

Globalization and the Hidden Words

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CHAPTER 2

BAHA'I AND GLOBALISATION

Globalization and the Hidden Words

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From Tehran to Baghdad

Baghdad (traditionally known as 'the City of Peace') is, we have all recently come to learn, a very diverse place both ethnically and religiously.¹ As such, it may be thought a faithful emblem of Islamic culture and history.² There are Sunni Muslims, Shi'i Muslims, Sutu Kurds, Syriac Christians, and Jews, among others. Moreover, it has been this way for a very long time indeed. Seventeenth century travelers 'were impressed with the great admixture of race, the diversity of speech and the rare freedom enjoyed by non-Muslims and the great toleration among the masses' (Durri 1975: 934b). Contrasted with the capital of its Eastern neighbor Iran, Baghdad was infinitely more cosmopolitan than the mainly Shi'i population of Tehran. Tehran, monochrome by comparison, had been mainly Shi'i for several hundred years as well. The significance this fact might have for the growth and development of the Bahai Faith is the main question treated here. The proposition is that the relatively communalistic and parochial Shi'i Babi movement

1 Note the prolonged difficulty the recently American-appointed Iraqi ruling council had in choosing a leader from amongst twenty-five members, finally settling on the Shi'i Ja fari as the first president. Note also that

this office is meant to rotate on a monthly (!) basis in alphabetical order.

<http://www.salon.com/news/wire/2003/07/30/interim/>

AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS 2 The term 'Islamicate' may require some explanation. It was coined by

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to avoid doctrinal and normative complications by the use of 'Islamic' in such contexts.

was transformed as changes in audience occurred. If the Bahai prophet-

by which a relatively marginal Islamic sect became a global 'World founder Baha' u'llah had not been exiled to Iraq, and then Turkey and

Religion' and in the process lost much of its original Islamic identity.

finally Ottoman Palestine (modern day Israel), it is possible that his

No other similar movement of the last two hundred years has so

comwritings would have remained more identifiably Shi'i than they did. In Baghdad, faced with an audience of widely divergent background and composition, Baha'u'llah was also faced with the task of distilling where than in the words of Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (d. 1957) when he the vast complex of arcana and esoterica that was the revelation of the Bab into an essence that could move a much broader spectrum of believer than the virtually all-Shi'i audience of the Bah. In the process, sect of Shi'a Islam into a world religion' (Rabbani 1970: xii). his message was being universalized for an even wider audience than 19th century Baghdad. In order to demonstrate this proposition, we will analyze the opening passages of Baha'u'llah's Hidden Words with this factor of audience in mind.

Ahmad al-Ahsa'i (d. 1826) plays a crucial and essential role. It was the

The Sacralization of Globalization

the dramatic events associated with the chiliastic-cum-revolutionary How does such a discussion find its way into a book of essays devoted activities of Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi (b. 1819). This young charto the problem of the Bahai Faith and Globalization? To begin with, the doctrinal content of the Bahai Faith is nothing if not universal. One Gate), was executed by Iranian state and religious authorities in 1850. assumes that there is some kind of important connection between 1the Afterwards, many of his followers one of whom was Mirza Husayn 'universal' and the ' global'. Traditionally, a 'universal' truth or featun is Ali Mazandarani, Ba!Ja'u'llah (Arabic for Glory ofGod; d. 1892) would be thought to be one that migrates across long-standing boundaries or bar-dispersed throughout the Middle East. What the above quotation refers riers of ethnos, nationality, language, culture, and geography to spE!ak to is the move away from the extremely arcane, esoteric and highly of something inherently, irreducibly and 'universally' human. To spe!ak exclusivist worldview of that Shi'i movement (Amanat 1989: 188-207) o f a universal idea is to speak of one that is eminently susceptible of glo- into a world religion with universal and global appeal (Smith 1987: balization - of being relevant or pertinent or even merely registrable, 31-45 & 136-156). Some have characterized this trajectory as a move to human beings wherever they might be on planet Earth.³

Here, a unique phenomenon that has occurred in the growth and development of the Bahai Faith will be examined, namely the process say, a New Religious Movem en t or, 'NRM' (Internet discussion 1997), it is not debatable that there are now Dahai communities all over the 3 1 should like to thank Professor Margit Warburg for her very he lpful sugworld in regions and localities as culturally different as they could pos- gestions al ld comments on an earlier draft of this paper. r wo uld also liko: to

sibly be. So, whether as a bona fide World Religion or 'merely' an NRM tha nk the editorial team, Dr Morten Warmind and Dr An ni ka Hvithamar, for their guidance and patience. Professors Peter Beyer of the Univ emity

(it may be more accurate in this instance to speak of New Religious of Ottawa and Barbara Lawson, Ethnology Curator, Redpath Museum, Identities), the Bahai Faith is a global phenomenon in the process of McGill University, also read earlier drafts and made several very helpful suggestions touching both content and style, for which I am most grateful. I apply to the human condition (Beyer 1998: Ch. 6; McMullen 2000: Obviously, none of these kind readers is responsible for the remaining flaws. passim, esp. 109-125).

Of interest here is the stark contrast that its early, extremely paro-

chial and exclusivist origins in the Shaykhi movement and the Babi Enchanted Ontology

faith provide to its current profile as promoter of the oneness of mankind, unity in diversity, tolerance, the abolition of prejudices and the

One of the more prominent features of later Islamic spirituality honoring and valuing of the differences amongst the human family. A

and mysticism is the degree to which it is concerned with ontology, more compelling interest is precisely the manner in which this trans- the nature of Being and/or Existence. Taking as a starting point transformation occurred, what were its stages and how do we measure the traditional hylomorphism, Muslim sages and mystics would evolve a process? (Smith 1987: 2-3).

Baha' u'llah, - who may be seen as a 19th century Persian theorist of theism which resulted in the divine unity of God being reflected and modernism and globalization (Cole 1998: 14-15 & 32-47)- formulated refracted, if not constituted, in the respondent multiplicity of

his teachings in the mid to later 19th century, a crucial period in the creation. This basic apprehension or spiritual axiom would be comprised of

globalization. So, 'Bahai' has grown concomitantly with globalization- figured and articulated in a variety of ways. But the main idea, that

ation, and there is reason to believe that there exists a close connection creation was a mysterious expression of divine unity - that between

between the Bahai Faith and globalization from a historical as well as and amongst all created things (including human beings) there was a

a sociological perspective. This connection can be elucidated by using living and sacred connection- would never be challenged. This basic

material that comes from members of the Bahai community today (e.g., van den Hoonaard 1996, McMullen 2000). But it may be that the

relationship between Bahai and globalization can also be studied and current term, enchanted. It is also the source and background of the

appreciated by working with religious texts. Here, another perspective- teachings of Baha'u'llah (Cf. Rabbani 1973: 226).

It may be illuminating, namely, the influence that the philosophical

mysticism of Islam has had on the 'globalistic' doctrinal content of the sought authoritative, logical explanations for this enchanted ontolBahai Faith.

It is assumed that one of the chief factors facilitating the globalization (1-knhrat), a frequent Bahai watchword (Baha'i International Comation of the Bahai Faith has been the relatively high degree to which unity 1997: 9; d. Amuli 1989: 310) According to Islamic tradition, people around the world have recognized themselves - their questions, problems, hopes, fears, sufferings and joys- as being addressed God himself. The answer has become one of the most important foci directly and in compelling ways by the Bahai teachings This coupled . of meditation for Islamic spirituality and is preserved in the literary

with a dissatisfaction with their 'native' religions, has caused many to form known as Hadith Qudsi, extra-Quranic 'Sacred Saying of God', see in Bahai a fresh statement of what is most essential to religion as

Who informed the Prophet:

such. One of the best loved and most widely distributed and translated small compendia of Bahai teachings is a collection of Arabic and Persian apothegms known as The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah/J. Quite apart So, I created mankind (lit. 'creation').⁴

from their literary beauty, a look at the circumstances of composition and the doctrinal contents of Baha'u'llah's Hidden Words will, it is

Thus the answer to the metaphysical question 'Why is there something hoped, offer us an insight into the transformation we are concerned with here. But before turning directly to this text, a bit of background

⁴ Arabic: kuntu klmnzan maklifiynn 'ahbattu 'au 'urafit fnklmlaqtu nl-klmlqn is required.

the other transliterations to follow, 'ayn is represented by a simple apostrophe, nor is it possible to show vowels and other similar sounds with the use of under dots.

rather than nothing- why are we here?' is linked to God's desire (lit.

in a work by the above-mentioned Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i himself. 'love') to be known. As a result, knowledge and love are indissolubly

Here, Shaykh Ahmad takes to task, in virulent terms, one of the pillars bound in a syzygical noetic and experiential dynamic that points to Being or Beyond.⁵ It should also be mentioned that a standard hadith

virtually accuses him of Unbelief (the most serious of crimes) for the is composed of two equally important parts, its 'text' (matn, i.e. the

doctrines he propagates. As a spokesman against the Unity of Being part quoted above) and its credential or pedigree, known in Arabic by

'school', Shaykh Ahmad sought to elevate the Godhead beyond such the word isnad, literally 'chain [of authority]', a long list of the names

terrestrial notions as 'being' and 'existence'.⁷ This theological position of teachers - 'spiritual ancestors' - who passed the knowledge from one to another. In Islamic learned discourse, one reveals (or conceals) part of basic Bahai belief (Lawson 2001). However, attachment and one's deepest religious allegiance according to the composition of assent to the actual hadith qudsi was not restricted to so-called wujudisnads one uses for textual support. In the case of the kind of hadith discussed, for the shuhudis could easily find in it support for their opposing represented here, namely hadith qudsi, there is an isnad, but these are doctrine. Shaykh Ahmad himself comments on it and 'Abdu'l-Baha frequently left out in published collections perhaps indicating that the wrote an important, extensive commentary on it (Momen 1985). And, important aspect is God's speaking directly to Muhammad, presumably through Gabriel, the angel of revelation, or in a dream (Robson almost verbatim (see above, note 5).

1971: 28-29). Thus, such statements are frequently unencumbered by the kind of sectarian sub-text afflicting other hadith. This type of hadith (Taherzadeh 1980: 71-83). At that time, what we now call Iraq was found favour amongst an earlier group of Islamic 'universalists', governed by the Sunni Ottomans, although there was a very large, if namely the Sufis. This particular hadith happens to be a favorite and not majoritarian, Shi'i element there. Not quite 25 years had passed may be seen as providing the foundational scriptural basis for the doctrine of the Unity of Being (wahdat al-wujud) associated with the (during which the second leader of the Shaykhi community, Sayyid greatest mystic of them all, Ibn Arabi (d.1240) and embraced by the many generations of his followers (and critics) who populate the world. The Ottoman government eventually intervened. Thousands were of Islam. Amongst such followers there are both Sunnis and Shi'is; in killed and Iran was nearly forced to declare war against the Turkish time, these followers would be criticized harshly for their 'pantheistic' authority (Cole and Momen 1986). The proposition put forth here is beliefs. One of these opposing tendencies is referred to as Unity of that 'Bahai universalism' would get its earliest impetus in works like Seeing (wahdat al-shuhud). Apparently at stake in the controversy is the the Hidden Words inasmuch as they were addressed to a previously transcendence of God.⁶ The 'wujudis' were seen by some of their critics unknown - i.e., in the case of Babism - heterogeneous (and potentially to violate this in their teachings. At times the debate would become explosive) audience composed of Sunnis and Shi'is.⁸ At the time of quite intense. One example of such a heated controversy may be found the revelation of the Hidden Words, Baha' u'llah's audience would have been divided into at least four major more or less mutually exclusive

5 Note the Baha'i noonday prayer, 'I testify O my God, that Thou hast created

me to know Thee and to worship Thee.' (ashiladrt yri iliihi bi-'annaka 7

'There is no space here to discuss this in detail. The interested reader is referred to Lawson, 2005.

near synonym for love. (Baha'u'llah 1982: 21) English translation by Shoghi

8 This is not to suggest that religious and confessional tensions did not exist

Effendi in 8afui' (Pmyers 1982: 4).

6 For a deeper reading of the terms of the debate, see Landolt 1971. Here, al-wujud. This is only one example; see below the reference to Akhbaris

incidentally, it is pointed out that the term wahdat al-wujud, does not appear in any of Ibn Arabi's known writings.

groups: the Surulis, the Shi'is, the Wujudis and the Shuhudis. In turn, to the fulfillment of the Shi'i Islamic eschaton which was to see, each of these groups, like the Shi'is, would be further divided into opposition among other things, a number of books that had heretofore been hidden with the occulted and awaited Imam, and were expected to be published with his emergence from hiding (zulw) (Lawson 2002, 19th century Baghdad (Batatu 1978). Addressing such an audience, Amir-Moezzi 1992). The title was changed to its current status at Baha'u'llah reduced the spiritual teachings of his religion to their most essential elements and thereby avoided placing unnecessary obstacles in the path of seekers of truth in the form of communalistic Hidden Words.

cues and insignia so common to much of Islamic religious literature

In the text at hand, brief quotations functioning almost like musical notes and phrases, are taken from the Qur'an, and Hadith, and to the Hidden Words (to which we will return).

What follows, is simply a demonstration of some of the ways in which the Hidden Words recasts traditional and contemporary Islamic Sufi terminology, there is no assumed allegiance to any of the many teachings in a form it is locent of any discernable communalistic provenance or allegiance, whether Shi'i, Sunni or organized Sufism. What here. The reader or hearer would instantly recognize these various emerges is a kind of catholic islamicate breviary, destined to appeal cues and would deem it jarring if not insulting for the author to have

to a literary taste that had been cultivated in an Islamic milieu over disrupted the flow of the 'heavenly' discourse/performance to cite the centuries and whose key reference points and inspirations, from a 'source'. And, what is absent is just as important as what is there: the perspective of literary history, are the Qur'an, the Hadith and nowhere in the book is there any mention of a proper name (not distinctive Sufi religio-literary presuppositions. But it is also a taste even Muhammad's) that could signal an allegiance to either Sunni, that is certainly not exclusively Muslim, let alone Shi'i. Obviously, it: Shi'i or Sufi Islam. There are no isnads.¹⁰ There are no legalistic doc will not be possible to analyze the entire contents of this work Only trines or cultic pronouncements that could also be conununalisti- a few key examples have been chosen.

appear to the mid-19th century Baghdadi, whether Sunni, Shi'i or
The Hidden Words

encumbered by the tragedy of history, appearing as a restatement of
In the Hidden Words, no group or faction is preferred over another.
basic truths through the medium of a compelling religious literary
Certainly, Baha'u'llah would have been known as a 'Babi'; but the
art in both languages of the city: Arabic (71 'verses' and Persian (82
vast majority of Baghdadis (along with a vast majority of Babis them..
'verses').

selves) did not necessarily know what this meant as far as doctrinal

Let us now turn to the text itself in order to illustrate this complex
detail might be concerned, apart from the general messianic mood
and seamless process. We will begin with the above-mentioned proof the
movement. One indication of this mood is in the original title logue
to the Hidden Words:

of the work at hand: The Hidden Book of Fatima. This explicitly points
He is the Glory of Glories

9 As just one example from among literally thousands, the work mentioned
This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the
above by the great scholar Mulla Muhsin Fayz Kashani, may be distin-
tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have
guished from Baha'u'llah's composition of the same name, in part, by tht!
constant references to the authority of 'Ali and the Imams. See Lawson 10
See the similar phenomenon in the writings of the Bab, specifically his first
2002.

taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, as
less, perennial truth of prophecy. But no prophets are named,
only

a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the
God, as in 'covenant of God' ('Inhd allah). Allah is the word .for
God in

Covenant of God, may fulfil in their lives His trust, and in the realm of
spirit Arabic and is used by Arabs, whether Jewish, Christian,

Muslim or

obtain the gem of Divine virtue.

Although the word is habitually associated with Islam, there is nothing with this statement, which is completely free of Shi'i-specific refer-

ences or cues, the message of oneness, unity, social harmony, social justice and peace may be seen as not merely emerging directly but literally escaping from the caldron of religious animosity exacerbated

by the Safavid moment in history and continued to some degree by the 19th century socio-political reality of the Middle East. What is more, Baha'u'llah addresses his audience with a somewhat unusual

but quite telling designation. In the English text, the word 'righteous' translates the Arabic word *ahbat*, a Quranic term meaning 'priests'

but which likely means here in the first instance 'learned ones'. Such 'learned ones' are not identifiable as Muslims of any particular stripe.

Indeed, the dictionary definition of the word is explicit: 'non-Muslim religious leaders'. If Baha'u'llah had wanted to designate Muslims

specifically here, he could have chosen from a whole lexicon of alternate terms: 'learned Muslim religious scholars' (*ulema*), 'gnostic

Muslims' (*urafa*), 'mystic philosophers' (*hukama*), not to mention the standard 'Muslims' (*muslimun*) or 'Believers [in Islam]' (*mu'mimm*).

Any of these other terms, including perhaps the most inclusive (but simultaneously exclusive) Quranic designation, 'people of the Book'

(*ahl al-kitab*), used here would have lent an entirely different elan to this prologue. With such a form of address, Baha'u'llah seeks to

circumvent the exceedingly vexed problem of a 'correct' Islam as such, and attempts to create a new audience.¹³ The mood is the im-

if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and

11 Hidden Words-English: 4-5; Arabic: *lwwa 'l-balui'u l-abhti luidlui mti nuzzila*

shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy mill jrrbaniti 'l-'izzati bilisid11 i 'l-qudrati wn'l-quwwnti 'aid al-nabyyfn

min qablu

neighbour. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behoveth thee to be. Verily justice wn'imui 'akhadhnajmvdhimhu wn 'q masm ilw qnmisa 'l-ikhtisrirdlan 'ala

'l-allbar

liyufti bi'ahdi 'l-lahi wa yu'addri 'nmdndtil!i fi 'anjusilim wnliyaklimmn bija whari

'l-tuqa fi 'ardi 'rnih mina 'l-fd'izfn a (Hidden 11\ford s-Arabic: 3)

12 Note 'Abdu'l-Baha's remark that long-standing Qur'anic notion of 'people of the Book' has been expunged from Baha'i teachings (Balui'i World Faith

2000.

1956: 246}.

13 There are Shi'i hadiths identifying the Imams as *al-brir* (Isfahani 1954: 125}. It jayyidan hasa.nnn mwtfrrn litamlilm mulka da'iman

btfqiyinn 'azalrm qadfman

is unlikely, but of course possible, that the word carries this meaning here.

(Hidden Words-Arabic: 1: 4).

is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine
y
e es.15

Ahmad (Cole 2001: 88ff) that would characterize much of the Bahai mes Apart from
the standard themes of ethical monotheism so beautifully
expressed here, there are one or two clues to the mystic-philosophical
tradition discussed above and out of which the Bahai Faith was
born. But these are not explicitly identified with Shi'ism, or mysticism or
philosophy. The reference to 'Justice' comes close to alluding
to Shi'ism, and no doubt did so for a Shi'i audience. It is one of the
prime religious preoccupations of that tradition, a tradition molded in
marginalization and persecution. One of the hallmarks of the return
i

of the Hidden Imam would be that he 'fill the earth with Justice as it
is now filled with injustice.' (Amuli 1989: 102. Note that here the 15th
century author connects this with the hadith 'I was a hidden treasure'
discussed above.) But even here, Baha'u'llah makes a very deft adjustt

ment. In Arabic, there are two closely related words to express the idea
of justice. The one found most frequently in messianic texts of Shi'ism
is *al-'adl*. The word used here is *insaf* and denotes fairness or equity more

than justice. Thus, with a single word Baha'u'llah not only orients the
discourse away from explicit and exclusive messianic Shi'ism, but
also beyond the realm of Islamic law, whether Sunni or Shi'i. *Insaf* as
equity implies a kind of Golden Rule in which it is necessary first to be
equitable to oneself and then to others (Arkoun 1971: 1237). Certainly,
the word can mean 'justice' but this concept, in an Islamic milieu is
more accurately represented by the word *'adl*.

The topic of knowledge is also broached in this passage. The Arabic

word *ma'rifa* refers to a specific kind of knowledge, namely spiritual or
mystical, as distinct from the word *'ilm* which by comparison means
religious, sacerdotal or legalistic knowledge. The exhortation is to 'know
of thine own knowledge' (*ta'rif bima'rijatika*). This is quite a remarkable
statement in the context of 19th century Shi'ism when the powerful office
of the Marja' Taqlid - the so-called 'Shi'i pope' - was in the process of
16 See above note 5; Arabic: *man 'amfn ruifsaiiJI fnqad 'nrai*
1989: 270, 307, 308, 315, 464, 675).

15 Hidden Words-English 2: 6; Arabic: *ya 'bnn 'r-ni/z 'alznbbu al-nshyn 'huff*
nlstifit. In tnrghab 'n11/w in tnku11 i lnya raglzibti wn lli taglifnlminlw
litnkzmn If a trilingual Arabic, Persian and English edition. Here it is referred to as

m (nnu wn 'aula tuwnjfarpr bidluflikn 'an tusluhida al-'aslyti bi'nyuikn tn /Ji'nyni Hidden Words- Arabic, Hidden Words-Persian, or Hidden Words-English as

,1- zbtfdz wntn'r(nlztf bimm'rifntikn lri bima'r ifnt i 'aluul fi 'l-bilrid. fkkirf dluflika appropriate. The English is the translation of Shoghi Effendi 'with the

<yfn yazbag!ztf ' Ill! takziun. dhrikn min 'ntiyyntf 'alnykn wn 'inayatf /akafrij'allzu assistance of some English friends'(Hidden Words-English: 1).

: 111 tllln nyllyka.(I-Iirfren Words-Arabic: 2: 4).

18 kzmtu /dwm

O Son of Man

Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I Imams to support the 'argument'.²⁰ Rather, Baha'u'llah's Hidden Words

knew My Jove for thee: therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine are presented by Him as being completely their own authority. And of

image and revealed to thee thy beauty.

considered the essence of the matter in a brief - and therefore, according

O Son of Man

I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that way than lengthier scholastic discussions - through the irresistible

I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of His.

themselves to memorization and as such can cross another barrier,

O Son of Being

Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My Jove can in no wise Standard Shi'i works seek to demonstrate the truth of a specific and

reach thee. Know this, O servant

rely very heavily on discursive argumentation. As such they frequently

It should be borne in mind that the literary culture of the audience

was a 'traditional' one; that is, as far as literary productions were

concerned, a good commentary might stand for what our contemporary tastes would consider an original composition. Indeed, it could

be argued that the literary tradition (and culture) with which we are

concerned is in some ways, in its entirety, a commentary on the Qur'an

(Lecomte 1965: 2). In the above three excerpts from the Hidden Words

there is embedded in Baha'u'llah's text enough 'explicit allusions' to

the original hadith qudsi to blur the line between original composition

and commentary. The same literary methods in the Bab's

is at work

Quyyumr al-aslirn (Lawson 1988a&b/1990) and in numerous other works of Baha'u'llah (Lewis 1999/2000 & 1994).

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asrrir. Teluran: Matba' al-Atab.

2'1. Natul'ally, the rlide11 Words had to be translated out of the original Arabic Kazemi-Moussavi, Ahmad (1996). Rel-igious A u thORITY in Shi'ite Islam:

and Persian for th.i5 to happen. In the process of translation, much - b1JI

From the Office of Mufti J.o /he bzs/'ihttion ofMmja', Kuala Lumpur: n?t all - of the 'confessional' Islam of the original has disappeared from

International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization.

vlew (Malouf 1997 and Lewis 1998).

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