The Social Protest of the Babis

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Marshall G. S. Hodgson
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The Iranian and neighbouring lands in the Iraq and the Caucasus, long so central to Islamicate culture, were relatively isolated from the earlier impact of the new Europe. European trade, indeed, had been vigorous in Safavi times (there had even been Catholic missions), but its importance had been reduced in the eighteenth century, with the internal political disruption; by the end of that century, European interests were represented largely indirectly—by way of the more central parts of the Ottoman empire, or of India, or of the Volga region. At the same time, the cultural tradition' of the area, heartland of the Persianate literary tradition and given to Shi'i loyalties, was relatively independent of that in the areas most immediately affected by the new Europe. The Iraq and Iran maintained well into the nineteenth century a high level of philosophical and religious creativity almost unparalleled in other Muslim areas. Even early in the. nineteenth century, though the position of the commercial classes was being undermined, the 'ulama' were making serious developments in jurisprudence, and the Persians honoured a major new philosopher (Mulla Hadi, 1797/8

1878) in the school of Mulla Sadra. It is only after the 1830S that, by subsequent

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Shi'i reckoning, the writers must be relegated to the position of epigones.

We have taken note of one of the philosophical minds of the late eighteenth century' also influenced by Mulla Sadra; that of Shaykh Ahsa'i. He developed a Shar'ism that differed strikingly from that of the Wahhabis and Sanusis, his contemporaries, in that it was not only deeply 'Alid-loyalist but also highly philosophical, looking to a long-term spiritual improvement of mankind. But like theirs, it was reformist, and opposed to the Sufi tariqahs. Indeed, it was explicitly chiliastic, and, like theirs, it took on great subsequent significance under the impact of the Western Transmutation. It was in an atmosphere still relatively uncorrupted by the Western presence, yet keenly aware of it as restricting the power of the Islamic community and presenting new and unexamined possibilities of living, that many Shi'is of the Shaykhi school in the 1830S were expecting, more insistently than ever, the renewed presence of the Bab, the special spokesman of the Hidden Imam, who would order society aright again. A young man of great theological and spiritual gifts, 'Ali-Mohammad of Shiraz (1819-50), won considerable following among them and in the tradesmen classes of the town population generally. 'Ali-Mohammad, as Bab, proclaimed (beginning in 1844) a new and quite liberal Shari'ah, a new set of symbolisms to replace those of Shi'i Islam, and the expectation of a new prophetic dispensation of social justice soon to be realized among his followers.

The Babis, as his followers were called, were impatient to see the new justice realized. They preached vigorously and soon came into open conflict with the Shi'i 'ulama' and then with the Qajar government. 'Ali-Mohammad was arrested but in prison he continued to be the inspiration of a devoted band of idealists. There were riots and finally extensive revolt; 'Ali-

Mohammad was executed; the movement was suppressed with much bloodshed in 1852.

After 'Ali-Mohammad's death, the majority of his followers gradually accepted the lead of another young man, Baha'ullah (1817-92), who then, in 1863, proclaimed himself the new prophet predicted by 'Ali-Mohammad; those Babis who accepted him were henceforth known as Bahá'ís (the others, as Azali Babis). The Bahá'ís retained the social mission of the Babis, which had favoured the town merchant and artisan classes and allowed women a much freer role than had traditional Islam. (A Babi heroine publicly tore off her veil in 1848.) But they abandoned the idea of immediate revolt within Iran, looking rather to a more general conversion of the world by the disciples of the new order. Baha'ullah already had a cosmopolitan outlook; on his exile from the Qajar realm, the Ottoman government detained him, as potentially subversive, settling him finally at Acre in Syria; there he attracted converts from beyond Iran itself, though the largest concentration of followers of the new faith were always to be found in Iran. He was succeeded (in the Shi'i manner) by his son, who won many converts from among Europeans (especially in the United States), whose tastes he pleased with a universalist liberalism in religion (he discouraged killing, either of humans for political reasons, as in war, or of animals for food). He in turn was succeeded by his grandson, trained at Oxford, who organized the faith on a world-wide basis with institutions designed to expand, with persistent missionary effort, into a world political order founded on faith.

The Shaykhi religious vision continued to be the starting-point for that of the Bahá'ís, whose demand for a universalist moral outlook and a liberal social order reflects a Sufi-type emphasis on the imponderables of the spiritual life as combined, by such movements as the Shaykhi, with the 'Alid-loyalist concern for a spiritual organization of just social order. But by the later part of the century the movement had become deeply tinged with the liberalism of nineteenth-century Europe and came to form, in some measure, an instrument for introducing the moral sides of technicalistic Modernity into western Iran. Eventually Bahá'í schools, partly staffed with American converts, shared with those of the Western missionaries (and of Zoroastrians, staffed from India) the education of a new liberal generation, attracting many non-Bahá'í students.

Jamaluddin Afghani and the concessions to Europeans

For the period in which insurrectionary Babism was being superseded by education-minded Bahá'ísm was that in which accommodation with the West was becoming fashionable even in the Qajar realm. In 1848, Nasiruddin, the new shah (1848-96), launched an effort at ministerial responsibility and generally tried to Europeanize the forms of his regime. In 1852 was founded what was intended to be a government institute of higher education on Western lines; from 1840 on, the various Western-sponsored schools began to multiply, and, from 1858, local students were sent to Europe in far greater numbers than in the Napoleonic period. Already after 1823, printing had become widespread and after 1851 there were rudimentary newspapers; by and large, the Westernization of the surface of urban life proceeded in Tehran rather as in Istanbul or Cairo, if somewhat less intensely. The shah himself made extensive tours through Europe and wrote with amusement, respect, and a certain amount of admiration of what he had seen, using a simple literary style which the reading of French was commending to fashionable circles.

Yet not only had the Islamicate cultural tradition retained greater vitality in the Qajar state than elsewhere. Those Persians and Azeris who were not under direct Russian rule did, even late in the century, remain more nearly untouched by the new international forces than either the inhabitants of the Ottoman empire or those of India. Meanwhile, older forms of land tenure remained more nearly in the condition they had reached after the end of Safavi times...

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...To get out of the tobacco concession without destroying his credit in the European capital market, the shah had to pay compensation to the tobacco monopoly. To this end he felt it necessary to take out a British loan secured on the southern customs—an expedient less evidently obnoxious, but in fact perhaps even more dangerous, as the Egyptians had discovered in the time of Khediv Isma'il. But the alliance endured, of the 'ulama' with the new intellectuals; the shah's continued policy of mortgaging the realm became increasingly unendurable. Afghani had been invited to Istanbul and there found himself almost silenced as an involuntary guest of 'Abdulhamid. But a close disciple of Afgham, after a trip to Istanbul where he consulted with the master, assassinated the shah in 1896 and, after some initial shock, was acclaimed as a tyrannicide by the Bazar, whose viewpoint the 'ulama' did not discourage. The Qajar government requested extradition from the Ottomans of certain others of Afghani's followers, who happened to be (Azali) Babis (though Afghani was presumably hostile to the Babi faith as such, as disrupting Islam); they were executed. Afghani himself was not yielded up, but died the next year in circumstances which led the Iranians to believe Sultan 'Abdulhamid had had him done away with...

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