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Graham Hassall
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In the Australian Bahá'í Community, the issues of religious and ethnic identity merit examination and explanation. Bahá'í beliefs, laws, and system of administration originate in the life and work of Mirza Husayn Ali, "Bahá'u'lláh" - who was born into the Persian nobility in 1817, and exiled for his beliefs, across the Ottoman Empire to the province of Palestine, modern-day Israel, where he died in Akka, near Haifa, in 1892. But whereas the Bahá'í Faith began in Iran in the nineteenth century, and acknowledges its religious and cultural heritage, its "worldview" is global rather than regional: it is a world religion, not an Eastern philosophy, nor is it a sect of Islam. Its basic teaching, around which all others revolve, is the "oneness of mankind", a belief that all peoples, beliefs, and values, while possessing their own integrity, share a common origin, purpose, and destiny. These defining statements suggest some parameters of the Bahá'í Faith as a religion, as they also suggest the issues of contention and opposition discussed in fundamentalist Christian and Islamic literature.

Iran is a Muslim country with a population of some 50 million, but its brand of Islam, Shi'a, differs from the Sunni Islam of the Arabic countries. The term "Iranian" derives from "Aryan", and indicates the Indo-European origins of the population, and "Persia" dates to the Greek name for the southern province of Fars, where the first Persian Empire began. Although "Farsi" is the dominant Persian language, the country contains numerous ethnic groups each having their own distinctive culture and language. The country has been called Iran since 1935, the people and culture continue to be termed Persian.

Whereas the Bahá'ís constitute the largest religious minority

in Iran (although unrecognized by the country's constitution), larger Bahá'í communities exist in Asia, the Americas, and Africa. Persian Bahá'ís thus form a significant section of the Bahá'í world community, without being its most populous. This paper suggests that the community of Persian Bahá'ís living in Australia forms part of a contemporary religious diaspora, initiated over one hundred years ago, and dependent on religious forces both within the religion, and political and religious forces acting upon it, that have their origins in the clash between Shi'a Islam and the modernizing West. The flight of Bahá'ís from persecution in Iran since the revolution in 1979, although the most well-known period of their exodus, has thus been a continuation of a century of diaspora-formation, not merely an isolated instance of political/religious refugee resettlement.

Two factors have generated the dispersion of Persian Bahá'ís. First, early widespread support for the religion provoked fear in the Shi'a Ulama (clerics), who branded it an heretical sect of Islam, and worked for its elimination. Barbarous opposition to the prophet-founders of the Bahá'í religion, climaxing more than a century later in the persecutions in the revolutionary era, has impelled Bahá'ís to emigrate, or flee from Iran, episodically, and during repression of varying intensity. Christians, Armenians, Jews and Zoroastrians have shared a similar fate, and exodus.

Secondly, Bahá'ís have emigrated from Iran in order to propagate Bahá'í beliefs in other countries, and among diverse cultures. Although without clergy - the religion has an administrative system, devoid of clerical offices - Persian Bahá'ís participated, together with their co-religionists from other parts of the world, in programs of global dissemination of Bahá'í beliefs. Given this combination of persecution and missionary zeal, a Persian Bahá'í diaspora was inevitable: they were both pushed and pulled from their country of birth.

Persian Bahá'ís were not the first to bring the Bahá'í Faith to Australia. An English-Irish couple, Hyde and Clara Dunn, arrived in Sydney from San Francisco in 1920 and within a decade succeeded in attracting a sufficient following to establish "Local Assemblies" in Sydney, Adelaide and Auckland. Although there were as yet no Persian Bahá'ís in Australia, there were periodic communications between the two communities. Australian Bahá'ís were keen to learn of the major events of Bahá'í history which had unfolded in Persia, and in 1930-31 an Australian photographer, Effie Baker, travelled through Persia and Iraq photographing important historical sites and religious

artifacts which were rapidly deteriorating. In 1932 the Australian Assemblies cabled to the Court of the Shah, thanking a court minister for removing a ban that had been unreasonably imposed on Bahá'í literature, and at other times, Australian Bahá'ís contributed to relief funds in aid of Persian Bahá'í communities affected by such natural disasters as floods and earthquakes.

Although emerging within different cultural contexts, Bahá'í communities in Persia and Australia, as in all other countries where there were Bahá'ís, established similar religious institutions, on the basis of identical beliefs, and administrative guidelines. Coincidentally, the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand, and of the Bahá'ís of Iran, were both established in 1934. Thus, by the 1950s, when the first Persian Bahá'í immigrants arrived in Australia, there was an established community of Bahá'ís in the antipodes ready to greet them.

PERSIAN BAHA'IS AND AUSTRALIAN IMMIGRATION POLICY: THE 1950s

Although Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith 1921-1957, exhorted Bahá'ís over many years to leave Iran, none considered Australia as a potential destination until the late 1940s. When, however, Persian Bahá'ís first applied for entry to Australia in 1948, they were classified as "Asiatic" rather than "European" by Australia's "White Australia" policy, and were denied entry. Others attempted but failed to meet the stringent requirements for entrance to Australia for tertiary study; although some successfully entered New Zealand, where they completed their education.

Beginning in 1951 the National Assembly attempted to identify sponsors for Persian Bahá'ís, but it was informed by the Department of Immigration in 1953 that the existing policy allowed no possibility for reciprocity between Iranians and the Australian government. Nevertheless, a number of Persians passed through Australia during 1953-54, en route to resettlement in New Zealand and several Pacific Island territories - notably the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia and Western Samoa.

The desire by Bahá'ís to leave Iran increased following an outbreak of persecution in 1955, in which Bahá'í properties were confiscated, and the community's activities were curtailed: the Australian Bahá'í House of Worship, at Ingleside in Sydney, was constructed when the events of 1955 halted plans to build one in Tehran. Although entry to Australia remained difficult into the 1960s, small but significant numbers of Persian Bahá'ís moved to

third countries - in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Some families arrived in Australia from Indonesia, where they had resided until all Europeans were expelled following political unrest there in 1965-66. Individual families also arrived at this time from Pakistan, India and Great Britain. At various times through the 1960s the National Assembly continued consultation with the Department of Immigration on the requirements for bringing further Bahá'ís into Australia, the easing of policy resulted in successful migration by professionals, especially medical doctors. On the eve of revolution, in 1978, there were approximately 50-60 Persian Bahá'í families in Australia.

REVOLUTION AND PERSECUTION: 1979-1988

With the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran deteriorated dramatically, and reports of persecution, imprisonment and execution gained world-wide media attention. In Australia, the National Assembly began alerting the Federal government, and a series of motions in the Australian parliament's upper and lower houses between 1981 and 1983, deploring the abuse of religious tolerance by the Iranian government, oriented the Australian Government's policy toward positive representation on behalf of the Iranian Bahá'í community.

The Government protested to the Iranian Charge d'Affairs in Australia, and supported resolutions on behalf of the Bahá'ís in the United Nations General Assembly, and its International Commission of Human Rights in Geneva. At the same time as it lodged these protests on humanitarian grounds, the government balanced its support for religious liberty with the need to retain good political relations with Iran, realising the potential that existed for the expansion of trade relations.

Thus, while maintaining diplomatic relations with Iran, the Australian government also made provisions for the intake of Iranian refugees. In 1981 Macphee, the Minister for Immigration, announced a Special Humanitarian Assistance (SHP) Program under which Iranian Bahá'ís and others were able to seek refuge in Australia. By 1986, 538 Persian Bahá'ís had entered Australia under the SHP program, and by 1988, some 2,500 had arrived in Australia through either SHP or Refugee Programs. Together with Persians already living in Australia, they constituted 38% of the Australian Bahá'í community.

IDENTITY ISSUES

Although Persian Bahá'ís share an ethnic and religious identity, aspects of both their culture and religious beliefs restrain the community from forming a homogenous, insular ethnic

minority. In the first instance, the belief of Bahá'ís in an emerging global society and in the equality of races prevents the Persian Bahá'ís from establishing an ethnic community apart from the wider Australian society. Furthermore, their entry into the Australian Bahá'í community, in which Bahá'í beliefs and method of administration have operated in the context of Australian culture over a seventy-year period, has led to their dispersed settlement, in all states, and in both urban and rural environments, rather than in a small number of closely settled localities.

This dispersed settlement pattern has been encouraged in part by the distinctive nature of Bahá'í administration. The formation of Local Spiritual Assemblies in all local government areas in which nine or more Bahá'ís reside - administrative units in which Persians have been quickly integrated at local level, has enhanced the capability of the Australian Bahá'í community at the same time as it has allowed the system to adapt to, and respond to, the needs of its Persian members, newly arrived.

The integration of Persians into the non-Persian Bahá'í community has cultural as well as religious implications. Despite the tendency for scattered settlement, 1988 figures suggest that, nation-wide, there were more Persians than non-Persians in 59 of 169 Bahá'í communities that had Local Assemblies, and in 19 Bahá'í communities, more than 75% of the members were Persian. With such concentrated numbers, the Australian Bahá'í community, particularly in metropolitan areas, has tended to appear less culturally diverse, and more dominantly Persian, than is actually the case.

THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATION AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Apart from the meta-cultural facets of the Bahá'í community, in which religious belief is shared by all members, separate from their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, the Persian segment of it contains its own set of permutations and cultural influences, and is far from homogenous. Whereas Persians who migrated prior to the revolution transferred much of their wealth to Australia, Persian refugees invariably escaped with no more than the clothes they wore, across the borders to either Turkey or Pakistan; and whereas some Persians had migrated at an earlier date to Europe, Britain, or North American, gained a Western education, and acquired Western cultural values, refugees invariably spent some time in squalid camps (some even in jail) and learnt basic English, before arriving in Australia. A further group, Bahá'ís of Zoroastrian background, who speak the Dari dialect, often spent periods in India, and are culturally linked with Indian customs of dress, food, and languages, as much as Persian.

Government agencies, as well as the Bahá'ís themselves, have observed closely the resettlement of Iranian refugees in Australia. One report described the Persian Bahá'ís as "articulate, well educated and highly motivated settlers": many were professionally qualified and displayed a determination to re-establish themselves quickly; they tended to remain in migrant hostels for short periods; they had high expectations of successful settlement, and strong career ambitions.

There were, on the other hand, costs involved in this period of migration. Principal among these were psychological difficulties such as stress and depression concerning the fate of relatives remaining in Iran; and concern at disappointment when high resettlement expectations were not met (for example, inability to gain employment of the same status as had been enjoyed in Iran).

Whereas Persian Bahá'ís have suffered at the hands of fundamentalist Muslims in Iran, relations between Persian Bahá'ís and Persian Muslims in Australia have been cautious, but not violent. Even so, separate Government translation facilities have been required for Muslim and Bahá'í refugees. The two communities left Iran for differing reasons. Many Muslims, especially those with Western education, and acculturation, were economically motivated to emigrate, since they wished to maintain their standard of living. Consequently, most Persian Muslims in Australia are well educated, with some capital. Persian Bahá'ís, on the other hand, fleeing persecution, came from a variety of economic and educational backgrounds - from land owners, industrialists, and merchants, to humble villagers and peasantry. In terms of class, therefore, the Persian Bahá'ís in Australia are far from homogenous culturally, economically and in degree of educational sophistication, and are united, rather, by religious belief.

For those who interpret the Iranian revolution as an attempt to replace Persian traditions with Islamic ones, as much as a revolt against Western influences, the preservation of Persian culture in Australia is most important. It is not clear the extent to which emphasis in the Bahá'í writings on the concept of a one-world mentality lessens dependence on the culture of birth. What can be argued, nonetheless, is that Persian Bahá'ís, having a familiar religious community to settle in to, suffer less home-sickness and cultural shock, than Persian Muslims. As one young Bahá'í commented, "Tradition weakens, but religion continues".

This does not mean, on the other hand, that the Persian's love

of poetry, music, and dance is any less strong among the Persian Bahá'ís than among the Muslim community, and the demonstration of fluency in Arabic, and "High" Farsi continues to command respect. Of Persian customs, however, only "Naw Ruz" (New Year) is incorporated into the Bahá'í calendar. Observed on 21 March, date of the spring equinox in the Northern Hemisphere, (which in Australia marks the autumn equinox), Naw Ruz is celebrated more widely than, for example, "Yalda", the first night of winter, the longest night of the year, on which families gather and picnic on the last of the summer's fruit, especially watermelons and grapefruit. Other celebrations, such as the thirteenth day after Naw-Ruz, on which families hold picnics away from their homes, so as to avoid the visitation of bad luck there; and "Charhar Shanbe Suri", a fire-jumping ceremony dating to Zoroastrian times held on the last Wednesday of each year year, are more often observed by Muslim than Bahá'ís Persians, for whom they are cultural but not religious observances.

Because the community of Persian Bahá'ís in Australia is of recent origin, its second generation has as yet had little time to assess itself in the context of Australian society. Young refugees, in particular, are faced with the task of integrating Persian traditions into a new cultural environment. 240 of the refugees who entered Australia between 1983-87, were in the 15-21 age group, and, since more young males were allowed to escape than females, (who presumably remain in the safety of family and village in Iran) there is an apparent lack of female partners for marriage. Whereas a 1987 survey found strong acceptance of cross cultural marriages - up to 85% of Persians who had been resident in Australia for 5 years or more favour the idea of themselves, or their children marrying a partner from a different cultural background- the Bahá'í principle of sexual equality may prove more adaptable to Australian than to Persian culture, and inhibit marriages between Persian males and non-Persian females. Apart from advantages that young Persian Bahá'ís have over their elders in acquiring competence in English, they are also usually more able to adapt the Persian system of politeness, "taroff", to Australian culture, than are older Persians, for whom Australian manners and culture can seem comparatively unsophisticated.

Although it has been suggested that the Persian Bahá'ís have settled successfully into Australian society through their universalist, rather than separatist, world-view, and by having an adequate support network already in existence in Australia to receive them, the permanence of the community cannot be taken for granted. Whereas some Bahá'ís migrated from Iran voluntarily in

the period before the revolution, others were forced reluctantly from their homeland, and retain a strong sense of Persian ethnicity. Just as some Persians had Russian parents, who lived a life-time in Iran, waiting for the revolution in their homeland to subside, the possibility of some Persians waiting a life-time in third countries such as Australia until the Islamic Revolution whithers, remains. For the majority, however, the period of revolution, flight, and resettlement will form the stuff of myth and legend, and the appearance of Persian Bahá'ís in countries such as Australia will mark that period in their diaspora in which the Bahá'í religion, through the blood of its Persian martyrs, came out of obscurity, and more widely known.

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Note: footnote reference numbers have been lost in this online version.

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