

prophet, messenger of God, “The one that God will reveal.”{1} The Bab’s message spread quickly throughout all of Persia, provoking strong opposition from the Shiite clergy and repression from the Persian government. The Bab was arrested and after several years of imprisonment, was condemned to death. His followers faced a wave of repression in which 20,000 of them lost their lives.

Following a failed assassination attempt against Shah Nasiri-d-Din, carried out in August 1852 by two of Bab’s followers seeking to avenge their master, Baha’ullah, one of the Bab’s first disciples, was arrested. Although he proclaimed innocence, he was thrown in the ‘black hole’, a famous Tehran prison. According to sacred Baha’i texts, it was there that he became conscious of his mission as a divine messenger. Released in January 1853 and exiled to Baghdad, he headed up the Babi community there and undertook to renew the community’s faith. Worried, the Persian government encouraged the Ottoman authorities to distance Baha’ullah and the growing number of his disciples from the Persian border. Before leaving for Constantinople, Baha’ullah spent twelve days in a garden near Baghdad and it was there that he declared to a small number of Babis that he was the messenger of God whose arrival had been prophesized by the Bab. {2} That was in April 1863.

From Constantinople, where he spent four months, Baha’ullah was transferred to Andrianople (current day Edirne) from which he rendered his mission public through letters called Tablets, addressed to the leaders of Persia, Turkey, Russia, Prussia, Austria, Great Britain and France, as well as to the Pope and the Christian and Muslim clergy.

A great majority of Babis recognized Baha’ullah and became know as Baha’is. Bothered by their success and the rapid growth of their community, the Iranian consul in Edirne asked the Ottoman authorities to evict Baha’ullah. On order of the Ottoman sultan, this was done in 1868. Baha’ullah was exiled to Saint Jean d’Acre, another Ottoman town, where he died in 1892.

Before passing away, Baha’ullah designated his oldest son, ‘Abdu’l-Baha, Server of the Glory (1844-1921), as leader of the Baha’i community and authorized interpreter of his teachings. ‘Abdu’l-Baha not only administered the movement’s affairs from Palestine, he also actively engaged to spread the faith, traveling in Africa, Europe and America from 1910 to 1913. In turn he designated his oldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1896-1957) as his successor and authorized interpreter of Baha’ullah’s teachings. {3}

During ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s ministry, Baha’i groups were established in North Africa, the Far East, Australia and the United States. Since then, the movement has spread nearly everywhere on the planet with particularly important communities in Africa, Iran, India, the United States and certain regions of South East Asia. The religion’s expansion in the Caucasus began as soon as its revelation but before analyzing in detail its progression in the Russian empire of the time, we will briefly present the religion’s theological principles.

Sacred literature and religious practice

The Baha'is believe that God revealed himself to men through different prophets throughout the centuries. They consider that the revelations of Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Christ or Mohammed complete one another, each one surpassing the previous one. {4} From this postulate derives the belief that Baha'ullah's and 'Abdu'l-Baha's revelations surpass previous revelations from the Old and New Testaments, as well as from the Qur'an, without contradicting them. {5} This new revelation, which according to the Baha'i faith is superior to the others, has become necessary for a more mature and responsible humanity than that of ancient times. {6} They are additionally convinced that mankind is on the brink of a new era in which they will form one single nation and have one single religion. This evolutionist conception of humanity is a central point of the Baha'i social and religious vision which considers that "God is unique and all of his prophets are united. Humanity is singular and whole." The Baha'is believe therefore in a unique God, creator of the world, and based upon these points, they follow the Abrahamic religions. They also share the same conception of humanity, placed by God at the summit of creation.

The Baha'is greatly insist upon humanity's unity. They consider the current divisions between nations, races and religions as faults destined to disappear with the accession of their doctrine. That is why they are fervent supporters of United Nations institutions, in which they see the precursor signs of the global government they wish to see. {7} The Baha'is' doctrine can be summarized in the words of Shoghi Effendi, Baha'ullah's last successor: "The goal of a Baha'i's life is to promote the unity of mankind. Our lives are directly linked to those of all human beings and we do not want a personal greeting, but a universal greeting. Our goal is to usher in a global civilization." {8}

The Baha'is observe a strict code of conduct based upon their holy book, Kitab I Aqdas. The religion's principal obligations are daily prayer and a one month fast in March, before the beginning of the New Year. They encourage personal spiritual life, supported by meditation upon the texts of Baha'ullah and Abdul Baha. Each day they also recite their three obligatory prayers while facing the directions of Saint-Jean d'Acre and Haifa, where their World Centre and Universal House of Justice are located. All drugs are strictly forbidden, particularly alcohol, and the use of tobacco is strongly discouraged. Marriage is extremely important and pre-marital sexual relations as well as adultery are also strictly forbidden. {9} The Baha'is follow a calendar of 19 months and 19 days, totaling 361 days. The four "remaining days" are dedicated to festivities. The first day of each month is marked by a celebration consisting of three parts. The first part is reserved for prayer and meditation upon the sacred texts. Following that, participants deal democratically with administrative questions concerning their group. Finally, the meeting ends with a meal and entertainment.

Notes:

{1} For a historical and scientific view of the Baha'i faith, see Momen

Mojan, The Babi and Baha'i Religions 1844-1944 : Some Contemporary Western Accounts, George Ronald, Oxford, 1981. See also the following book which continues to remain relevant, Hippolyte Dreyfus, Essai sur le baha'isme : son histoire, sa portée sociale, Paris puf 1962, 152 p. Finally, it is worth consulting the serious study by J-D. Martin, The Baha'i Faith : the Emerging Global Religion, San Francisco, 1984.

{2} Hippolyte DREYFUS, op.cit.

{3} Hippolyte DREYFUS, op.cit.

{4} Encyclopedia Britannica, op.cit.

{5} See the Encyclopedia of Religions and Humanity:

<http://www.bahai-biblio.org/centre-doc/dico/encyclopedie-religions.htm> , 25 March 2006.

{6} Encyclopedia Britannica, op.cit.

{7} This belief in a universal government explains the Baha'is' passion for the United Nations where they have permanent representation in several organizations in Geneva, Nairobi and New York.

{8} All of Shoghi Effendi's works translated into French can be found at: <http://www.religare.org/unity-mba.htm>, as of 4 April 2006.

{9} See the Encyclopedia of Religions and Humanity:

<http://www.bahai-biblio.org/centre-doc/dico/encyclopedie-religions.htm> , 25 March 2006.

The Baha'is of the Caucasus: From Russian Tolerance to Soviet Repression
(2/3)

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Russia, at the moment of the Baha'i faith's advent was already politically and militarily very present in Iran and along its frontiers. Guided by an imperial policy that put it into competition with the English Crown, Russia was very interested in what was happening in Iran, where it was one of the rare European powers to maintain permanent diplomatic representation .{1} Because of this, Russia was concerned and well-informed about what happened there, including in the domain of politico-religious ideas.

The theological questions of the Persian Empire interested Russia even more because historically, it was often the Shiite clergy that pushed the Shah to war against Russia. This was the case in 1813 and 1828 at least. {2} This strong interest explains the rapidity with which the Writings of Baha'ullah were translated into Russian by Orientalists in the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg and Moscow. {3} On the part of certain Russian intellectuals, these translations contributed to a veritable fancy for the Baha'i faith.

Repression, to which the first converts were subject, obligated them to exile

themselves in several directions and notably, to Russian territory, in the Turkmen steppes and in the region of Nakhichevan. Therefore, Ashgabat, capital of present-day Turkmenistan, the main city of the Turkmen desert at the time and an important Russian garrison in the region, became the centre of Baha'i exiles. Largely studied by specialists of the Baha'i faith {4}, this community is considered a model of a Baha'i society, founded and governed by the Writings of Baha'ullah. Because of its order, discipline and social organization, as well as its interdependent collective life, based on mutual aid and conviviality, it elicited the admiration of the Russian political authorities of the period.

It possessed, exceptionally for the time, its own hospitals, schools, workshops, newspapers, and centres of leisure. Early egalitarians, girls were educated, conforming to the prescriptions of Baha'ullah that insist on the instruction of girls. The temple of the community, Mashriq-ul-Adhkar, was the point of assembly and crystallization of the group. Certain European intellectuals did not hesitate to compare it to the first Christian societies. {5}

Parallel to its diffusion in the Russian provinces, this new faith attracted the curiosity and sympathy of intellectual circles in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In 1903 the writer Isabelle Grinevskaya composed a play in five acts that she called *The Bab*. In the play, she praises Baha'ism, which she had just embraced. But it is Leo Tolstoy who most publicized this new religion to Russian readers of the period. An admirer of Baha'ullah, he was notably seduced by his progressivism, the rationality of his thinking and above all by the positive role that he gives to women in society. Arguments vary and contradict each other as to whether or not he converted to Baha'ism. {6}

The first contact between Babism (and therefore Baha'ism) and the Caucasus occurred in present-day Nakhichevan. As of the announcement of the next coming of Baha'ullah, a group of disciples formed under the leadership of Sadiq, from the town of Senend, close to Ordubad. The movement spread to all of Nakhichevan and to the region of Zangezur. Worried in face of this movement that it did not understand from the start, the Russian army, under the command of General Behbudov, attacked the new community, which is thought to have included more than ten thousand people. In spite of repression, the new faith continued to grow. From 1850 onwards, small communities established themselves in Baku, Balakhani, Ganja, Barda, and Sheki.

Small groups also installed themselves in Tbilisi, Batumi, in Armenia and in Karabakh. But it is the community of Baku that counted the largest number of believers, to such a point that in 1860, it obtained official recognition from the authorities. It was supported in its legalization efforts by Mirza Abdulkadir Ismayilzade, father of the great national poet Mikayil Mushfik.

Records from the Russian period and from the NKVD show that in 1887 the building situated at 216 Mirza Agha Aliev Street (formerly Jadirov Street), was the spiritual centre of the Baha'i faith community. Currently, attempts are

underway for this property to be returned to the Baha'i faith community, but the current legislation does not provide for such recourse.

Political Opening

The success of the Baha'is in Azerbaijan stems from the importance that they accorded from the beginning to modern mixed education, to tolerance and to dialogue with other religions. These progressive views that went against the dominant religious ideas of the age cost them. The famous akhund (Shiite cleric) Ibrahimkhelil, learning that his son had not only converted to Baha'ism but also that he was contributing to its diffusion, published a fatwa condemning him to death. In 1901, he was thrown into an open oil well and stoned to death by the crowd. Barred from Muslim burial, the authorities gave him a space in the Merdekan cemetery.

Despite this climate of hostility, major Azerbaijani intellectual figures often read, admired and even embraced Baha'ism. Among them were the great poet Seyid Azim Shirvani (1835-1888), the founder of the national opera Uzeyir Hajibeyov (1885-1948), and Elekber Sabir (1862-1911) who lived for a long time among the Baha'is and to whom we owe the most scientific and reliable studies on the community. Finally, the major millionaire and oil magnate, patron of the arts and philanthropist Musa Naghiyev (1849-1919), was part of the Baha'i faith community. A member of the Spiritual Council of Baku, he helped the community confront external attacks.

Built on the ruins of the Russian Empire, the Soviet government's ideologues defended with firm conviction from the 1920s onward the idea that all religions are the source of obscurantism and backwardness. With this idea, as soon as it established its control over the whole country, the Bolshevik regime declared war on major religions like Islam and Protestantism. Baha'ism was initially spared because it was a small community scattered in several towns in the Caucasus and in Central Asia.

From 1922, the new government's caciques launched their campaign against the Baha'is through the official organs of the Party. Concrete measures ensued immediately, such as the deportation of certain Baha'is to Iran and the exile of others to Siberia. Baha'i faith publications and schools were banned, as well as collective meetings, which were considered to be a threat to socialism. From the 1930s onwards, repression intensified, as was the case for all other religions. Certain intellectuals were shot by the Stalinist police.

As in other religions, Baha'i faith and practices took refuge in the family circle and private life, as all religious expression was banned in public spaces. The end of Stalinism relaxed the antireligious policies but a renewal did not occur until much later during perestroika, which, blowing a wind of liberty over all of the Soviet Union, permitted the establishment of connections with Baha'is abroad. This political opening, along with the independence of the republics where the Baha'is were implanted, announced a reconstitution of the community.

Notes:

{1} On the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Iran, see George CURZON, *Persia and the Persian Question*, vol. 1, Longmans, 1892, London, reprinted in Frank Cass, London, 1966. For a Russian version of these narratives, see Andrew D. KALMYKO, *Memoirs of a Russian Diplomat* (Ed. Kalmykow, Alexandra), Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1971.

{2} Tadeusz SWIETOCHOWSKI, *Historical Dictionary of Azerbaijan*, New York, Secarcrow, 1999.

{3} The first real Russian translation of Baha'i texts was the work of Aleksandr KAZEM-BEG, a Russian scholar of Iranian origin, a professor of Persian Studies at Saint Petersburg University between 1849 and 1860. See Graham HASSALL, "Notes on the Babi and Bahá'í Religions in Russia and its territories", *Journal of Baha' Studies*, vol. 5, n° 3, 1993, pp. 41-80.

{4} On the Ashgabat Baha'i community, see Moojan MOMEN, "The Baha'i Community of Ashkhabad : it's Social Basis and Importance in Baha'i History", in Shirin AKINER (Ed.), *Cultural Change and Continuity in Central Asia*, London, Kegan Paul International, 1991, pp. 278-305.

{5} Moojan MOMEN, « The Baha'i Community of Ashkhabad: its Social Basis and Importance in Baha'i History », op.cit.

{6} On the relationship between Leo Tolstoy and Baha'ism, see William P. COLLINS, and Jasion T. JAN, "Lev Tolstoy and the Báb' and Bahá'" Religions: A Bibliography", *The Journal of Bahá' Studies*, vol. 3, n° 3, 1991, pp.1-10.

The Baha'is of the Caucasus: An Independent Azerbaijan (3/3)

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From caucaz.com [archive.org]

As for other religions, the end of the Soviet era is for the Baha'is a synonym for a rediscovered religious liberty. However, the campaign against religion during the Soviet period was such that the number of Baha'is at the beginning of the decade was barely two thousand. Fifteen years later, their number is essentially the same. Like other religions, the Baha'i faith is seeing a rejuvenation that comes from a combination of internal and external influences.

In the interior of the country, residents more easily express their faith and their religious practices, all the more reason because the power and the authorities seem to encourage this phenomenon—the public expression of religious sentiment. As for the exterior influence, it has come essentially from Turkey. One could expect that it would come from Russia and Iran, where important, long-established Baha'i communities live but it is actually the Turkish influences what were the most rapid and the most efficient, doubtless because of the good relations between Ankara and Baku, united around the

discourse on Turkishness and a re-found brotherhood.

The phenomenon of conversion occupies a considerable place in this revival. It is estimated that more than 80% of Baku's Baha'is are converts, often Shiite Muslims in quest for spirituality at the moment of the break-up of the Soviet Union. The arrival of foreign missionaries, Turkish missionaries especially, facilitated the conversion of certain people, Muslim or Christian by culture, to the Baha'i faith. Ethnically, the majority of Baha'is from Azerbaijan are Azeri, but there are also Russians and Northern Caucasians, especially Lezgins {1}.

On the same model, in other Caucasian regions, where communities exist, notably in Batumi and in Dagestan, a certain revival has also taken place. As for the Baha'is in Armenia, most of them have left the country since the beginning of the confrontation with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

One of the traditions of the Baha'i faith is the assembly of the community of each city every year on 21 April to choose its nine leaders. An impossible practice during the Soviet period, it was revived starting in 1991. At that time, nine people were chosen democratically by the faithful hold the decision-making power for the community in Baku. The groups in Ganja, Sumqayit and Salyan each have their own nine representatives charged with administering the life of the community. In other cities, the reduced number of Baha'is does not allow the election of representatives that can always go to Baku for the important Baha'i holidays.

In contrast to other religions, the Baha'i faith doesn't place a central importance on the place of worship. Most of the time, meetings and religious ceremonies take place in family houses. Nevertheless, in Baku there is a seat of the association that serves as the conference center, the school and the meeting room. Religious education there is assured by the leaders of the community. Religious literature is often imported from Russia, where paper is less expensive. Every 19 days, the community meets in a plenary session for collective prayers, often readings of sacred texts, especially the works of Baha'ullah and of Abdu'l-Baha.

The community of Baku is accepted world-wide by Muslims and perfectly integrated into the country and society. In accordance with the law, its two religious associations are registered with the State Committee for Religious Affairs. It also has two members who are part of a forum created by the state, the Union of Religious Organizations for Peace.

This official recognition of its status permits the community to freely practice its religion and to peacefully live its religious life. On the other hand, in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic where, in principle, the laws of the Republic of Azerbaijan should apply, the small Baha'i minority is constantly harassed by the authorities, who don't give it any freedom of association.

However, the Baha'is aren't the only ones to be bothered for the religious

beliefs. Followers of Christian denominations, especially Adventists, Pentecostals, and Baptists, are also constantly bothered by the authorities of the Autonomous Republic.

Note:

{1} See <http://www.bahai.az>

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