



CONVERSION V. TO BABISM AND THE BAHAI FAITH

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The [Bahai faith](#) was adopted by tens of thousands of people in late 19th-century Persia. These conversions probably began on a small scale some time between 1280/1864 and 1283/1866. In 1279/1863 the prominent Babi [Bahā'-Allāh](#), while in exile in Baghdad, had declared himself to a very small group of close disciples and relatives as the messianic figure (*man yožheroḥo 'llāh*) whose advent had been predicted by Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad Širāzī, the [Bāb](#). Bahā'-Allāh subsequently encountered opposition from his younger half-brother Šobḥ-e Azal (see [azali babism](#)), whom many Babis had accepted as the leader of the community. In many of his writings, issued from exile in Edirne in the late 1860s, Bahā'-Allāh used Babi texts to prove his own claims, and the first major audience he addressed in his new role of prophet appears to have consisted of Babis in Persia who were dissatisfied with Šobḥ-e Azal's rather secretive leadership. Typical of Bahā'-Allāh's works in these years is the letter *Sūrat al-aṣḥāb* (Surah of the companions), which contains mystical imagery, ethical exhortations, and instructions on how to proselytize and evokes symbols concerning the end of time. Many such letters were disseminated throughout Persia by couriers drawn from the ranks of Bahā'-Allāh's close friends and followers, like Moḥammad "Nabīl" Zarandī and Najaf-'Alī Zanjānī,



who was executed by Persian authorities around 1284/1867 (for Bahā'-Allāh's works from his Edirne period, see 1348 Š./1969, IV, esp. "Sūrat al-aṣḥāb," pp. 205-39).

Examination of developments in the community in Shiraz, the home of the Bāb, affords a glimpse of the shift among Babis to Bahā'-Allāh. The Bāb's own relatives, except for one nephew who converted under the influence of the Bāb's widow, Ḳadija Begom, in the 1850s, had remained Shi'ite Muslims. In 1278/1862 a maternal uncle, Sayyed Moḥammad Širāzī, visited Bahā'-Allāh during a trip to the Shiite shrines in Najaf and Karbalā'. In answer to his questions about Babism Bahā'-Allāh wrote *Ketāb-e īqān* (Book of certitude), which prompted Sayyed Moḥammad to convert to Babism. Gradually other members of the Bāb's family in Shiraz became Babis. As they constituted a prominent merchant clan, operating a trading empire that eventually extended from the interior of Persia throughout the Persian Gulf and as far as India and China, these relatives, the *Afnān*, played an influential role in spreading the new religion.

Not long after Bahā'-Allāh moved to Edirne he sent Nabīl to Persia on a missionary journey. Nabīl stopped at Shiraz, where he convened a meeting of the Babis, including the *Afnān*, and publicly burned Ṣobḥ-e Azal's writings, declaring those of the Bāb and Bahā'-Allāh alone to have the status of scripture. Prominent members of the *Afnān* were for a time troubled by this development but finally decided in favor of Bahā'-Allāh, who had been responsible for their conversion and with whom they had stronger ties. Nabīl went to Isfahan and then traveled to Khorasan, where he repeated his performance. The *Afnān* who adopted the Bahai faith were supported by a preacher from Yazd, Moḥammad-Ebrāhīm Yazdī, who also converted fifty or sixty members of a clan of Kāzerūnī tailors in Shiraz. Their presence added a certain boisterousness to Bahai meetings, to which the *Afnān* were unaccustomed (*Afnān*, pp. 168-83).

From early Bahai manuscripts it appears that *sayyed* (claiming descent from the Prophet Moḥammad) merchants played an extremely important leadership role in bringing the Babis into the Bahai faith. Aside from the *Afnān*, the Nahrī family of Isfahan, wealthy merchants of *sayyed* background who had adopted Babism in the 1840s, emerged in the 1870s as mainstays of the Bahai community in Isfahan. Two Nahrī merchants were martyred on the orders of a leading *mojtahed* in 1297/1880 (Samandar, pp. 179-80; Ešrāq-e Kāvārī). Another important family was the Bāqerāf (Baqerov) of the Sādāt-e



Ḳamsa clan of Rašt, merchants with large property holdings and *sayyed* lineage who enjoyed international trading contacts (‘Amīd-al-Aṭebbā’, *passim*). The Afnān and the Nahrīs probably originally adopted Babism out of genuine conviction, but later membership in Babi and subsequently in cosmopolitan Bahai society became an ideological expression of their elite status as *sayyeds* and of their independence from the government and the Shi‘ite clerical establishment. Most Babis and Bahais were not themselves *sayyeds* or merchants but came from families of urban artisans and shopkeepers, yet it was the *sayyed* merchants who most often emerged as community leaders, having ties of patronage with the petty-bourgeois and working-class Bahais, in addition to the common religion.

In the late 1860s and early 1870s Bahā’-Allāh wrote a number of works, some of them in the form of letters to the kings and leaders of the world, stressing his principles: the need for a world government, a single world language, religious tolerance, abandonment of nationalist chauvinism, and diversion of military budgets to relief for the poor. His program attracted converts from outside Babism. For instance, former Shi‘ite clergymen like [Mīrzā Abu’l-Faẓl Golpāyagānī](#) or Nabīl-e Akbar Qā’enī (Samandar, pp. 15-57) adopted the Bahai faith, which, unlike Babism, had a strong rationalist emphasis. These learned individuals in turn often became itinerant missionaries and preachers, employing their clerical skills and networks to spread Bahaism among Shi‘ites. Golpāyagānī, for instance, undertook missionary journeys from Tehran to Isfahan, Kāšān, and Hamadān in the 1880s, then outside Persia to Ashkhabad and Samarkand, and finally to Egypt and the United States. Itinerant Bahai preachers became known as *moballeḡīn*, missionaries of the faith, and provided a different sort of leadership from that of the more sedentary urban elites. Converts to Bahaism from the Shi‘ite middle strata joined the tens of thousands of Babi converts, attracted not only by Bahā’-Allāh’s religious charisma but also by his reformist principles. In the 1880s Bahais in Persian cities began to establish consultative councils (*maḥāfel-e šūr*), as mandated in Bahai law. The first such council was formed secretly among prominent Bahais in Tehran around 1295/1878. It subsequently sent missionaries throughout Persia to spread the faith in an organized manner and to encourage a greater degree of organization among already existing Bahai communities, as well as adherence to Bahā’-Allāh’s new book of laws, the [Aqdas](#). Mīrzā Asad-Allāh Eṣfahānī, for instance, traveled widely in Khorasan, Māzandarān, Yazd, Fārs, and Kāšān on behalf of the Tehran council. The spread of the new faith met with violent opposition from the state and from



the Shi'ite *'olamā'*, who sometimes succeeded in having prominent Bahais executed. But by creating martyrs, particularly in a culture that so celebrated the courage and spiritual power of martyrs, they appear only to have made the religion more attractive to some sections of the public (Meḥrābḵvānī, 1980? 1981?).

The openness and cosmopolitan attitude of many Bahai merchants and missionaries enabled them to make contact with and to achieve conversions among non-Muslim minorities in Persia, particularly Zoroastrians and Jews. Zoroastrian conversions began in Yazd in the mid-1880s, and Bahais of Zoroastrian background made significant contributions to the new religion. All the Zoroastrians of Qazvīn appear to have become Bahais. Bahā'-Allāh, unlike most Shi'ite Persians, acknowledged the validity of Zoroastrianism, placing Zoroaster in the line of true prophets that included the biblical and koranic figures. He traced his own lineage to the Sasanian ruling family, and he wrote to Zoroastrians in pure Persian, without the admixture of Arabic words. He considered himself the messianic figure promised in all the great religions, including the Zoroastrian Shah Bahrām. Such prominent Zoroastrians as Mollā Bahrām Aḵtar-e Kāvārī, Kay-Ḳosrow Ḳodādād, and Sīāvoš Safīdvaš embraced the Bahai faith, and Zoroastrian merchants, professionals, and prosperous farmers were among the first to adopt it; they led some peasants and artisans into the new faith, as well. For most of these people, however, conversion meant entering an enlightened club; they did not immediately forsake their own communal activities and rituals, and only slowly in the course of the 20th century did Bahais of Zoroastrian background come to make their primary identification with the Bahai faith.

Conversions of Jews to the Bahai faith began in the late 1880s, primarily in southwestern Persia, but they have not been as well studied as conversions among Zoroastrians (see iv, above). Significant conversions of Jews in Hamadān appear to have continued into the 1930s, but Persian Jews seldom adopted the Bahai faith after the state of Israel was established in 1948, an event that engendered pride in their ethnic ancestry. Peter Smith (1987, pp. 86-99, esp. p. 95) suggests that for minorities Bahaism functioned as an ideology of modernization, providing an alternative to rigid traditionalism that allowed them to continue to affirm the value of their ancestral religions while entering a cosmopolitan and pan-Persian society (cf. Fischel; Smith, 1984; Stiles, 1983b; idem, 1984).

Conversion to the Bahai faith in Persia was largely a 19th-century



phenomenon. Although some Persians converted in the 20th century, joint government and clerical persecution of the faith succeeded in marginalizing it and slowing its growth. Indeed, Smith estimates that, although the total number of Persian Bahais grew from 100,000 to 300,000 between 1317/1900 and 1404 = 1363 Š./1984, their proportion of the Persian population actually declined, to less than 1 percent. This decline may be accounted for partly by Bahai fertility rates lower than those of Shi'ite Muslims, but it nevertheless suggests that relatively few new conversions were occurring (Smith, 1984).

Sources. The Balyuzi Library, London, contains numerous manuscripts treating the period of conversions in Persia. Relevant material can also be found in such biographical dictionaries as those of Kāzem Samandar and 'Azīz-Allāh Solaymānī. Some histories and biographies have been summarized by H. M. Balyuzi and Adīb Taherzadeh. Material bearing on conversions in general and those from Judaism and Zoroastrianism in particular is included in the work of Mīrzā Abu'l-Faẓl Golpāyagānī. The major academic study of the issue has been carried out by Susan Stiles. For Jewish conversions, see the work of Walter Fischel.

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