# Conversion: to Babi and Baha'i Faiths

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Conversion:

to Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths

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The Bahai faith was adopted by tens of thousands of people in late 19th-century Persia. These conver-sions probably began on a small scale some time between 1280/1864 and 1283/1866. In 1279/1863 the prominent Babi Baha?-Allah, while in exile in Baghdad, had declared himself to a very small group of close disciples and relatives as the messianic figure (man yozheroho ?llah) whose advent had been pre-dicted by Sayyed ?Ali-Mohammad Širazi, the Bab. Baha?-Allah subsequently encountered opposition from his younger half-brother Sobh-e Azal (see azali babism), whom many Babis had accepted as the leader of the community. In many of his writings, issued from exile in Edirne in the late 1860s, Baha?--Allah used Babi texts to prove his own claims, and the first major audience he addressed in his new role of prophet appears to have consisted of Babis in Persia who were dissatisfied with Sobh-e Azal’s rather secre-tive leadership. Typical of Baha?--Allah’s works in these years is the letter Surat al-ashab (Surah of the companions), which contains mystical imagery, ethi-cal exhortations, and instructions on how to prosely-tize and evokes symbols concerning the end of time. Many such letters were disseminated throughout Per-sia by couriers drawn from the ranks of Baha?--Allah’s close friends and followers, like Mohammad “Nabil” Zarandi and Najaf-?Ali Zanjani, who was executed by Persian authorities around 1284/1867 (for Baha?--Allah’s works from his Edirne period, see 1348 Š./1969, IV, esp. “Surat al-ashab,” pp. 205-39).

Examination of developments in the community in Shiraz, the home of the Bab, affords a glimpse of the shift among Babis to Baha?--Allah. The Bab’s own relatives, except for one nephew who converted under the influence of the Bab’s widow, Kadija Begom, in the 1850s, had remained Shi?ite Muslims. In 1278/1862 a maternal uncle, Sayyed Mohammad Širazi, visited Baha?--Allah during a trip to the Shiite shrines in Najaf and Karbala?. In answer to his questions about Babism Baha?--Allah wrote Ketab-e iqan

(Book of certitude), which prompted Sayyed Mohammad to convert to Babism. Gradually other members of the Bab's family in Shiraz became Babis. As they consti-tuted a prominent merchant clan, operating a trading empire that eventually extended from the interior of Persia throughout the Persian Gulf and as far as India and China, these relatives, the Afnan, played an influential role in spreading the new religion.

Not long after Baha?--Allah moved to Edirne he sent Nabil to Persia on a missionary journey. Nabil stopped at Shiraz, where he convened a meeting of the Babis, including the Afnan, and publicly burned Sobh-e Azal's writings, declaring those of the Bab and Baha?--Allah alone to have the status of scripture. Prominent members of the Afnan were for a time troubled by this development but finally decided in favor of Baha?--Allah, who had been responsible for their conversion and with whom they had stronger ties. Nabil went to Isfahan and then traveled to Khorasan, where he re-peated his performance. The Afnan who adopted the Bahai faith were supported by a preacher from Yazd, Mohammad-Ebrahim Yazdi, who also converted fifty or sixty members of a clan of Kazeruni tailors in Shiraz. Their presence added a certain boisterousness to Bahai meetings, to which the Afnan were unaccus-tomed (Afnan, pp. 168-83).

From early Bahai manuscripts it appears that sayyed (claiming descent from the Prophet Mohammad) mer-chants played an extremely important leadership role in bringing the Babis into the Bahai faith. Aside from the Afnan, the Nahri family of Isfahan, wealthy mer-chants of sayyed background who had adopted Babism in the 1840s, emerged in the 1870s as mainstays of the Bahai community in Isfahan. Two Nahri merchants were martyred on the orders of a leading mojtahed in 1297/1880 (Samandar, pp. 179-80; Ešraq-e Kavari). Another important family was the Baqeraf (Baqerov) of the Sadat-e Kamsa clan of Rašt, merchants with large property holdings and sayyed lineage who en-joyed international trading contacts (?Amid-al-Atebba?, passim). The Afnan and the Nahris probably origi-nally adopted Babism out of genuine conviction, but later membership in Babi and subsequently in cosmo-politan Bahai society became an ideological expres-sion of their elite status as sayyeds and of their independence from the government and the Shi?ite clerical establishment. Most Babis and Bahais were not them-selves sayyeds or merchants but came from families of urban artisans and shopkeepers, yet it was the sayyed merchants who most often emerged as community leaders, having ties of patronage with the petty-bour-geois and working-class Bahais, in addition to the common religion.

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In the late 1860s and early 1870s Baha?-Allah wrote a number of works, some of them in the form of letters to the kings and leaders of the world, stressing his principles: the need for a world government, a single world language, religious tolerance, abandonment of nationalist chauvinism, and diversion of military bud-gets to relief for the poor. His program attracted converts from outside Babism. For instance, former Shi?ite clergymen like Mirza

Abu’l-Fazl Golpayagani or Nabil-e Akbar Qa?eni (Samandar, pp. 15-57) adopted the Bahai faith, which, unlike Babism, had a strong rationalist emphasis. These learned individuals in turn often became itinerant missionaries and preach-ers, employing their clerical skills and networks to spread Bahaism among Shi?ites. Golpayagani, for instance, undertook missionary journeys from Tehran to Isfahan, Kašan, and Hamadan in the 1880s, then outside Persia to Ashkhabad and Samarkand, and fi-nally to Egypt and the United States. Itinerant Bahai preachers became known as moballegin, missionaries of the faith, and provided a different sort of leadership from that of the more sedentary urban elites. Converts to Bahaism from the Shi?ite middle strata joined the tens of thousands of Babi converts, attracted not only by Baha?--Allah’s religious charisma but also by his reformist principles.
In the 1880s Bahais in Persian cities began to establish consultative councils (mahafel--e šur), as mandated in Bahai law. The first such council was formed secretly among prominent Bahais in Tehran around 1295/1878. It subsequently sent missionaries throughout Persia to spread the faith in an organized manner and to encourage a greater degree of organization among already existing Bahai communi-ties, as well as adherence to Baha?-Allah’s new book of laws, the Aqdas (q.v.). Mirza Asad-Allah Esfahani, for instance, traveled widely in Khorasan, Mazandaran, Yazd, Fars, and Kašan on behalf of the Tehran council. The spread of the new faith met with violent opposition from the state and from the Shi?ite ?olama?, who some-times succeeded in having prominent Bahais executed. But by creating martyrs, particularly in a culture that so celebrated the courage and spiritual power of mar-tyrs, they appear only to have made the religion more attractive to some sections of the public (Mehrabkvani, 1980? 1981?).

The openness and cosmopolitan attitude of many Bahai merchants and missionaries enabled them to make contact with and to achieve conversions among non-Muslim minorities in Persia, particularly Zoroastrians and Jews. Zoroastrian conversions began in Yazd in the mid-1880s, and Bahais of Zoroastrian background made significant contributions to the new religion. All the Zoroastrians of Qazvin appear to have become Bahais. Baha?-Allah, unlike most Shi?ite Per-sians, acknowledged the validity of Zoroastrianism, placing Zoroaster in the line of true prophets that included the biblical and koranic figures. He traced his own lineage to the Sasanian ruling family, and he wrote to Zoroastrians in pure Persian, without the admixture of Arabic words. He considered himself the messianic figure promised in all the great religions, including the Zoroastrian Shah Bahram. Such promi-nent Zoroastrians as Molla Bahram Aktar-e Kavari, Kay-Kosrow Kodadad, and Siavoš Safidvaš embraced the Bahai faith, and Zoroastrian merchants, profes-sionals, and prosperous farmers were among the first to adopt it; they led some peasants and artisans into the new faith, as well. For most of these people, however, conversion meant entering an enlightened club; they did not immediately forsake their own communal activities and rituals, and only slowly in the course of the 20th century did Bahais of Zoroastrian background come to make their primary identification with the Bahai faith.

Conversions of Jews to the Bahai faith began in the late 1880s, primarily in southwestern Persia, but they have not been as well studied as conversions among Zoroastrians (see iv, above). Significant conversions of Jews in Hamadan appear to have continued into the 1930s, but Persian Jews seldom adopted the Bahai faith after the state of Israel was established in 1948, an event that engendered pride in their ethnic ancestry. Peter Smith (1987, pp. 86-99, esp. p. 95) suggests that for minorities Bahaism functioned as an ideology of modernization, providing an alternative to rigid tradi-tionalism that allowed them to continue to affirm the value of their ancestral religions while entering a cosmopolitan and pan-Persian society (cf. Fischel; Smith, 1984; Stiles, 1983b; idem, 1984).

Conversion to the Bahai faith in Persia was largely a 19th-century phenomenon. Although some Persians converted in the 20th century, joint government and clerical persecution of the faith succeeded in marginalizing it and slowing its growth. Indeed, Smith estimates that, although the total number of Persian Bahais grew from 100,000 to 300,000 between 1317/1900 and 1404 = 1363 Š./1984, their proportion of the Persian population actually declined, to less than 1 percent. This decline may be accounted for partly by Bahai fertility rates lower than those of Shi?ite Mus-lims, but it nevertheless suggests that relatively few new conversions were occurring (Smith, 1984).

Sources. The Balyuzi Library, London, contains numerous manuscripts treating the period of conver-sions in Persia. Relevant material can also be found in such biographical dictionaries as those of Kazem Samandar and ?Aziz-Allah Solaymani. Some histo-ries and biographies have been summarized by H. M. Balyuzi and Adib Taherzadeh. Material bearing on conversions in general and those from Judaism and Zoroastrianism in particular is included in the work of Mirza Abu’l-Fazl Golpayagani. The major academic study of the issue has been carried out by Susan Stiles. For Jewish conversions, see the work of Walter Fischel.

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