Baha'i Communities

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Bahá'í Communities

Peter Smith
published in Encyclopaedia IranicaVolume 3

New York: Columbia University, 1989

The development of the Bahai faith has been accompanied by a massive transformation of the religion’s social base. From being a religion predominantly composed of those of Iranian Shi?ite background, it has become a worldwide movement comprising people of a multitude of religious and national backgrounds. Of the contemporary Bahai population, probably fewer than one in ten are Iranians.

Overall pattern of Bahai expansion. A distinctive Bahai community may be said to have come into being during the 1860s and 1870s following the open rupture between the leaders of the Babi movement. Mirza Hosayn-?Ali Nuri Baha?-Allah (1817-92) had already begun to successfully reanimate and coordinate the various Babi communities in Iran and Iraq. When he laid claim to be the promised one of Babism (1866), his message was widely accepted. Most Babis became Bahais, only a minority siding with Baha?-Allah’s half brother, Sobh-e Azal (see azali babism). Well coordinated, the emerging Iranian Bahai community possessed considerable dynamism. Successful missionary activity was soon undertaken, not only amongst Iran’s Shi?ite majority, but also amongst the Jewish and Zoroastrian minorities (from the 1880s). Further afield, small Bahai communities were established in Turkey, Syria, Egypt, India, and Asiatic Russia, mostly amongst expatriate Iranians.

Bahai expansion beyond the Middle East and the Iranian diaspora only began after the passing of Baha?-Allah (1892) and the succession of his son, ?Abd-al-Baha? (1844-1921), as leader. In the 1890s, an active community developed in North America, Americans in turn establishing Bahai groups in England, France, Germany, Hawaii, and Japan. Groups were also later established in Australia and New Zealand. Western Bahais also traveled widely in the Middle East, India, and Latin America, significantly contributing to the sense of the world community among the Bahais.

Plans for a systematic global expansion of the Bahai religion had been outlined by ?Abd-al-Baha?, most clearly in his Tablets of the Divine Plan (1916-17).

However, it was only under the leadership of his grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1957), that such plans were actually implemented on any large scale. Devoting the early years of his ministry to consolidating and standardizing the system of Bahai administration (1922-early 1930s), Shoghi Effendi then employed this administration as a means of securing systematic expansion, at first only in selected countries, through a series of national and regional Bahai plans (1937-53), and then globally in an international Ten Year Crusade (1953-63). This approach has been continued since Shoghi Effendi's death (1957), with a series of Nine, Five, Seven, and Six Year Plans (1964-73; 1974-79; 1979-86; 1986-92). The resultant expansion has led to Bahai communities being established in most countries of the world.

Expansion and distribution. Some indication of the extent of Bahai expansion can be gained from the statistics in Table 13. These figures indicate a slow rate of expansion during the 1928-52 period, rapid growth only occurring after 1952 and the introduction of international teaching plans. Other indices of expansion include the growth in the number of languages in which Bahai literature is produced, from 8 or so in 1928, to 70 in 1953, and 757 in 1986, and in the number of tribal and ethnic groups represented in the community, from 42 in 1952 to over 2,100 in 1986 (see Bahá?í World II, pp. 193-210; XII, pp. 775-827); Shoghi Effendi, The Baha?i Faith, 1844-1952; and Universal House of Justice, Department of Statistics, The Seven Year Plan, Statistical Report, Ridván 1986).

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In terms of total numbers, the official Bahai estimate in April, 1985, was that there were in the region of 4.7 million Bahais worldwide. In terms of distribution, fifty-nine percent of the Bahai world total live in Asia, twenty percent in Africa, eighteen percent in the Americas, 1.6 percent in Australasia and 0.5 percent in Europe. There are relatively few Bahais in the Communist world where little organized activity is permitted. (See Table 14.)

The areas of Bahai expansion can be divided into three separate "worlds": the Islamic heartland in which the religion first developed (the Middle East, North Africa, and Asiatic Russia); the West (North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand); and the Bahai "Third World" (including the Far East; Smith, Bábí and Bahá?í Religions, pp. 162-71). In these terms, there has been a marked change in the distribution of Bahais during the present century. Taking the distribution of local Bahai Spiritual Assemblies as a measure of change, in 1945, out of a total of 505 Assemblies, the majority, sixty-one percent, were in the Islamic heartland (mostly in Iran), twenty-nine percent were in the West (mostly in the U.S.A.), and only ten percent were in the Bahai Third World (mostly in India and Latin America). By 1983, however, out of a total of 24,714 Assemblies, the figures were respectively two, eleven, and seventy-eight percent (calculated from Bahá?í World X, pp. 551-82; and Universal House of Justice, Department of Statistics, The Seven Year Plan, 1979-1986, Statistical Report 1983). Although the Assembly distribution figures

underrepresent the larger local Bahai communities (such as those in Iran), the overall trend is clear. As a consequence of the international teaching plans of the last thirty years, the Bahai Faith has become a predominantly non-Islamic Third World religion.

The Bahai communities of the Islamic heartland: 1. Iran. During the years of their initial expansion, the Babis had succeeded in establishing a widespread network of groups in most Iranian cities and in rural areas in several different regions, but after the Bab's execution (1850), the Babi groups and network had become fragmented. Baha?-Allah's recoordination of these groups during the late 1850s and the 1860s provided the basis for the emergence of the Bahai religion as a social entity. Utilizing itinerant Bahai couriers and teachers, Baha?-Allah and ?Abd-al-Baha? (acting increasingly as chief organizer for his father) created a viable Iranian Bahai community, whilst the efficient and widespread distribution of Baha?-Allah's major writings provided the basis for doctrinal unity.

Commitment to missionary expansion was strong. Bahai groups were established in areas such as Gilan and the Persian Gulf coast which the Babis had not reached. New converts were gained among the Shi?ite population, including men of considerable ability and prominence such as Mirza Abu'l-Fazl Golpayegani (q.v.), converted in 1876. Contacts were established with members of the Jewish and Zoroastrian minorities, and significant numbers of conversions made from the 1880s onwards, particularly in Hamadan and Yazd. Of major population groups, only the nomadic tribes and the Sunni and Christian minorities remained effectively beyond the reach of Bahai missions.

In terms of social class, both the existing "Babi" membership and the new converts represented a wide-ranging diversity. European observers noted the particular success which the Bahai missionaries enjoyed among the educated classes, but craftsmen, urban workers, and peasants were also well-represented. In contrast to Babism, relatively few clerics were converted: The ?olama? now had a well-defined and negative image of the Babi-Bahai movement, and were thus more resistant to its message. Correspondingly, Bahai merchants assumed greater prominence in the leadership of the movement within Iran; Bahai ?olama?, however, remained important. Bahai women also assumed importance within the community, the successful "familialization" of the religion providing a major basis for its social consolidation.

Reflecting the activity of the Bahai community, there was a recrudescence of persecution. Thus, throughout the Qajar period, there were sporadic attacks on the Bahais, a number being killed, and many more being despoiled of their property. Religious animosity towards the Bahais as unbelievers was an important motivation here, particularly for the clerics who led most of the attacks. Other factors were also involved, however. Thus, whilst increasing numbers of the Qajar elite perceived that the universalistic and pacific policies of Baha?-Allah contrasted sharply with the militancy of the Babis, there was an understandable tendency to confuse the two movements, and hence to regard the Bahais as potentially seditious. (For an indication of changing

attitudes amongst later Qajar officials, see Amin-al-Soltan's statement in Momen, Bábí and Bahá?í Religions, pp. 358-59.) Again, certain local clerical and civil leaders readily used persecution of Bahais to secure their own financial or political advantage. The execution in 1879 of two Bahai merchants who were creditors to Mir Mohammad-Hosayn, Imam Jom?a of Isfahan, assumed particular notoriety in this regard (Momen, ibid., pp. 274-77). Persecutions increased as popular agitation against the Qajar regime mounted, a widespread series of attacks occurring in 1903 (ibid., pp. 373-404).

Bahai expansion within Iran appears to have reached its peak in the early decades of the present century. Thereafter, it has had to rely increasingly on natural increase, so that whilst the number of Bahais in Iran has recently been in the region of 300-350,000, this represents less than one percent of the total population. At the beginning of the century, by contrast, the percentage may have been as high as 2.5 (Smith, "Bábí and Baha?í Numbers in Iran," pp. 296-98). Lack of research precludes a proper analysis of this decline.

Overt persecution of the Bahais during the Pahlavi period (1925-79) was limited, outbreaks occurring in 1926, 1944, and 1955, in this later case with the government's active support. At the same time, Bahais were denied full civil rights. They were unable to contract legal marriage, freely publish literature, or publicly defend themselves against the well-organized propaganda campaign which their opponents mounted against them. The Bahai schools, as the schools of other religious minorities, were closed in 1934.

Under the Islamic Republic (from 1979), the Bahai situation has markedly worsened. Regarding the Bahais as heretics, Zionist agents, and anti-revolutionary subversives, the regime has actively pursued persecution of the Bahais. Over 200 have been killed; hundreds have been imprisoned; thousands have been purged from government employment. Bahai students and school children have been expelled from educational institutions. Community and individual properties and assets have been seized. All Bahai organizations have been disbanded. And all Bahai activities have been forbidden. The situation is bleak. (For sources on the current wave of persecution see the bibliography.)

2. Turkestan and Caucasia. The consolidation of Russian rule in Turkestan (Transcaspia) and its consequent economic development encouraged Iranian immigration during the 1880s. Bahais were amongst these immigrants, and by 1890, there were about one thousand of them in the new provincial capital of Ashkhabad (Lee, "Bahá?í Community of ?Ishqábád," pp. 1-13). In 1889, Shi?ite militants murdered a prominent Bahai. The Russian authorities' trial and imprisonment of the assailants was hailed by the Bahais as the first occasion on which judicial punishment had been meted out to their persecutors. Henceforth the Bahai community in Turkestan flourished, Ashkhabad providing a convenient refuge from persecution in Iran. Increasingly prosperous, the Bahais were able to establish their own meeting hall, kindergartens, elementary schools, clinic, libraries, and public reading rooms. A magazine, Kvoršid-e kavar (Sun of the East), and printing presses were also established, and, in 1902, work began on a Bahai house of worship, the Mašreq

al-Adkar, the first ever to be built. As in Iran, Spiritual Assemblies were established to coordinate the affairs of the local Bahai communities, the central Assembly in Ashkhabad exercising authority over the Bahais in the various other cities of Turkestan. Bahai immigrants were also amongst those Iranians who moved to Caucasia, particularly Russian Azerbaijan, and a second Bahai community developed there, centered in Baku.

The Russian Revolutions of 1917 initially created very favorable conditions for the Bahais, who came to enjoy even greater freedom of expression and organization. Teaching activity was extended to ethnic Russians, a number of whom joined the community. Indeed, for a time, the Bahai youth organization was able to provide serious competition for recruits to the Communist Komsomol (Kolarz, Religion in the Soviet Union, p. 471). However, the situation rapidly deteriorated from 1928 onwards, with a build-up of anti-Bahai activity, including the arrest and exile of leading Bahais and the closure or expropriation of Bahai institutions, including the Mašreq al-Adkar. There was a further wave of mass arrests, exiles and deportations (mainly to Iran) in 1938, and the Bahai communities of Asiatic Russia were all but destroyed. Following earthquake damage, the Mašreq al-Adkar was later demolished.

3. Syria, Palestine, and Israel. Baha?-Allah was exiled ?Akka in Ottoman Syria in 1868. With him were some seventy or so of his family and disciples. These formed the core of a Bahai colony which grew, mostly through immigration from Iran, as the conditions of confinement were eased. Groups of Bahais also moved to Beirut and Haifa, and to the Galilee, where a Bahai agricultural settlement was established.

?Akka, and after 1909, the neighboring town of Haifa, served as the administrative and spiritual headquarters of the Bahai religion, the burial places of Baha?-Allah, the Bab, and ?Abd-al-Baha? becoming its major places of pilgrimage. To avoid any threat to this status, the Bahai leaders discouraged or even prohibited any proselytism amongst the local population, a policy which was continued from the Ottoman period through to the present day, both under the British Palestine Mandate and the State of Israel. During the 1940s, Shoghi Effendi drastically reduced the size of the local Bahai community, instructing all Bahais who were not involved in the tasks of the “Bahai World Center” to leave Palestine. This policy still obtains, so that only Bahais involved in the faith’s international administration or the maintenance of its shrines and other properties are allowed to reside in the Holy Land.

4. Egypt and other Arab countries. Next to Iran, the most important Middle Eastern Bahai community has been Egypt. Founded in the 1960s by expatriate Iranians, the community came to include native Sunni Muslim and Christian converts. The distinguished Bahai scholar, Mirza Abu’l-Fazl Golpayegani, provided the community with intellectual leadership during the 1890s and 1900s, and taught for a while at al-Azhar. Bahai Assemblies were also formed, translations of Bahai writings into Arabic were made, and books and pamphlets were printed. Though limited in scale, Bahai activities naturally

provoked the opposition of many orthodox Muslims. There were several local disturbances against the Bahais, but more significant were a series of declarations by the religious courts (from 1925) that Bahais were not Muslims and that Muslim converts were apostates. Nevertheless, Bahais attained a degree of official recognition, and were able to continue their activities until 1960, when all Bahai activities were banned by Presidential decree, and a number of Bahais were arrested (Bahá?í World XVII, p. 78).

Elsewhere in the Arab world, the longest established Bahai community is that of Iraq, which effectively dates from the time of Baha?-Allah's exile there in the 1850s. Though subject to sporadic attacks by Shi?ite militants, the community was gradually able to expand its activities and even to elect a Bahai national Spiritual Assembly in 1934. As in Egypt, in recent years, all Bahai activities have been banned (from 1970). Indeed, in general, the position of the Bahais in the Middle East has become more difficult in the post-war years, the growth of modern Arab nationalism and the location of the Bahai headquarters in what has become the State of Israel leading to the Bahais coming to be regarded as a suspect minority, and not just as a heretical sect. Apart from Iran, all Bahai communities in the Middle East are very small.

The Bahai communities in the West: 1. North America. The Bahai teachings were first introduced to the West by a Syrian Christian convert, Ibrahim George Kheiralla. Establishing himself in Chicago, he gained his first converts in 1894. With a circle of enthusiastic followers, Bahai groups were soon established in other centers, notably New York City. In 1898-99, Kheiralla visited ?Abd-al-Baha? in ?Akka, and, after disagreeing with him over matters of doctrine, eventually became a partisan of ?Abd-al-Baha?'s half brother, Mirza Mohammad-?Ali. Most of the American Bahais, however, tended to side with ?Abd-al-Baha?, and an energetic campaign of activities was soon resumed. American Bahai teachers traveled to various parts of the United States, Canada, and Europe. There was an extensive publication of Bahai literature, including several translations of scripture, pilgrims' accounts of visits to ?Abd-al-Baha?, and a number of expositions of Bahai teachings by Westerners. Local and national organizations were established—although not without controversy, many American Bahais were plainly antipathetic to organized religion. Plans were made for the construction of a Bahai Mašreq al-Adkar near Chicago (actually completed in 1953). And contacts were established with the Bahais of Iran and the East, several Americans visiting Iran in connection with medical and education projects. By the time of ?Abd-al-Baha?'s tour of the United States and Canada (April-December, 1912) there were several thousand American Bahais, and these were already beginning to have a considerable impact on the overall development of the religion.

In the 1920s Shoghi Effendi initiated his policy of standardizing and strengthening the system of Bahai administration. He received enthusiastic support from the North American National Spiritual Assembly, particularly from its long-time secretary, Horace Holley. In prosecuting their plans, the

American Assembly encountered considerable initial resistance from those Bahais who were suspicious of religious organization. Two distinct opposition movements emerged, headed respectively by Ruth White and Ahmad Sohrab, but the majority of the Bahais were gradually persuaded of the need for centralized organization. By the late 1920s, the new administrative system was consolidated, and from 1937 onwards a definite series of expansion plans was undertaken. Success was modest in terms of total numbers, and by the early 1960s there were still only eleven thousand Bahais in North America. A policy of widespread diffusion was very successful, however, and through pioneer moves, the Bahais established themselves in all American states and Canadian provinces. The achievement of separate National Assembly status for Canada (1948) and Alaska (1957), provided a major spur to expansion in those territories.

The Bahai situation in North America changed dramatically in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In common with most other Western countries and as part of a significant general change in attitudes towards religion, the community experienced a great boom of youth conversions. A second wave of conversions followed as the American Bahais successfully made contact with rural Afro-Americans in the southern states. The combined impact of these two developments was considerable. In terms of total numbers, the Bahai population was greatly increased, so that now there are in the region of one hundred thousand Bahais in the USA. In terms of social composition, there was also a major change. The community had always been ethnically diverse, but had tended towards a predominantly urban and middle class membership. The new and very large southern constituency, by contrast, was often poor, or poorly educated. Again, the influx of youth had a major impact on the range of cultural styles within the community, young Bahais often taking a leading role in the further propagation and administration of the religion.

2. Europe. The first groups of Bahais in Europe were formed as a result of contacts with American Bahais: Britain and France from 1899 and Germany from 1905. The British and French groups remained particularly small, with fewer than a hundred members in each until the 1930s. The German community was more dynamic, but nowhere in Europe was there a response comparable to that in the United States. ?Abd-al-Baha? visited the European Bahais twice (August-December, 1911; December, 1912-June, 1913), but was unable to engender much more than generalized sympathy for the Bahai cause.

After the First World War (1914-18), there was an increasing pace of activity, particularly in Germany, where many new Bahai groups were established, and there was extensive publishing activity, including a German Bahai magazine (Sonne der Wahrheit). There was also extensive contact with the Esperanto movement. Administrative development proceeded more slowly than in America, but National Assemblies were formed in both Britain and Germany in 1923. In 1937, all Bahai activities and institutions in Germany were banned by order of the Gestapo because of the religion’s “international and pacifist” teachings. A number of Bahais were later imprisoned, and after the outbreak of the war

(1939), Bahai activities came to an end throughout occupied Europe. The British Bahais, by contrast, became increasingly active, their community remaining the largest in Europe until the present.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the American Bahais undertook a major teaching campaign in much of Western Europe, local Bahai communities being established in all of the countries outside the communist block. As in America, the European Bahais gained a lot of youthful converts from the late 1960s onwards. Even so, there are still only in the region of 22,000 Bahais in Europe, the lowest concentration in relationship to the general population in any world region outside of the communist block (Universal House of Justice, Department of Statistics, The Seven Year Plan, Statistical Report, Ridván 1986, Haifa: Bahá?í World Centre, 1986, pp. 48-49). There is a Mašreq al-Adkar near Frankfurt.

3. The “Anglo-Pacific.” A Bahai group was established in Hawaii in 1902. Communities were established in Australia and New Zealand during the 1920s. Growth remained limited in these areas until after the Second World War, despite the formation of a joint National Bahai Assembly for Australia and New Zealand in 1934. Growth has been far more marked in recent years. A Mašreq al-Adkar was dedicated in Sydney in 1961.

The Bahai “Third World”: 1. Latin America and the Caribbean. Bahai teachers from the United States visited Latin America even before the First World War, but sustained activity only began in the inter-war period, particularly after the start of the first American Seven Year Plan (1937-44), which aimed to establish Bahai Local Assemblies in all the mainland republics. Regional National Assemblies, one each for Central and South America, were established in 1951. Initially, the Latin American communities drew much of their membership from amongst the urban middle classes, but from the 1950s onwards, increasing contacts were made with the Amerindians, particularly in the Andean countries. Poorer social groups now predominate in most of the region, and many of the Bahai communities have become increasingly involved in fostering educational and development programs. A Mašreq al-Adkar was dedicated in Panama in 1972.

2. Africa. Apart from the Arab Bahai communities of North Africa, there were very few Bahais in the continent until the 1950s. Development thereafter was rapid, particularly in East Africa. There are now reported to be some 969,000 Bahais in the whole continent (Universal House of Justice, Department of Statistics, Statistical Report, Ridván 1986, p. 48). There is a Mašreq al-Adkar in Kampala.

3. Southern Asia. The Bahai community of the Indian subcontinent dates back to the 1870s, the Bahai teacher, Jamal Effendi, undertaking an extensive tour at Baha?-Allah’s direction (1872-78). Most of the early Bahais were either of Iranian extraction or were Persianized Indians. Little contact was made with the Hindu masses. Nevertheless, the Bahai community embarked on an energetic campaign to propagate the Bahai teachings, and an extensive Bahai literature in

the main Indian languages was developed.

By concentrating their efforts on the urban lecture-going population, the Bahais greatly limited their chances of success, and even as late as 1961, there were still less than nine hundred Bahais in the whole of India (Bahá?í World III, p. 299). The decisive breakthrough was the determined attempt to present the Bahai teachings to the rural masses. When this was done (from 1961), the whole character of the community was changed, and large numbers of people became Bahais, most of them Hindu by background. By 1973, there were close to 400,000 Bahais in India (Garlington, "The Baha'i Faith in Malwa," p. 104), and there are now said to be approaching two million. A Mašreq al-Adkar has recently been dedicated in New Delhi (1986). Active and expanding Bahai communities have also developed in the other countries of the subcontinent. There are many educational and development projects.

4. The Far East, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. There were Iranian Bahai traders in China at an early date, but the earliest indigenous Bahai group to be established in the Far East was in Japan (1914). This community has remained small, however, and Bahai teachers have experienced more success in Korea.

In Southeast Asia, the earliest community was in Burma, as an outgrowth of activities in India (from 1870s). Elsewhere, a few Bahai groups were established during the inter-war period, but large-scale expansion only began in the 1950s. Until its reunification and the disbanding of the Bahai administration under the new communist government, the largest and most prominent Southeast Asian community was in South Vietnam. Bahai activities are also restricted in Indonesia, but there are active communities in most other countries of the region.

The development of Bahai groups in the Pacific region has occurred mostly since the Second World War. Although small in numbers, several of these communities, because of the small population base, now have some of the highest concentrations of Bahais in the world. A Mašreq al-Adkar was recently opened in Western Samoa (1984).

The role of Iranians in the present-day Bahai community. Although Iranians now constitute fewer than one-tenth of the total Bahai population, they remain a significant presence within the Bahai world community. In many Asian countries, Iranian Bahais were the original "pioneer-teachers" whose missionary endeavors did much to establish the first Bahai groups. Iranian pioneers were also an important element in the establishment of Bahai communities in several African countries, and there are small groups of Iranian Bahais in many other countries.

In general, the number of expatriate Iranian Bahais has greatly increased since the Islamic revolution. It is not yet possible to quantify this diaspora, but it is clear that many thousands of Bahais have left Iran, the majority eventually emigrating to North America or Europe. Given the relatively small size of the indigenous Bahai communities in Europe, this Iranian influx has had a major impact on their demographic composition, several European Bahai

communities now including a very large proportion of Iranians (certainly in several cases, well over a third). A similar situation has developed in some parts of North America (e.g., southern California).

Iranian Bahais also remain a significant presence in the international administration of the Bahai Faith. At the present time, two of the members of the Universal House of Justice (the supreme Bahai ruling body) are of Iranian background, as are 20 out of 72 Continental Counselors. There are also Iranian members on many Bahai national Spiritual Assemblies.

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