



JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES V. QAJAR PERIOD (2)

JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES OF IRAN

v. Qajar Period (1786-1925)

(2) Conversion of Jews

In the latter part of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries there occurred a relatively widespread mass movement of Persian Jews to the Bahai community; the latter predominantly consisted of Shi'ite converts. Estimates by outside observers of the number of Iran's converts to the new religion are sketchy, ranging from an astonishing two million in the 1880s, including "many Jews" (Neumark, p. 80), to the more plausible estimate in the mid-1930s of "thousands and perhaps ten thousand of [converted] Jews" including "around a quarter of the Jews of Hamadan" (est. 8,000) and 700 Jews in Tehran (Brower, 1937-38, pp. 22, 24, 31). These estimates are fairly consistent with those of Lord Curzon in the 1880s (prior to the early 20th-century wave of Jewish conversions) of 50, 100, and 150 converted households in Kashan, [Hamadan](#), and Tehran respectively (Curzon, p. 496). His account of Golpāyagān, where as many as 75 percent of the Jewish population had "formally joined the Bahai movement and their numbers have since increased



considerably,” along with similar reports of group conversions in Khorasan’s Torbat, indicate conversions of large segments of certain Jewish communities starting as early as the Babi period, though some, including most of the Golpāyagān converts, evidently reverted to Judaism (Brower, 1944-46; Fischel, 1934, p. 54).

Such estimates should be seen in light of the fluidity of Jewish-Bahai identity in this period, ranging from sympathizers to propagators. Such significant numbers are particularly noteworthy for Persian Jewry, who, despite their close historical ties with other sectarian movements, had never converted in large numbers to religions other than Islam. Conversion of a disadvantaged minority to the even more persecuted Bahai faith, rather than to the dominant religion of the majority, presents an important anomaly. The exact circumstances of many early conversions to the Bahai faith cannot be determined with certainty. Even though most conversions of Jews to Bahaism took place during the ministry of ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ (1892-1922), their earliest encounter with the faith goes back to the early years of the Babi movement.

The earliest known Jewish Babi convert in Tehran, according to Bahai sources, was a physician whose name Ḥakim Masiḥ (= Christ; Arabic form of the common Jewish name Mashiah = Messiah) and whose interest in Islamic concerns may suggest an earlier conversion to Christianity or Islam. As a Babi sympathizer in 1848, he attended debates that the notable woman Babi leader, Ṭāhereh Qorrat-al-‘Ayn, conducted with Shi’ite scholars in Baghdad. In 1861 he openly confessed his Babi beliefs after he came into contact with the Babi and later Bahai leader Mollā Ṣādeq Moqaddas while attending to sick Babi prisoners in Tehran. His conversion demonstrates an early universalistic view, at least on the part of some Babi leaders, of the Babi mission going beyond Islamic confines (Balyuzi, p. 18; Rafati, pp. 395-98).

In 1847 Ṭāhereh stayed briefly at the house of the Jewish physician Elezar (Lālehzār; d. 1881) in Hamadan, before her stay was ended by concerns of possible trouble, including anti-Jewish riots over the danger of a rebellious Muslim woman associating with a Jewish family (Ḥāfeẓi, p. 36; Ešrāq-Ḳāvari, 2004, pp. 28-30; Amanat, 1989, p. 315). Although Elezar never openly confessed his belief, his Babi sympathy or secret belief later found expression in at least one of his associates, the prominent physician Ḥakim Āqājān (d. 1881?; Ḥāfeẓi, p. 21). Āqājān was reportedly first attracted to Babis and Bahais in 1877 when he was invited to treat a patient in the prominent Babi scholar and merchant Narāqi household. He was impressed by the family’s expression of respect



toward himself, their disregard for laws of impurity, their willingness to share food with him, and their lenient attitude even after he reportedly gave the patient erroneous medication. Āqājān's further inquiry into the family's beliefs eventually led to his acceptance of the Babi/Bahai message. The new message soon spread through Āqājān's family networks to reach the influential physician and later Bahai community leader Ḥakim Raḥamim, later known as Raḥim Khan Ḥāfeẓ-al-Şeḥḥa (1844-1942). Within two years (1877-79), with the help of itinerate Bahai propagators (sing. *moballeḡ*), some 50 Jews joined the nascent community of Hamadan, now a center of early Jewish Bahai conversion (Ḥāfeẓi).

Yet much of the initial success of Bahaism in Hamadan seems to have been based on the earlier work of the Christian mission; many of the new converts were attracted to the Bahai community while maintaining their Christian ties. Becoming a Bahai allowed them to come to terms with an Islamic identity without having to repudiate their family and community ties.

The message. The early Bahai message focused on challenging the bases of rabbinic tradition and the necessity of the coming of the Messiah, by arguing that fundamental laws of the Torah such as the rite of sacrifice could not be observed in the absence of the Jerusalem temple (Rayhan Rayhani memoirs in Amanat, 2006, pp. 184-86). The urgency of the coming of a savior instilled a new sense of optimism and hope for an end to age-old miseries and persecution. It found fertile ground in an environment of messianic expectation, a primordial trend among Iranian Jews further stimulated by the activities of Christian missionaries, especially among younger Jews. Later in the 1880s the Bahai message was further articulated with the help of prominent Bahai scholars well versed in Biblical and Islamic texts, such as [Abu'l-Faẓl Golpāyegāni](#).

The Bahai message accepted the validity of all past prophets as “manifestations” (*ẓohur*) of the “Divine Truth”; its emphasis on “Progressive Revelation” gave believers much latitude to accept the validity of Islam and Christianity without having to deny their belief in Judaism; its deep indigenous roots tapped into cultural reservoirs shared by Iranian Jews; and it was in harmony with an Iranian identity. Its universalistic and modern outlook, which stressed the need for the renewal of religion, the unity of humanity, social and political equality, ethnic and gender harmony, and the acceptance of religious minorities, proved attractive to an emerging cosmopolitan class in search of alternatives to traditional identities.



Fluid identities. Unlike Muslims, the Bahais tolerated fluid or flexible religious identities, at least initially. Early Jewish conversions often involved a two-stage process; Jewish Bahai propagators mainly argued the validity of Christ and left the next stage of conversion to other Bahai teachers more familiar with Islamic arguments. Many Jewish converts held multiple identities, attended Sunday church ceremonies, and observed Jewish rituals. A number of Jewish converts to Islam also became Bahais, possibly to end a stigmatized quasi-Islamic identity as a neo-convert (*jadid al-Eslām*), an option made possible only after the Constitutional Revolution impeded enforcement of capital punishment prescribed by the Shari'a for the apostate (*mortadd*). Cases of individual or mass reversion to Judaism or Christianity were not unusual. As many as 60 households of Mashad's "neo-converts" to Islam also became Bahais by 1930. Many converts who were reportedly disappointed by experiencing persecution rather than empowerment against their Muslim aggressors reverted to their "new-Muslim" identity (Fo'ādi-Bošru'i, p. 181).

Social and economic factors. A number of social and economic factors contributed to the spread of the Bahai faith among Jews. Hamadan and Arak, the two important conversion centers, both experienced rapid economic expansion in the latter part of the 19th century—the former with the opening of Basra trade in 1865 and the latter as a carpet distribution center in the 1870s. They attracted many young Jewish immigrants, many from communities like Kashan with declining economies. New occupations and work environments and the loss of family support often led to new challenges to conventional beliefs. Fewer restrictions in their choice of neighborhood meant less communal control and a breakdown of traditional bonds that had been preserved within the constraints of the ancient Jewish neighborhood (*maḥalleh*). A community of affluent and Westernized Iraqi Jews further reinforced Hamadan's cosmopolitan nature (*Sahim*). The establishment of a number of European-style schools, including some by the [Alliance Israélite Universelle](#), helped open horizons and introduce doubts about traditional norms and values. However, conversions were less widespread in other Jewish communities affected by the forces of change, such as Kermanshah and Yazd, and rare in Isfahan and Shiraz, where Jews experienced little social mobility.

PROFILES OF CONVERSION

Beginning in the 1880s the Bahai message spread to other Jewish communities including Kashan, where it attracted a number of mostly disenfranchised



young Jews. Among the enthusiasts was the young Rayḥān Rayḥāni, a self-educated orphan whose autobiography is a remarkable testament to the pains and anguish of his multistage conversion, the miseries of life as a Jewish Bahai peddler, and his cultural assimilation as a recognized member of Kashan's established Bahai community (Amanat, 2006).

In Tehran, the conversion of the influential physician Mirzā Ḳalil (ʿAqiba) reflects the complexities of multiple identities complicated by inheritance feuds within a privileged family. He served in one of Tehran's first Bahai Assemblies (1879), and in 1906 he unsuccessfully campaigned for the position of Jewish representative to Iran's first Constitutional Assembly (Majles; Amanat, 2008, p. 16).

The enigmatic and eccentric Ḥājji Elyāhu Kāšāni was described as Kashan's "most skillful and accomplished professional thief" before his conversion. He became a successful Bahai propagator and suffered much hardship after Tehran's Jewish leaders declared him "ritually impure" (*neseḳ*) and he was targeted in a gang attack "with the intention of killing him (Amanat, 2006, pp. 140, 201-202; ʿAzizi, pp. 27-29).

He influenced the young Eshāq, later named ʿAziz-Allāh (1873-1950), who dreaded his family's poverty and low social status, the miserable and unsanitary conditions of the Jewish ghetto, and the humiliation Jews suffered as the "ritually impure." His experiment with a new religious identity as a "semi-Bahai" who frequented Tehran's Sufi circles, known for their tolerance of non-Muslims, finally led to his full acceptance of the optimistic Bahai message that prophesized a future of advancement and progress for the Jews. His final break with the Jewish community came, not over religious disagreements but through a more potent symbolic gesture in his behavior, that is, his refusal to conform to the customary practice of shaving his head and growing facial hair, a statement of commitment to modernity sanctioned by Bahā'-Allāh but objectionable to traditionalist Jews (ʿAzizi, pp. 38, 19-24, 49-54).

OPPOSITION TO JEWISH CONVERSIONS

The success of the Bahai message led to tension within the Jewish community. In Hamadan, a center of early Jewish conversions, some of these tensions can be traced to old professional rivalries among physicians; many younger ones eventually became Christians and later Bahais (Ḥāfeẓi, p. 15). Tensions are



reported as early as 1877, involving a mob attack and hostile charges and ending with the governor's interference (Ešrāq-Kāvāri, 2004, pp. 44-46; Hāfezi, pp. 26-28).

Repeated complaints to the authorities, mostly over the Bahais' consumption of non-Kosher food in Kashan and Hamadan around the turn of the century, typically led to arrests and payments of fines to greedy or cash-strapped local governors. Enforcement of Jewish dietary laws by a Muslim governor was even more awkward, as it implied that the food produced and consumed by Muslims was somehow "impure" (Ešrāq-Kāvāri, 2004, p. 140). Nevertheless, the enforcement of Jewish laws by local governors could lead to severe consequences. In more conservative Kashan, where Jewish leaders were under pressure by the Shi'ite ulema either to fully enforce Jewish law or accept conversion to Islam (Amanat, 2006, p. 251), charges of opening shop on the Sabbath by a certain Mollā Musa led to Jewish elders' demand for a death sentence. He was beaten, imprisoned, and banished and was later murdered, the first of several Jewish converts who paid with their lives for openly advocating their beliefs (Fāẓel-Māzandarāni, 1976, pp. 713-15; Amanat, 1989, p. 70). In fact, the converts were rejecting the rabbis' persistence in what many saw as a narrow definition of religion based on strict observance of Jewish ritualistic practices, and they were willing to endure stigmatization and persecution in return for a new identity.

By the turn of the century, the traditionalist rabbis at times found a new, more modern ally in their opposition to Bahai conversions. Concerned with Bahai success in Hamadan, an agent of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, an organization dedicated to promoting the status and education of less privileged Jews, tried to discourage Jews from attending Bahai meetings and tried to disband the gatherings altogether by putting pressure on the local authorities. He even demanded that his superiors in Tehran pressure the governor of Hamadan to administer corporal punishment (the *bastinado*) to the new converts. He also tried without much success to stop the rabbis from presiding over marriages involving new converts. Some Bahai gatherings held in Seneh in Kurdistan on Saturday afternoons, for example, attracted Jewish enthusiasts and thus became a cause of concern for the agents of the Alliance (Amanat, 2006, pp. 153-54).

Yet despite traditionalists' opposition, many Jews continued to convert, become recognized Bahais, and were elected to Bahai assemblies (*mahfel-e rowḥāni*). As propagators they helped introduce the Bahai faith to others,



including even some members of the ulema. A notable example was a member of a leading ulema family of Hamadan and later a leading Bahai scholar and teacher, Ḥajji Sayyed Aḥmad Ṣadr-al-‘Olamā’, entitled by ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ as Ṣadr-al-ṣodur (1868-1907), who learned about the Bahai faith around 1898 through his Jewish-Bahai physician (Rastegār, pp. 21-28; Fāẓel-Māzandarāni, 1975, pp. 480-81). As converts, their contribution to scholarship was limited to a few treatises on prophecies and polemical discourse. However, as later generations became more assimilated, their contribution to scholarship became more significant (see Arjomand, 1982 for an example of a Jewish-Bahai debate written by a convert).

The rabbis who saw their role as protectors of Jewish traditions could not tolerate such a break and often tried to define the Bahais as outsiders, as a separate community, leading them to establish their own distinct institutions such as cemeteries, bathhouses, and boys and girls schools around the turn of the century (see [BAHAISM x. BAHAI SCHOOLS](#); Eṣrāq-Kāvāri, 2004, pp. 105, 116-25, 128, 137-40).

Some earlier Western observers in the 1930s attributed the Bahai appeal to its “cosmopolitan outlook on life” and its belief in “peaceful relations between the different faiths” (Fischel, 1934, pp. 47-55). More recent views rely on themes common among 19th-century Western observers, such as the Jews’ “humiliation and persecution, suffering and torture,” and their “simplemindedness” and “ignorance in matters of religion” (Cohen, 1973, pp. 54, 162-63) to explain Jewish conversions to Islam and the Bahai faith. The picture of isolated and persecuted Jewish life does not take into account indigenous Jewish Iranian traditions, at variance with traditional European Rabbinic Judaism. Other, more sympathetic observers have generally depreciated the role of social and economic factors in conversion (see Maneck).

Throughout their age-old presence in Iran, Persian Jews made wide-ranging contributions to Iranian society and culture (Fischel, 1937; Moreen; Spector). Yet mass conversions never became widespread among Persian Jews, even with the increasing pressures for conversion during the Safavid period, when many mass conversions to Islam were nominal and transient (Matthee, pp. 20, 42; Amanat, 2006, pp. 60-62). A more fundamental change in the condition of the Jews was the prevalence of the doctrine of ritual “impurity” (*nejāsāt*), present in Sunni Islam but more emphatically so in Shi‘ism and more strictly applied to Jews. This doctrine had consequences well beyond restricting social



interaction and, by the Qajar period, created major economic obstacles for the Jews, who were banned from having shops in the Bazaar in many urban centers, and contributed to a gradual decline in the Jews' socioeconomic status. Trends toward cultural participation became more restrained and limited to occasional participation in Sufi orders, where Jews were more tolerated (see Soroudi, pp. 164-65; Williams).

Increased contact between Iran and the West brought improved communications, notably print and telegraph, and a dramatic rise in the volume of foreign trade, but also military defeat, diplomatic humiliation, monetary crises, and financial dependency (see Okazaki on famines; Issawi, pp. 70-151, 258-309, on the economy; Cole, 1998, "Introduction"; and Amanat, 2004 on sociopolitical conditions). At a time when Iran was deeply affected by war, famine, epidemics, political uncertainties, and weakening central authority, faith was one of the few anchors of personal stability and community support. Yet the economic changes in 19th-century Iran also included more constructive processes. Expansion of domestic markets leading to the emergence of a national economy by the 20th century was fueled partly by the commercialization of agriculture, new trade routes, and increased European demand for Iran's products such as carpets. Some members of the Jewish community, even those with little capital, benefited from these conditions by forming partnerships for domestic trade.

One important aspect of religious ambiguity can be observed in the acceleration of a primordial trend in the history of Persian Jewry, namely a sense of expectation for the coming of a savior or Messiah (Mashiyah). Although Western missionary activities attracted few converts, they revitalized messianic fervor and introduced new options in terms of religious convictions (Momen). According to the Christian missionary Henry Stern, who visited Iran in the 1850s, the prominent Jewish physician Ḥakim Hārūn confessed that "Christian salvation was in perfect harmony with the Scripture, and far superior to the fanciful system of Rabbinism." Stern further claims that Hārūn assured him that many of the Jews of Kashan "will as intensely love Christ and his Gospel, as they formerly rejected the one and despised the other" (Stern, pp. 254-60). Even if one discounts the enthusiasm of the reporter, these statements may point to the strengthening of a deep-rooted sense of messianic expectation among Jews.

A more visual representation of the presence of messianic memory in Kashan during this period was the customary Jewish practice of praying on their



rooftops on the Sabbath for the capacity to recognize the Messiah at the time of His Return (Fāẓel-Māzandarāni, 1976, p. 713). Prior to the forced conversions in Mashad in 1839, some Jews there had voluntarily yet secretly converted to Islam (Jazzāb, pp. 2-4; Solaymāni, pp. 451-52). In one instance, a rabbi in Tehran even encouraged his followers to convert to Islam if the Messiah did not appear by the impending date of 1884 (Rayḥāni's memoirs in Amanat, 2006, p. 134). It is not unlikely that the coming of the year 5600 (1840) in the Jewish calendar awakened a sense of millennial anticipation in many Jews. As in other instances in Jewish (and Islamic) history, the clerical establishment stood against any expectation of messianic advent. Nevertheless, the activities of Christian missionaries and the rise of the Babi movement gave rise to a new discourse in messianic expectation.

This environment of messianic expectation and religious ambiguity, together with pressing questions and changes related to the advent of modernity, provided fertile grounds for the spread of a new religious identity among Jews. For those attracted to the Bahai faith, the coming of the savior instilled a new sense of optimism and hope for an end to age-old miseries and persecution. To become a Bahai was to become a respected member of a community that promoted equality; it was a way out of the ghetto mindset and the limits of an impoverished and marginalized community. Conversion, one might argue, was a way for people to abandon retrograde and parochial divisions and embrace a common culture.

As such, conversion can be seen as a reconciliation of the new faith with the fundamentals of deeply held Jewish convictions. The Jewish belief system was now seen in a new light, by rejecting what was believed to be extraneous traditions and "superstitions" that had developed over the centuries under the dominance of clerical authority. This purist view, which depreciated the rabbinic tradition and instead held up the Torah as the primordial source of religious inspiration, had deep roots among Iranian Jews, perhaps through the influence of the medieval, anti-rabbinic Karaite movement, which rejected the authority of Talmudic law as unchanging and relied instead on a Shi'ite-style interpretation of the Torah by living experts (Netzer, 1997; Amanat, 1998, p. 334).

However, the break with rabbinic tradition was more extensively developed in Bahai texts that reintroduced the old Perso-Shi'ite notion of the renewal of the age and the coming of the "New Era" with the advent of the new "manifestation." The non-literal and hermeneutical Bahai reading of the text, a



familiar theme in the Persian mystical tradition, appealed to the emerging rationalist trends influenced by modernity. Deeply rooted in Iran's mystical and literary tradition, Bahai writings were an important avenue of assimilation through Persian high culture (see Lewis on the influence of Persian literature on Bahai writings).

Cultural assimilation. The Bahai community reflected principles of cultural assimilation in a variety of ways. Bahai schools, which emphasized Persian literature and Arabic language, served as an important conduit of this cultural transformation for second-generation converts (see [BAHAISM x](#); Tābet, 1997; Ringer). In addition to their religious content, Bahai meetings (*mahfel*) conveyed what can be characterized as a Bahai cultural language. Their program included group musical recitations of prayers and poems as well as reading of Bahai texts in Persian and Arabic. Discussion of polemical arguments, grounded in the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, missionary experiences, and conversion accounts, equipped the participants in Bahai debates (Solaymāni, p. 485). Bahai gatherings, which also attracted sizable numbers of Jewish migrants, offered not only hospitality but a universal message of tolerance and equality with Bahais of Muslim descent who would otherwise have considered the Jews “impure” and avoided close interaction with them.

The new Bahai image, especially at the turn of the 20th century, was manifested in modern attire, a standardized Persian vernacular free of provincial and communal vocabulary and intonations, and an emphasis on personal health and hygiene. These were consistent with the emerging modern Iranian identity that stressed national homogeneity and an aversion to signs of a parochial past. In the early 1920s, when Iranians had to embrace a new identity by choosing a family name, many Bahais replaced their Jewish given names and made choices that specifically denoted their religious conviction.

THE PARADOX OF EMBRACING A PERSECUTED RELIGION

Unlike earlier incidents of collective forced conversion to Islam, conversions to the Bahai faith were grounded in individual convictions and private experiences. As such, the Bahai conversions present a seemingly paradoxical question of why, notwithstanding intellectual, cultural, and socio-economic grounds, an already persecuted minority would choose to join a new religion that was subject to even harsher persecution, rather than seek the relative



security of conversion to Islam. In an environment particularly hostile to Bahais, where the murder of an infidel could be justified as religiously sanctioned or permissible, becoming a Bahai could only increase the potential for humiliation and add the risk of anti-Bahai persecution to an already precarious existence.

The answer can be sought in Iran's deep-rooted religious and cultural characteristics. Becoming a Muslim required cutting all connections to the Jewish community. The stigma and loss associated with conversion in exchange for a tenuous quasi-Muslim recognition as a "new convert" (*jadid al-Eslām*), with all of its derogatory connotations, could not have been much of a bargain. Such humiliating practices toward converts may explain why many younger Jews chose to accept the risk of persecution in return for becoming an equal member of a movement that saw itself as the fulfillment of the prophecies of all religions and the leading edge of modernity. They may also explain a common pattern in Bahai conversions among Jews who had become Muslims prior to becoming Bahais. This pattern can be seen as an expression of a trend among those who were seeking new alternatives but were ill at ease with the second-class designation of *jadid al-Eslām* (Eqrāri, p. 22). Even devout Muslims whose ancestors converted generations ago cannot, to this day, completely rid themselves of their Jewish past.

In contrast, the Bahais in theory and to a reasonable extent in practice accepted Jewish converts as equal members. Bahai writings called for the elimination of religious and racial prejudice and the rejection of the idea of "ritual purity" (*nejāsat*). Nevertheless, it was not an easy task to put into practice the Bahai ideas of racial unity, as age-old anti-Jewish prejudices at times proved resilient. Signs of such views can be traced in 'Abd-al-Bahā's repeated warnings against racial prejudice among Bahais (for one such letter, see Ešrāq-Kāvāri, III, 1960, p. 96).

The adoption of a Bahai identity did not necessitate abandoning deep-rooted social ties involving many kinship, marriage, and business relationships. Most Jewish converts continued to attend Sabbath services and observe the rituals of Yom Kippur. According to one account, a number of converts, especially those in clerical positions, together with their numerous "followers," reclaimed their Jewish identities (see Rayhani's memoirs in Amanat, 2006, pp. 214-15). Inter-marriage between Bahai families of divergent backgrounds did not occur in Kashan until around 1929, although it gradually became common. For a short while, in order to raise funds for the newly established Bahai



school in Kashan, Jewish Bahais even ran a kosher butchery in competition with the one run by the rabbis (see Amanat, 1998, pp. 36-38).

In Tehran, Jewish Bahais had separate Bahai Spiritual Assemblies for some years before ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ put an end to the practice. As late as 1903, the Spiritual Assembly of Israelites of Tehran expressed solidarity with American believers by quoting biblical passages as proof of their new religious conviction in a letter addressed to the “Christian Bahais of Chicago,” published in *Najm-e Bakhtar* (Bāktar; “Star of the West”). Bahai tolerance of dual identities allowed for a wide range of believers and sympathizers, ranging from ardent propagandists and active community leaders to those who, in line with the Shi’ite practice of dissimulation of faith (*taqiya*) and esoteric (*bāṭenī*) identity, remained discreet about their faith and maintained only distant ties to the community of believers.

Conversion patterns among women varied in various communities. In contrast to the Jewish women of Kashan, who remained in their hometowns, stayed at home, and were not exposed to education, the new economy, or the evolving structure of the workforce, many Jewish women of Hamadan became dedicated Bahais. According to a Christian woman observer in Hamadan around 1890, “Some of the Jewish women, who have become Babis, ask to have the New Testament read to them in the hope of hearing something which they may use in the propagation of their new faith” (Bird, p. 163).

EVOLUTION AND CONSOLIDATION

External opposition notwithstanding, the daunting changes in the internal dynamics of the Bahai community played a critical role in defining the boundaries of Bahai identity. Beginning in the 1930s under the leadership of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahai Faith (1922-57), an increasingly well-defined and institutionalized form of religious identity challenged multiple identities and loose associations, which had been key elements in the growth of the movement. This process of consolidation, which was influenced by prevailing Western trends, made it more difficult to sustain multiple religious identities and produced a more tightly knit Bahai community, in which membership in other religious communities and attendance at mosque and synagogue services were no longer considered normal (see Ešrāq-Kāvari, III, 1960, p. 14). This crucial transition in the development of Iran’s Bahai community was accompanied by an equally significant process of institutionalization, which placed elected administrative bodies much more



firmly in control of religious and daily life. Through these institutions, new rules for formal “enrollment” (*tasjil*) were established, and Bahai laws such as those relating to marriage, the prohibition against working on Bahai holidays, and even occasional temporary travel restrictions were more vigorously enforced. This trend towards institutionalization coincided with and may in part explain the decline in the rate of growth of the Iranian Bahai community by the 1950s (Smith).

Bahai conversions were also affected by developments within the Jewish community. Iran’s first Zionist committee was formed in Hamadan in 1912, probably in reaction to the Bahais’ overwhelming success in converting Jews there (Netzer, 1980, p. 225). Zionism and later the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 instilled a new sense of self-confidence in Iran’s Jewish community and provided them with a vital psychological boost. Many Persian Jews now saw the successes of their coreligionists in the Promised Land as a fulfillment of their messianic aspirations and an end to their misery as an impoverished and disadvantaged minority. Iran’s Jewish community gradually adopted a more Westernized version of Judaism, less preoccupied with issues of messianic expectation and more engaged with Zionism.

Yet many who chose to confirm their belief in the Bahai faith made important contributions to the Bahai community. Among Mashad converts, one notable Bahai was ‘Aziz-Allāh Jazzāb, a poet and scholar who corresponded with Edward Brown and was appointed by ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ to visit Count Leo Tolstoy (Jazzāb, p. 3; Solaymāni, pp. 451-52; Balyuzi, pp. 175-90). Beginning in the 1920s, many Jewish converts experienced substantial social mobility and economic enhancement, often using community networking in what amounted to a form of “ethnic economy.” Some even sought and received guidance from ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ in starting their business. Others were philanthropists and became known as major donors to the Bahai community, for example, ‘Abd-al-Miṭāq Miṭāqiyeh (1893-1981), a grandson of the aforementioned Ḥakim Hārūn (see autobiography, 1977).

A number of mostly second-generation Bahais benefited from the higher level of education they received in modern (including Bahai) schools and joined the growing educated middle class of the Pahlavi period. Many advanced in business and as professionals. One leading Bahai, Manučehr Ḥakim (1910-81), a highly respected professor of medicine (and a descendant of the aforementioned Ḥakim Masiḥ), was murdered in his Tehran office, allegedly for his Bahai activities (see Ḥakim-Samandari). Many more used their



education to become successful professional entrepreneurs (see Eqrāri). A few became leading innovators and industrialists, important agents of modernity and major contributors to Iran's economy and industry. One notable example is [Kalil Arjomand](#) (d. 1944), an engineering professor who founded Arj Industries in 1937 and was responsible for introducing the manufacture of a number of vital industrial products to Iran (Arjomand, 2002, pp. 62-66, 38-48). Ḥabib Tābet was a well-known industrialist and mega-entrepreneur, whose ventures included the establishment of Iran's first television stations in 1959 (see Tābet's autobiography, 1993). Both Tābet and Arjomand were descendants of the aforementioned ambitious physician Mirzā Ḳalil (ʿAqiba).

The conversion of a substantial number of Jews to a persecuted minority faith was a unique phenomenon in Islamic Iran, if not in the entire Muslim world. The converts added color to an already diverse community of followers that included the educated elite, radical revolutionaries, and eccentrics, but mostly the disadvantaged. Within a relatively short period of time, as their faith evolved from a popular, messianic, anti-establishment movement to a highly institutionalized faith, their experience in the Bahai community contained elements of change and continuity. Those from within the isolated and deprived Jewish community who joined the Bahai faith maintained patterns of economic activity in line with their Jewish relatives. As they became more assimilated and adopted a more Iranian identity, they also tended to be more educated and their social mobility was geared toward professional patterns (Bozorgmehr, 1993, p. 73).

Today, decades after the wave of emigration of many non-Muslims following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's cultural ecosystem, a vital aspect of its survival, is once again under threat of religious conformity. The Islamic Republic's efforts to showcase the religious freedoms of "recognized" minorities are contradicted by its treatment of the Bahais, who have become a silenced "other" belonging to a forbidden memory. A vital question for Iran's future might be whether she is able to rejuvenate within herself the sense of cultural diversity that historically has been essential to her survival.

See also: [CONVERSION IV. OF PERSIAN JEWS TO OTHER RELIGIONS.](#)



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