The Anti-Baha'i Society

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The Anti-Bahá'í Society

Mehdi Abedi
Michael M. J. Fischer
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[page 48]

[Intro note, by Michael Fischer]:

Anjoman-e Zedd-e Bahá'íyat (The Anti-Bahá'í Society)

The Anti-Bahá'í organization was started with the permission of Ayatullah S. Husain Borujerdi by Shaykh Mahmud Halabi of Mashhad who became what in contemporary idiom might be called a "Mahdi freak." He started an annual celebration of the Mahdi's birthday in Mashhad, in which everyone who owned canaries would bring them in their cages to decorate a large busainiyeh in which the celebration was held. He also started an organization to stop the spread of Bahá'ísm which claimed that Muhammad was not the last and final prophet, but that a new dispensation had begun with Baha'ullah. The organization was called Anjoman-e Imam-e Zaman to deny any claim that the Bab or Baha'ullah could be considered the Mahdi or messiah: Imam-e Zaman ("Imam of the age") is a title of the twelfth Imam who will return as the Mahdi. After the 1979 revolution, the organization Arabicized its name to Hojjatiyya after another title of the Imam-e Zaman: Hujjat Allah 'Ala Khalqih ("God's proof over his creation"). Halabi moreover hinted that he was in daily contact with the Imam-e Zaman; and eventually he came out against Khomeini, denying that he was a legitimate representative of the Imam-e Zaman. The name Hojjatiyya thus now performed two denials: first, it denied the Babi-Bahá'í claim that the Imam-e Zaman had come or that there was a new dispensation; second, it denied Khomeini's title Nayeb-e Imam ("aide to the Imam") or Imam. Halabi invoked the slogan "Should any flag be raised before the coming of the Mahdi, its carrier is an idolator [taghut] and is guilty of the heresy of shirk [worshipping something other than God]." Halabi advocated peaceful

[page 49]

means of fighting the Bahá'ís, including harassment, but not direct insult or violence. However, violence against the Bahá'ís has broken out on several occasions during this century: 1903 in Yazd, 1955-56 in nearby Abarghu, and the 1979 revolution are times of martyrdom for Bahá'í history (on the former two, see Fischer [1973, appendix on religious riots]; on the latter, see Fischer [1980]: on Babis and Bahá'ís, see chapter 4).

In Yazd the Anti-Bahá'í Society was headed by Dr. Paknejad, a physician on government salary, who also owned a weaving factory. His office was devoted more to the Anti-Bahá'í Society than to healing patients, although he often wrote out free prescriptions for the poor. He wrote a University of Tehran dissertation, and published from it a series of some fifteen volumes on Islam and medicine, called Avvalin Daneshgah va Akherin Peyambar (The first university and the last prophet), which is a badly written and confused outpouring of verbiage with little value or coherence. After the revolution he was elected to Parliament from Yazd. He was assassinated, and was succeeded as member of Parliament by Ayatullah Saduqi's son, Muhammad-Ali Saduqi. (When Muhammad-Ali ran for reelection to Parliament, he was rejected by the Yazd electorate in favor of a mulla from Mehriz, but was nonetheless appointed by Khomeini to be a deputy minister of justice in Tehran. Subsequently, he ran for the Majlis again and was elected, and has now succeeded his father and father-in-law as the main ayatullah in Yazd.)

A number of Bahá'ís of Yazd were killed during the revolution. The most dramatic of these stains on the revolution was the execution of Nurullah Akhtar-Khavari (see chapter 4), the gentle, cosmopolitan leader of the Yazdi Bahá'ís, who handled international correspondence for the Derakhshan Textile Mill. He had given Paknejad private tutorials in English. Paknejad not only repaid this with diligent harassment of the Bahá'ís, but made no move to avert the execution of his teacher. That execution was filmed for television by the zealots of the revolution only to discover that audiences were repulsed: the broadcast was suppressed. Paknejad now has a small street named after him, as if he were a worthy martyr.

[Mehdi Abedi's recollections]:

It was Mr. Nayeb Kabir, the geometry and religion teacher mentioned above, who prepared us for ideological combat against the Bahá'ís, whom he referred to as "the political party." He stressed the verse in the Qur'an (33:40) which refers to Muhammad as Khatam al-Nabiyin ("the seal of the Prophets"), and he prepped us for the Bahá'í argument that while khatim means "the last," khatam, the form here, means "signet ring"; from this, the Bahá'ís drew the conclusion that there were other "seals" of prophecy, while Mr. Nayeb Kabir insisted that the Qur'an means that

Muhammad was the seal that closes prophethood. He also prepared us for the Bahá'í argument that nabi is only one of several kinds of prophets, and that rasul and ulu al-'azm are other kinds. But one cannot be a rasul without being a nabi and one cannot be an ulu al-'azm without being both nabi and rasul. And he dealt with the problem of the supernaturally long life of the Mahdi: born in 255/868 he had already lived eleven centuries, and would live to the end of time. Here he would tell us about others who had lived long lives, e.g., Noah; he told us there were contemporaries who had seen the Mahdi; and he said that modern biology had demonstrated that cells could live forever if properly nourished. The last fit nicely with the dogma that all the Imams had been assassinated, for had their lives not been precipitously ended, they would have lived forever. He taught us the signs of the Mahdi's reappearance, and he had ready answers to objections such as, Why would the Mahdi return with a sword and only 313 followers; would not a few atomic bombs be more efficient? The answer was that in a sword there is discrimination, while atomic bombs kill guilty and innocent alike, leaving no opportunity for verbal persuasion, for people to recant and join the forces of the Mahdi. His forces will not be limited to 313, but many will join: may we all be his soldiers.

I did not know much about Bahá'ís before this time. Children in the alleys would sometimes chant, Tu pir-e babi ridam ("I shit on the Babi saint"), and my father had told me that "Babis" (he did not distinguish Babis and Bahá'ís) did not say their prayers, and were najes (impure). In the village, the first Sepah-e Danesh (literacy corpsman) had been taunted and run out with accusations that he was Bahá'í (though that may have had to do mainly with his obvious disinterest in the village, and his always running off to town).

My father had already often spoken to me about the Mahdi. One of his few books, which he seemed never to tire of reading, was a volume called Nur al-Anwar (The light of the lights). It described the Mahdi, gave vivid accounts of false messiahs, the signs of the true Mahdi's reappearance, the names, number, and place of origin of those destined to be among his special 313 soldiers. My father would sigh, "Alas, I am not one of those soldiers, since none of them come from Yazd." He also had a small book by a mulla named Khalisi, called Crime in Abarghu, the story of a Bahá'í who had killed some Muslims with an ax. The book called on Muslims to rise up for justice. It inflamed people like my father and youths like myself to think of Bahá'ís as merciless killers; and I remember that after having read it, I had nightmares of a Bahá'í trying to kill me with an ax. My father liked to tell me the stories of the year of Bahá'í killing (sal-e babi koshi) [presumably 1905,

but perhaps 1955-56; see Fischer (1973, appendix on religious riots)], as if he singlehandedly had killed Bahá'ís like so many flies or mosquitoes. The verb he used was saqqat kardan, the term for beating animals to death. Of course, I knew this was all vicarious bravado: he had never killed anyone in his life.

Nayeb Kabir's approach was different. He did not share the pride of the earlier generations in having physically killed Bahá'ís. Instead he thought the spread of Bahá'ísm could be halted, bringing the misguided back to Islam, by training Muslim youths to challenge the Bahá'í missionaries (muballighs). He had a network of spies who had penetrated Bahá'í circles by pretending to be believers. Part of their job was to find people in the process of being attracted to Bahá'ísm, or merely curious, and reconvert them back to Islam. I was recruited and attended weekly meetings of the Anjoman-e Zedd-e Bahá'í in a room attached to the Congregational Mosque just across from the old Vaziri Library, belonging to the Heyat-e Hamiyan-e Masjid-e Jami' (Gathering of Protectors of the Congregational Mosque). I seemed to be the only student in these meetings; everyone else was from the bazaar, except two teachers, Nayeb Kabir from the secondary school of the Ta'limat-e Islami, and Mir Ali from the primary school of the Ta'limat-e Islami. There were several such groups of ten or fifteen persons each under the general leadership of Dr. Paknejad. Among ourselves the organization was called Anjoman-e Zedd-e Bahá'í, but to outsiders we called it Anjoman-e Imam-e Zaman (Society of the Imam of the Age).

These meetings consisted in part of dictations by Nayeb Kabir, which we would copy into notebooks, of arguments to use with the Bahá'ís, and quotations from their own writings complete with page and line reference. But the exciting part was practice debates in which one of us would play the role of the Bahá'í. Soon I was completely preoccupied with Bahá'ísm. I read all the refutations of Bahá'ísm I could find. Nayeb Kabir and these books told me about the connection between Bahá'ísm and colonial politics, that the Russians had invented the Shaykhi sect and its offshoot, Babism; that Bahá'ísm was an offshoot of Babism supported by the British, and more recently by the Zionists. (Khalisi, the author of the pamphlet about Abarghfu, had also published the memoirs of Prince Dalgorgi, the Russian who was supposed to have started Babism, by going to Sayyid Kazem Rashti, the head of the Shaykhis, and suggesting to him that the Mahdi might be among us, and pointing out the Bab. Khalisi was exiled to Yazd by the shah, and many old folks still remember his activities aimed at establishing Islamic unity.)

Once, in Dr. Paknejad's presence, I played the Bahá'í, and defeated

all my fellow Muslims. This ranged from glib adolescent nonsense to much more dangerous areas. To the slur, "Baha'ullah is your God," instead of insisting that he was a prophet of God, I counterattacked: "Suppose it is so, what then?" My opponents took the bait: "It says in your books that he had a hernia, how could God be so powerless as not to be able to cure his own hernia?" To this I glibly responded, "At the beginning of your Muslim prayer you say 'Allah o Akbar' ['God is the greatest']; if God is the greatest, then his testicles must be the greatest." Everyone laughed good-humoredly. But when I began to argue the case for pantheism and metaphor, and cited the Qur'anic verse where God says, "It was not you who shot the arrow, but Allah," things became tense, and Paknejad stopped the proceedings, saying, "Thank God, you are Muslim; were you really a Bahá'í, not even Muhammad himself could convince you." Another said, "If someone were as hardheaded as you, it could never be the word of Muhammad that could change your mind, but only the sword of the Mahdi." Everyone laughed.

In these debates we were taught to be polite, to differentiate ourselves from the rabble who cursed the Bahá'ís. Bahá'ís were pacifist, so we had no fear of being beaten, and we wanted to show we also had a mission to be as peaceful as they, and to demonstrate that we had a higher logic. Our goal was not so much to win verbal duels, but to intervene with Muslims who were toying with Bahá'í propaganda and bring them back into the fold of Islam. We infiltrated into Bahá'í meetings under the guise of ourselves being potential converts. Often, of course, Bahá'ís we engaged in conversation would ask, "Do you know Dr. Paknejad?" We would say, "No, I have nothing to do with him." We were also taught to snatch rare Bahá'í books where we could. Two or three incidents in which I participated will illustrate the tactics.

I befriended Kamran, a young Bahá'í. We said to each other, "If I can show you the truth, will you accept it," and each of us said yes. He brought me a mimeographed book, which impressed me. I took it to the Anjoman-e Zedd-e Bahá'í, where as soon as I began describing its arguments, it was identified and the counterarguments laid out. Nayeb Kabir told me it was not an important book and I should return it. Kamran then gave me a rare edition of the Iqan (Certitude), published in Cairo. Paknejad recognized it as the original unedited version, and appropriated it. Kamran tried mightily to persuade me to give it back, arguing that were he to have done the same to me, I would never accept his religion; that I was clearly not acting on my own conscience but was being manipulated by others; and that he had borrowed it to show me only with great difficulty, arguing that I was an educated and sincere

friend. I remained unmoved, and pointed out that the book was no longer in my hands, but that it now belonged to the library of the Imam-e Zaman.

Kamran also took me to the one Bahá'í meeting I ever infiltrated. I remember that there was a Bahá'í missionary from Tehran who answered questions of the local Bahá'í, and there was one local very agitated man who asked how to respond to questions about the Bahá'í calendar having an illogical nineteen months, while all other religions had twelve months aligned with the solar or lunar calendars. The missionary responded that were the questioner Muslim, one could cite the Qur'anic bismillah-i rrahman-i rrahim, which has nineteen letters, and several other phrases which were multiples of nineteen, i.e., to show that nineteen is a divine number.26 The man in a crude Yazdi idiom retorted, Kos cheh rabti be skaghigheh dareh? ("what connection does the vagina have with the temples?"; the Tehran idiom is Guz che rabti..."What connection does a fart have . . . "). So the missionary replied, "Nineteen times nineteen is 351 days, plus four days we celebrate the New Year, what's so bad about that?" Another item of discussion was that the Bahá'í library in the village of Manshad did not have a copy of the Dehkhoda encyclopedia, and money should be raised to supply one. This impressed me because at the time, the Vaziri Library was trying to find someone to donate volumes to complete its set of this encyclopedia, and I thought to myself this village library must be large to have things our library did not. Later I realized Bahá'ís had a special interest in this encyclopedia because it had a long entry on the Bab. The entries on the Imams were short, understandably, since every Iranian knows about them, but it angered Muslim zealots like Dr. Paknejad.

The only other evil thing I did against individual Bahá'ís was when I was transferred to a second group of the Anjoman under Ahmad Fattahi. Fattahi was a registrar of births and deaths. It was he who registered most Bahá'í marriages, births, and deaths, so he was a tremendous source of information in keeping tabs on Bahá'ís. (Bahá'í marriages were not legally recognized in Iran; marriages could be registered only under the four recognized religions: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism.) One day Fattahi called me. I had a beard and a black suit, and he gave me a black attache case. He took me to an alley in the Zoroastrian quarter, and told me to knock on a particular door and ask for Abbas. Abbas would not be there. I was to pretend I was an anti-Bahá'í activist from Tehran asked by Abbas to come and answer questions he was not capable of answering. Whether or not I was admitted into the house, I was to deliver the message that they should

[page 54]

not think what they were doing was secret, but that we knew everything that went on. When I knocked, a woman's voice with a Zoroastrian accent answered without opening the door, "Who is it?" "Engineer Imami," I said. Members of SAVAK were said to use the titles Engineer or Doctor. "What do you want (cke famayeshi darid?)," she asked in polite formal language, adding "Our man is not here (mardemun khuneh nist)", i.e., please go away. "I'm looking for Abbas." "What Abbas? No Abbas lives here." "Abbas, you know, the painter." Silence. I repeated, "Abbas, the painter who comes here to learn from your husband." "He is not here." "He must be here; he sent for me to come all the way from Tehran to answer a few questions. Where shall I go? When will your husband or Abbas be here?" Surprisingly, at this point, the woman opened the door a little, and spoke loudly as if invoking the ears of neighbors, "I already told you, Abbas is not here, my husband is not here." I said, "Tell Abbas if he sends for someone from Tehran, he must be polite enough to meet them." And I turned and walked away. Fattahi was waiting around the corner with his bicycle and took me on it back to his office. There I reported the conversation and asked him what it was all about. Abbas, he said, was a poor painter who had been seen repeatedly in the shop of this Zoroastrian-Bahá'í tailor. The ruse worked when Abbas next went to the house, he was turned away despite his protestation that he did not know any Engineer Imami. A few days later Fattahi sent someone else to Abbas to hire him to paint a house. As the contract was being made, this emissary asked, "You are not a Bahá'í or a Jew are you; paint after all is a liquid and conveys impurity, we cannot use a najes painter." "No, no," Abbas assured him. Then later while painting, the emissary said, "Sorry I asked you, but you know these Bahá'ís are such hypocrites and liars." And with such preparation, often an Abbas would spill his own story out of bitterness. So, Fattahi said, we turn potential enemies of the Mahdi into soldiers of the Mahdi.

That is what we called ourselves, Sarbaz-e Imam-e Zaman (soldiers of the Imam of the age). It was a kind of war. Perhaps that is why many of the leaders of the Anjoman were not married: Nayeb Kabir, Mir Ali, Fattahi. No one in the organization was a mulla, because clerical dress would warn off any Bahá'ís. The only one who wore a turban was Shaykh Mahmud Halabi of Mashhad who started the whole thing.

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