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AZALI BABISM

AZALI BABISM, designation of a religious faction which takes its name from Mīrzā Yaḥyā Nūrī Ṣobḥ-e Azal (about 1246-1330/1830-1912), considered by his followers to have been the legitimate successor to the Bāb. A son of Mīrzā Bozorg Nūrī, a court official in the reign of Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah, Yaḥyā was converted to Babism around 1260/1844, probably by his older half-brother, Mīrzā Ḥosayn-ʿAlī, the future Bahāʾallāh, founder of the Bahaʾi religion. From about 1848, Mīrzā Yaḥyā Ṣobḥ-e Azal was in regular contact with the Bāb, who was then in prison in Azarbaijan. His letters were well received by the Bāb, who claimed to find in them evidence of divine inspiration. Numerous references in writings by the Bāb from this period seem to provide strong evidence that Azal (also referred to as al-Waḥīd, Ṭalʿat al-Nūr, and al-Ṭamara) was regarded by him as his chief deputy following the deaths of most of the original Babi hierarchy, and as the future head of the movement. Earlier criteria for leadership within the sect had been priority of belief and membership of the *ʿolamāʾ* class, but Azal appears to have been selected on account of his innate capacity (*feṭra*) to receive divine knowledge and his ability to reveal verses—as had been the case with the Bāb himself.

After the Bāb's death in 1266/1850, Ṣobḥ-e Azal came to be regarded as the central authority within the movement, to whom its followers looked for some form of continuing revelation. Recognition of his authority was, however, only one of a number of doctrinal positions adopted by Babis in the 1850s and early 1860s. Numerous other claimants to theophanic status emerged in this period, some of whom were seen by Azal as rivals, while others appear to have been

regarded as reflections enhancing the prestige of the original theophany (in accordance with the Bāb's theories concerning limitless descending emanations or manifestations of the Primal Will). It is particularly significant that, with few exceptions, these claimants were from non clerical backgrounds like the Bāb and Azal—an indication of the new social role now emerging for Babism in its second phase.

Following the attempt by several Babis on the life of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah in 1852 and an abortive uprising organized by Azal in the same year, he and other Babis chose to go into exile in Baghdad. Here he lived as generally-acknowledged head of the community until their removal to Istanbul in 1863. By adopting a policy of seclusion (*ḡayba*), Ṣobḥ-e Azal gradually alienated himself from a large proportion of the exiles, who began to give their allegiance to other claimants, notably Azal's half-brother, Bahāʾallāh. During this period, Azal set up a network of agents (termed *šohadāʾ* "witnesses," i.e., of the Bayān) in Iraq and Iran. But this attempt to routinize further the charismatic authority of the faith seems to have clashed with the continuing appeal of original charisma within the movement and further weakened Azal's position.

In Edirne in 1866, Bahāʾallāh made public his claim to be *man yoẓheroho'llāh* (he whom God shall manifest), the messianic figure of the Bayān. Ṣobḥ-e Azal responded by asserting his own claims and resisting the wholesale changes in doctrine and practice introduced by his brother. His attempt to preserve traditional Babism proved largely unpopular, however, and his followers were soon in the minority. In 1868, bitter feuding between the two factions, leading to violence on both sides, induced Ottoman authorities to exile the Babis yet further. Bahāʾallāh and his followers (now known as Bahaʾis) were sent to Acre in Palestine, and Azal with his family and some adherents to Famagusta in Cyprus, where he remained until his death on 29 April 1912.

Ṣobḥ-e Azal, like his brother, was a prolific writer, his works consisting primarily of interpretations and elaborations of existing Babi doctrine, together with very large quantities of devotional pieces and poems. His best-known writings include the early *Ketāb-e nūr*, *Mostayqeẓ* (a refutation of claims advanced by Mīrzā Asadallāh Ḵūʾī Dayyān), the *Motammem-e Bayān* (a continuation of the Bāb's unfinished Persian *Bayān*), and the *Naḡamāt al-rūḥ*. One list of his writings gives 102 titles, some in several volumes, others very short.

Azali Babism represents the conservative core of the original Babi movement, opposed to innovation and preaching a religion for a non-clerical gnostic elite rather than the masses. It also retains the original Babi antagonism to the Qajar state and a commitment to political activism, in distinction to the quietist stance of Bahaʾism. Paradoxically, Azali conservatism in religious matters seems to have provided a matrix within which radical social and political ideas could be propounded. If Babism represented the politicization of dissent within Shiʿism (Bayat, chap. 4) and Bahaʾism stood for a return to earlier Shiʿite ideals of political quietism (MacEoin, "Babism to Bahaʾism"), the Azali movement became a sort of bridge between earlier Babi militancy and the secularizing reform movements of the late Qajar period.

The first generation of Azalis were largely established Babis like Sayyed Moḥammad Eṣfahānī, Mollā Rajab-ʿAlī Qāher Eṣfahānī, Mollā Moḥammad Jaʿfar Narāqī, and Ḥājī Mīrzā Aḥmad Kāšānī. In the writings of men like Qāher and Narāqī, as in those of Azal, we find an abiding concern with sometimes obscure religious themes that remain well within the tradition established in the Bāb's later writings. But for the second generation of Azal's followers, "Azalī Babism provided . . . a creed which seemingly justified their political activism and growing nationalist consciousness" (Bayat, p. 130). Often loosely applied, Babi affiliation (which came increasingly to mean Azali affiliation) was applied to or used as a badge by several important individuals active in demanding social change in Iran, in a manner paralleling the connection with Freemasonry used by Malkom Khan and others. It is, in fact, important to remember that the *farāmūš-ḵāna*s were regarded by many as centers for Babi recruitment and proselytizing (Gobineau, *Religions et philosophies*, p. 274).

The best known of the early Azali nationalist reformers were Shaikh Aḥmad Rūḥī Kermānī (1272/1856-1314/1896) and Mīrzā ʿAbd-al-Ḥosayn Kermānī (Āqā Khan Kermānī, both of whom were executed along with Mīrzā Ḥasan Khan Ḵabīr al-Molk following the assassination of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah in 1896. Rūḥī's father, Mollā Moḥammad Jaʿfar Tahbāḡallāhī Šayḵ-al-ʿolamāʾ (1241/1826-1311/1893) was an eminent *ʿālem* from Kermān who had been an early convert to Babism; he is described by Browne as "one of the early promoters of the Liberal Movement in Persia" (*Persian Revolution*, p. 414). Rūḥī and Āqā Khan formed the core of a group of Azalis resident in Istanbul in the 1880s and 90s who had close links with political activists such as Mīrzā Malkom Khan (q.v.) and Sayyed Jamāl-al-dīn Afḡānī. A number of Azalis, particularly Āqā Khan, were closely associated with the influential Persian-

language newspaper *Aḵtar*, published in Istanbul under the editorship of Mīrzā Moḥammad Ṭāher Tabrīzī. Both Rūḥī and Āqā Khan wrote on Babism (they collaborated on the well-known work *Hašt behešt* and were married to daughters of Ṣobḥ-e Azal, but it would be a mistake to overstress the importance of their Babi affiliation in their wider activities. Like other Azalis of this period, they seem to have used Babism as a motif for dissent, much as Malkom Khan or Afḡānī (and, indeed, Āqā Khan at times) used Islam. It is chiefly (one might say, properly) as free-thinkers and secularist reformers rather than as thoroughgoing Babis that they made their impact on contemporary affairs.

Edward Browne noted that it was "a remarkable fact that several very prominent supporters of the Persian Constitutional Movement were, or had the reputation of being, Azalīs" (*Materials for the Study of the Bābī Religion*, p. 221). Notable among these were: Mīrzā Jahāngīr Khan Šīrāzī (1292/1875-1326/1908), a teacher at the Dār al-Fonūn in Tehran and a member of various *anjoman*s, who edited the important Constitutionalist newspaper *Ṣūr-e Esrafīl* and was executed following the coup d'état of 1908; Mīrzā Naṣrallāh Eṣfahānī Malek-al-motakallemīn (1277/1861-1326/1908), a pro-Constitution cleric also killed in 1908, who was active with other free-thinking *ʿolamāʾ* in promoting reform ideas; Shaikh Mahdī Šarīf Kāšānī (d. 1301 Š./1922), author of the *Tārīḵ-eJaʿfarī* and *Tārīḵ-ewaqāyeʿ-e mašrūṭīyat* and a son of the important Azali cleric Mollā Moḥammad Jaʿfar Narāqī, who was a member of the Anjoman-e Maʿāref in Tehran and head of the Šaraf school; Shaikh Moḥammad Afżal-al-molk Kermānī (1267/1851-1322/1904), a brother of Shaikh Aḥmad Rūḥī and a close associate of Afḡānī in Istanbul; his brother Shaikh Mahdī Baḥr-al-ʿolūm Kermānī, a member of the first and second Majlis; and Ḥājjī Mīrzā Yaḥyā Dawlatābādī (1279/1862-1359/1939, q.v.), the well-known educationalist who served as a member of the second and fifth Majlis.

It is important to remember that these men, like their predecessors, acted as individuals rather than Azalis and that their ideas were frequently more secularist than religious in orientation. It must also be stressed that many individuals who have been suspected of harboring Babi sympathies or even of being Babis, such as Sayyed Jamāl-al-dīn Eṣfahānī, were hardly true converts: the mere suggestion of heretical leanings or association with known Azalis were often enough to earn a man the name. Neither Jamāl-al-dīn Afḡānī nor Mīrzā Moḥammad Reżā Kermānī, the assassin of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah, were Babis, although both were often described as such. Abu'l-Ḥasan Mīrzā Šayḵ al-

Raʾīs, a member of the Qajar family who was an outstanding reformer of the Constitutional period, has sometimes been called an Azali, whereas there is ample evidence that he was, in fact, a Bahaʾi.

Yaḥyā Dawlatābādī was appointed Ṣobḥ-e Azal's successor after the death of his own father, Ḥājj Mīrzā Hādī, but there is little evidence that he was actively involved in organizing the affairs of the sect. He did not write on Babi subjects, nor did any other Azalis of note emerge after the death of Azal to produce significant writing on the topic or to develop the original ideas of the religion. With the deaths of those Azalis who were active in the Constitutional period, Azali Babism entered a phase of stagnation from which it has never recovered. There is now no acknowledged leader nor, to the knowledge of the present writer, any central organization. Members tend to be secretive about their affiliation, converts are rare, and association appears to run along family lines. It is difficult to estimate current numbers, but these are unlikely to exceed one or two thousand, almost all of whom reside in Iran.

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