran are doomed to hell and their children are illegitimate, for their ceremonies in Tehran are performed by Ardishir Rustam Kuchabih. The same is true for the Zoroastrians of London,

China and America. If it be argued that this is allowed out of necessity and emergency; the same would hold true in a situation in which the *dastúr* opposes it. . . . In any case the guardianship of the *dakhmih* rests with *Anjuman*.³⁰

To further consolidate their position, the Bahá'ís obtained a document stating the sympathetic position taken by one of the *dastúrs* of India. This statement was originally made in English, but one of the Bahá'ís translated it into Persian to distribute around Yazd. The author, Jiyun-Jí Madí, stated that while he was in Europe in 1889 he became acquainted with the principles of the Bahá'í Faith.³¹ From what he had studied of it, he believed one could easily be both a Bahá'í and a Zoroastrian just as one could be a Sufi or a Freemason and still be a Zoroastrian. As far as he could tell, the Bahá'í Faith was not a religion but a philosophy which encouraged greater freedom for men and women and discouraged religious fanaticism and ignorance. Therefore, as long as a Bahá'í wore the *sadrh* and *kushtí* and followed the teachings and laws of Zoroaster, he was to be considered a Zoroastrian. The *dastúr* noted that some Bahá'ís had discarded these customs, but such persons were neither good Bahá'ís nor good Zoroastrians. As to their beliefs about prophecies concerning the Sayoshants and *Sháh Bahrám*, the Bahá'ís were clearly confused about this. The Báb could not possibly be one of those, and none of their leaders was conceived in a lake as the Sayoshants would be. Nevertheless, their error here was certainly not serious enough to exclude them from the community.³² While *Siyávash* states this document was not indicative of the actual views held by Bahá'ís of the time, they nonetheless were willing to utilize the statement in their disputes with the *dastúrs* of Yazd.³³

Isfandiýár Gushtasp donated the land for the cemetery, which consisted of a walled garden located not far from the *dakhmih*. The Bahá'ís made crypts out of six stones which were placed on all sides. In the ground, they imbedded chalk. Ustád Javán-Mard drafted the *vaqf* document which was taken to the Muslim *mujtahid*, Labkhandagí. The *mujtahid* changed the wording of the document and issued a decree in language which

was quite offensive. In some ways it was indicative of relations between Muslims and minorities in Yazd at the time:

It is the custom of the Zoroastrian sect not to bury their dead, be they men or women, young or old; nor do they cover their faces even if she be a woman. Rather, [the body] is given to a stranger to be placed in a remote place or a *dakhmih* or on a stone, exposed to the sun and moon and all the elements, to become meat for vultures who eat what is unclean, etc. Anyone with a little insight and understanding would feel the greatest astonishment and revulsion at this custom, although history shows that in the past they were not always this way and did not always despise their dead in this manner. Now, little by little, this group has come to understand the offensiveness of this behavior and are embarrassed by it, compared to the good rules of Muslims. Long ago they adopted the *vaqf*, and oftentimes they likewise seek the assistance of Muslims for their marriage ceremonies. It is now their intention to do the same in regards to burial. Therefore, in obedience to Islam, Isfandiýár Ibn Gushtásp Ibn Surúsh Qásimábádí, in my presence, by his own free will, in a true Islamic manner, has established this *vaqf*.³⁴

A copy of this document was forwarded to Tehran and confirmed by the ulama there while another copy remained in the files of the Gulistán-i Javíd Foundation. Meanwhile the *dastúrs* took steps to stir up agitation against the cemetery among the surrounding villages. Finally, the *dastúrs* decided to tear down the cemetery walls themselves and desecrate the gravesites. The Bahá'ís discovered their plan and asked the *Anjuman* to request that the government post a guard to protect the site. The government sent several horsemen to guard the cemetery during the day, but after they left at night the *dastúrs* came under the pretense that they were reading scriptures at the *dakhmih*. They broke into the cemetery and destroyed the gravestones. When the Bahá'í discovered the damage the next day, they reported the incident to the *Anjuman*. The *dastúrs* insisted they had nothing to do with it. Fírúz Tírandáz went to the surrounding villages and questioned the peasants. The villagers told him that the *dastúrs* themselves had vandalized the cemetery. In this case the *Anjuman*, in order to downplay the incident, asked Isfan-

diyār Gushtasp to drop all charges and paid him for the damages.³⁵

The Assassination of Ustád Master Khudábakhsh. Deeply concerned over the rapidly deteriorating situation within the Zoroastrian community of Yazd, Ardishír-Ji Sáhib, the Parsi agent, came from Tehran to Yazd to effect a reconciliation. He called for a meeting of the entire Zoroastrian community, including the Zoroastrian Bahá'ís. In a passionate speech, he urged both groups to maintain their unity. He mentioned that he had met 'Abdu'l-Bahá two years before and extolled his character and knowledge.³⁶

Still, the tension steadily worsened. The *dastúrs* and the conservative elements of the community began to aim their attack directly at liberal members of the *Anjuman* who strongly sympathized with the Bahá'ís. Foremost among these was Ustád Master Khudábakhsh, president of the *Anjuman*. Khudábakhsh, though born in Yazd, had emigrated with his family to Bombay during the famine of 1870-1871. He received his education from the Parsis and then returned to Yazd to teach at the Zoroastrian school, *Dabiristan Kay-Khusrawvaf*. Regarded as the leader of the liberal faction of Zoroastrian laymen, he opposed the ritual sacrifices, supported calendar changes, and favored limitations on the power of the clergy.³⁷ A society, *Majm'ay-i Haqshinás wa Haqqúy-i Yazd* (Society of Truth-Knowers and Truth-Speakers of Yazd) was formed to oppose these reforms as well as the activities of the Bahá'ís. The society commissioned an assassin, Firaydún Rustam Kirmání, to kill both Master Khudábakhsh and Firúz Tírandáz.

Firaydún Rustam went to the door of Firúz Tírandáz disguised as a telegram man. Firúz opened the door, then suddenly became suspicious and closed it. Firaydún Rustam riddled the door with bullets and then fled the scene. Firúz Tírandáz suffered no injuries. The next day Firaydún Rustam shot Khudábakhsh through the head as he was headed for the school. The *Majm'a* sent a threatening letter eighteen days later to Ustád Kayumarth, Khudábakhsh's coworker, who had excited their

opposition by offering free education to the poor.³⁸ Kayumarth fled to Bombay. The assassin was eventually arrested, but Rustam Dastúr and Árbáb Kay-Khusraw intervened on his behalf and arranged for him to be allowed to escape. The Zoroastrians later constructed a memorial containing a burning lamp at the site of Master Khudábakhsh's assassination.³⁹ The Bahá'ís themselves regarded Master Khudábakhsh as a martyr and believed his sympathy toward the Bahá'ís was the major reason he was assassinated. 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent a letter to the Zoroastrian Bahá'ís according him the station of a Bahá'í martyr, despite the fact it was recognized that he was never a Bahá'í. His descendants became Bahá'ís.⁴⁰

The assassination proved a serious miscalculation on the part of the conservatives, for while they may have succeeded in terrorizing some of liberal faction of the Zoroastrian community, they irreparably undermined the moral credibility of the Zoroastrian clergy. From this point on, the power and authority of the priesthood disintegrated rapidly and the *Anjuman* assumed almost complete leadership of the Zoroastrian community.

Zoroastrian Bahá'ís often made numerous trips to Bombay, both for business and to promulgate their religion. Before long some of the Parsis in Bombay became concerned with their activities, both in India and in Iran. In 1907, the eminent Zoroastrian theologian Dr. Manekji Dhalla tried to convince the Parsi leadership in Bombay of the seriousness of the Bahá'í threat. Most of those leaders, however, regarded the Bahá'í Faith as a harmless movement similar to the Theosophists. Dr. Dhalla visited Iran in 1920 and found, to his dismay, that all the so-called Zoroastrians of Qazvin were in fact Bahá'ís.⁴¹

In 1921 the Amelioration Society sent out another representative to Iran, Pestanji Tasker. He discovered that Bahá'ís were still prominent in the Zoroastrian school system. He found Zoroastrian Bahá'ís invested with the sacred cord, studying Arabic instead of Avesta. Pestanji attempted to pressure one of the Zoroastrian Bahá'í teachers to make a list the members of the Zoroastrian community who were in fact Bahá'ís. The teacher refused to do so. Subsequently, Pestanji issued an order which was posted on the main fire temple of Yazd expelling all

persons not fully abiding by Zoroastrian tradition from participation in the Zoroastrian community.⁴² Bahá'ís protested Pestanji's order to the British consulate in Yazd, since he was a British subject. The consulate investigated the matter, but refused to intervene.⁴³

Conclusion. While Zoroastrian Bahá'ís continued to abide by the customary laws of their ancestral religion and support its institutions, they at the same time associated freely with Bahá'ís who were outside the Zoroastrian community. In so doing they violated the unwritten ethnic religious boundaries which restricted relations between members of separate communities to solely economic ones. This excited the opposition of many Zoroastrians, especially the clergy, against the Bahá'ís. For the most part the merchant and professional classes within the Zoroastrian community regarded the Bahá'ís as progressive members of the community and showed no reluctance in appointing Bahá'ís to positions of leadership.

Gradually, Zoroastrian Bahá'ís began to establish separate institutions alongside the traditional Zoroastrian ones. Still, Zoroastrian Bahá'ís sought to justify their departures from Zoroastrian customs in terms of Zoroastrian law and appealed to reforming elements of the community to support them. In so doing they markedly altered the character of entire Zoroastrian life, discrediting the Zoroastrian clergy and allowing the secular elite to assume effective leadership. Zoroastrian Bahá'ís did not finally separate themselves from the Zoroastrian community until that community itself ceased to recognize them as Zoroastrians.

In general, four phases marked the emergence of a distinctive Bahá'í identity. In the first phase, the Bahá'í Faith dissociated itself from the traditional religious establishment, Islam, and ceased to derive its identity from it. In the second phase, it began to appeal to persons outside its original religion matrix. This occurred before others had yet recognized the religion as independent and before its boundaries were fixed. In the third phase, there was a process of assimilation and integration

wherein the various elements of the new religion were brought together into a single community. In this process all elements of that community were altered. Finally, the perceptions of outsiders toward the new religion changed to the point that they regarded Bahá'ís as separate from themselves and excluded them from participation in their own community. In accepting these boundaries, the Bahá'í Faith acquired its fully distinctive identity. With the emergence of rigid boundaries, the incidence of conversion slowed.

NOTES

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1. Napier Malcolm, *Five Years in a Persian Town* (New York: Dutton and Co., 1907) pp. 45-46.
2. *Star of the West*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (March 21, 1910) pp. 5-7.
3. Rúhu'lláh Mihrábkháni, *Sharh Ahvâl-i Jináb-i Abu'l-Fadl-i Gulpáygáni* (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 131 s.e. [1975]) p. 58.
4. Malcolm, *Five Years*, p. 52.
5. Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 3 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983) p. 296.
6. See H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980) pp. 9-11.
7. Siyávash Safidvash, *Yádarín*, (Tehran: 132 s.e. [1976]) pp. 19-23.
8. 'Alf-Alláhí is a popular designation often given to a number of related Shí'í extremist sects. All of them show strong gnostic influences and are said to regard 'Alf as the supreme Manifestation of God.
9. 'Azíz'u'lláh Sulaymání, *Maşábil-i Hidáyat*, Vol. 4 (Tehran: 1959) p. 380.

10. Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1977) pp. 103-104.
11. Safidvash, *Yádarín*, pp. 8-9.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-24.
14. Sulaymánf, *Maṣábih-i Hidáyat*, Vol. 3 (Tehran: 123 *Badí* [1966-67]) p. 79.
15. Michael Fischer, "Zoroastrian Iran: Between Myth and Praxis." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago 1973, pp. 347-48.
16. See Moojan Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions: Some Contemporary Western Accounts, 1844-1944* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981) p. 357.
17. Sulaymánf, *Maṣábih-i Hidáyat*, Vol. 4, p. 389.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 395-96.
19. Among those listed as members or sympathizers with the Bahá'í Faith who served on the first *Anjuman* are Ustád Javán-Mard Shífr-Mard, *Khusraw Khudádád*, Mullá Bahrám, Dinyar Bahrám Kalandar, Ustád Kayumarth Vafadar *Khurramsháhí*, Master *Khudabakhsh*, Rustam *Khudá-Mard*, Surúsh Bahman Nuzar, Bahman Jamshíd, Arbáb Gúdarz-i Míhrabán, and *Khusraw Míhrabán 'Alyábádí*. (*Maṣábih-i Hidáyat*, pp. 404-406).
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 407-408.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 417-24.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 397-99.
24. Safidvash, *Yádarín*, pp. 94-95.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-14.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
31. He must have heard of it from non-Bahá'ís, as the religion had not yet spread to Europe.
32. See Appendix G.
33. Safidvash, *Yádarín*, pp. 124-125.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
36. *Ibid.*
37. The ritual calendars followed by the Zoroastrians of Iran and India were discovered to be a month apart in the eighteenth century.

Further research determined both were incorrect so a new seasonal calendar was devised which excited much opposition in both countries.

38. Ustád Kayumarth was a student of Ustád Javan-Mard. (Fischer, "Zoroastrian Iran," pp. 108-109.)
39. Safidvash, *Yádarín*, pp. 127-129.
40. Fischer, "Zoroastrian Iran," pp. 108-109.
41. Maneckji Nuserwanji Dhalla, *Dastur Dhalla: The Saga of a Soul* (Karachi: Dastur Dr. Dhalla Memorial Institute, 1975) pp. 722-727.
42. Great Britian Public Records Office. FO 268 1271, FO 248 1352.
43. *Ibid.*