Baha'i and Babi Schisms

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Bahá'í and Bábí Schisms

Denis MacEoin
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Although it never developed much beyond the stage of a sectarian movement within Shi?ite Islam, Babism experienced a number of minor but interesting divisions, particularly in its early phase. The first of these involved the defection of three of the earliest converts of the Bab, led by Molla Javad Valiani, who transferred their allegiance to Molla Mohammad Karim Khan Kermani as the authentic head of the Shaikhi school. Although the scale of this defection was small, it did have repercussions on the Babi community at Karbala?, whose leader, Fatema Baragani (Qorrat-al-?Ayn), a maternal cousin of Valiani, wrote a refutation of his allegations against the Bab. Valiani’s concern centered on what he perceived as the Bab’s break with the more conservative wing of Shaikhism. By thus distancing themselves from the Bab’s claims, he and those who supported him helped sharpen the growing sense of division within the Shaikhi ranks and encouraged the Bab and his followers to demonstrate a clearer identity for themselves. (See MacEoin, “From Shaykhism,” pp. 199-203.)

A more serious split occurred soon after this at Karbala? itself, where Qorrat-al-?Ayn and a probable majority of the Babis of the region came into conflict with Molla Ahmad Korasani and his supporters. The issues involved in this dispute were complex (and are dealt with in contemporary materials written by the chief participants), but the central point of contention appears to have been the status accorded Qorrat-al-?Ayn and other Letters of the Living (horuf al-hayy; see babism). As with Valiani, Korasani’s principal worry was that the Bab and his chief followers were claiming (or, in the case of the former, having claimed for him) a quasi-divine status out of keeping with a more conservative Shi?ite interpretation. This quarrel appears not to have been fully resolved before Qorrat-al-?Ayn was forced to leave Karbala? for Baghdad and, eventually, Iran. (See MacEoin, “From Shaykhism,” pp. 203-07.)

Apart from her dispute with Korasani, Qorrat-al-?Ayn came into conflict with other Babis over her radical interpretations of doctrine, in particular her tendency to push for the abolition of the Islamic religious Law (šari?a). Something of this division seems to have surfaced during the famous Babi conclave held at Badašt in Mazandaran in the summer of 1847, when Qorrat-al-?Ayn led an abolitionist party in opposition to a poorly-defined group who resisted such a radical development. There are indications that a wider split occurred between the radicals at Badašt and the followers of Molla Hosayn Bošru?i at Shaikh Tabarsi (see Noqtat al-kaf, pp. 153-54, 155).

After the Bab's death in 1850 and the death or dispersal of most of the Babi leadership, divisions of a more complex nature occurred within the surviving community. In Iran and in Baghdad, where a core of sect members took up residence under the leadership of Mirza Yahya Nuri Sobh-e Azal, over twenty individuals made separate claims to some form of divine inspiration, usually based on the ability to compose verses (ayat). Most notable among these was the Azerbaijan-based Mirza Asad-Allah Ko?i Dayyan, whose followers became known as Dayyanis. His movement was short-lived, however, ending after his assassination in 1856. The divisions of this period culminated in the increasingly bitter dispute between Sobh-e Azal and his half-brother Mirza Hosayn-?Ali Baha?-Allah. From about 1866, this leadership quarrel hardened into a permanent division between Azali and Bahai Babis. (See MacEoin, "Divisions and Authority Claims.")

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The history of Bahaism as a distinct movement is punctuated by divisions of varying severity, usually occurring as responses to the death of one of the religion's leaders. It has become an article of faith in modern Bahai circles that the religion is protected from schism by the Covenant system of authoritative succession (see below). This has led to a strong emphasis on orthodoxy, with a tendency to play down or even ignore present or past divisions. Thus, "There are no Bahá?í sects. There never can be" (Hofman, Renewal, p. 110). At the same time, it should be stressed that there is a high degree of cohesion within the movement and that the authority of the mainstream Bahai leadership is seldom challenged.

Following the death of Baha?-Allah in Palestine in 1892, a serious clash took place between his two oldest sons, ?Abbas (see ?abd-al-baha?) and Mirza Mohammad-?Ali. It was accepted that, in his will, Baha?-Allah had appointed ?Abbas his successor and interpreter of the holy text, in keeping with traditional Shi?ite notions of vicegerency (wesaya). But Mohammad-?Ali and his partisans accused ?Abd-al-Baha? of making excessive claims for himself. Since ?Abd-al-Baha?'s real claims seem to have been quite limited, it is likely that his opponents were really objecting to his somewhat radical interpretations of Bahai doctrine, particularly his social and political theories. Mohammad-?Ali and his supporters (who included most of Baha?-Allah's family) termed themselves Ahl al-tawhid or Mowahhedun and were dominant for some time in Syria. ?Abd-al-Baha?

drew his support chiefly from Bahais in Iran and, increasingly from the late 1890s, from the growing community in the United States, where a cult based on his personality was developed. His eventual success is attributed by Berger to his ability to sustain charismatic appeal within the new movement (“Motif messianique,” p. 102; conflicting versions of the quarrel may be found in Browne, Materials, pp. 72-112 and Balyuzi, ?Abdu’l-Baha, pp. 50-61).

The split did, however, extend into America eventually, following the defection to Mohammad-?Ali of Ibrahim George Kheiralla, the first Bahai missionary to that country. By 1899, the American Bahai community was divided into two factions: a majority of those loyal to ?Abd-al-Baha? and a minority of “Behaists.” In 1900, Kheiralla founded a Society of Behaists, with himself as its Chief Spiritual Guide and with Churches of the Manifestation in Chicago and Kenosha. The Behaist faction was later reorganized as the National Association of the Universal Religion, but the number of its adherents dwindled rapidly, particularly after the successful visits to North America made by ?Abd-al-Baha? between 1911 and 1913. In Palestine, the followers of Mohammad-?Ali continued as a small group of families opposed to the Bahai leadership in Haifa; they have now been almost wholly re-assimilated into Muslim society (see Cohen, “Bahá?í Community of Acre”).

Mainstream Bahaism, as represented by ?Abd-al-Baha? and his followers, responded to the challenge of factionalism by emphasizing the doctrinal ideal of a Covenant (?ahd, mitaq) designating a single individual head of the faith (markaz al-mitaq “Center of the Covenant”), to whom all believers were to render unquestioning obedience. The centrality of the Covenant system first became apparent in 1917-18 in the course of the Chicago Reading Room Affair, during which a group of dissenting Bahais in Chicago were expelled from the main body. (See Smith, “American Baha?i Community,” pp. 189-94.)

Under the leadership of Shoghi Effendi (q.v., 1921-1957), the Bahai movement underwent radical structural changes with the creation of a tightly-controlled administrative organization modeled on modern Western management systems. Challenges to Shoghi Effendi’s authority or that of the bodies under him were in numerous cases met by the excommunication of groups or individuals as Covenant-Breakers (naqezu ’l-mitaq). The only significant breakaway groups to emerge during this period, however, were the New History Society based in New York around the anti-organization views of Ahmad Sohrab and Julie Chanler (see Johnson, “Historical Analysis,” pp. 311-18), and the German Bahai World Union which re-emerged after World War II as the World Union for Universal Religion and Universal Peace and the Free Bahais of Stuttgart. In the East, dissent tended to be even more individual, taking the form of personal defections from the movement rather than organized groupings. Faeg’s Scientific Society founded in Egypt about 1923 was atypical. Since all of the schismatic groups of this period found their raison d’être in the rejection of religious organization, it was inevitable that they should be short-lived and restricted in their influence.

The death of Shoghi Effendi in 1957 presented the movement with a potential crisis of major proportions, but also allowed the administrative system established by him to demonstrate its widespread acceptance within the community at large. Between 1957 and 1963 (when a universal House of Justice, bayt al-?adl-e a?zam [q.v.], was elected), the religion had no leader. Shoghi had had no children, had excommunicated his entire family, and had failed to designate any other successor. From about 1958, Charles Mason Remey, President of the International Baha?i Council, began to oppose the notion that there could be no successor to the Bahai Guardianship (welaya), and in 1960 he declared himself to be the second Guardian of the Bahai Faith. Under Remey’s leadership, a minority group organized themselves successively as the Bahais under the Guardianship, Bahais under the Hereditary Guardianship, and the Orthodox Abha World Faith, with its headquarters in Santa Fe (see Johnson, pp. 342-80). Remey died in 1974, having appointed a third Guardian, but the number of adherents to the Orthodox faction remains extremely small. Although successful in Pakistan, the Remeyites seem to have attracted no followers in Iran. Other small groups have broken away from the main body from time to time, but none of these has attracted a sizeable following.

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