

Following the attempt by several Babis on the life of Naser-al-din Shah in 1852 and an abortive uprising organized by Azal in the same year, he and other Babis chose to go into exile in Baghdad. Here he lived as generally-acknowledged head of the community until their removal to Istanbul in 1863. By adopting a policy of seclusion (*gayba*), Sobh-e Azal gradually alienated himself from a large proportion of the exiles, who began to give their allegiance to other claimants, notably Azal's half-brother, Baha'allah. During this period, Azal set up a network of agents (termed *šohada'* "witnesses," i.e., of the Bayan) in Iraq and Iran. But this attempt to routinize further the charismatic authority of the faith seems to have clashed with the continuing appeal of original charisma within the movement and further weakened Azal's position.

In Edirne in 1866, Baha'allah made public his claim to be *man yozheroho'llah* (he whom God shall manifest), the messianic figure of the Bayan. Sobh-e Azal responded by asserting his own claims and resisting the wholesale changes in doctrine and practice introduced by his brother. His attempt to preserve traditional Babism proved largely unpopular, however, and his followers were soon in the minority. In 1868, bitter feuding between the two factions, leading to violence on both sides, induced Ottoman authorities to exile the Babis yet further. Baha'allah and his followers (now known as Baha'is) were sent to Acre in Palestine, and Azal with his family and some adherents to Famagusta in Cyprus, where he remained until his death on 29 April 1912.

Read the rest of this article online at www.iranicaonline.org/articles/azali-babism.

Sobh-e Azal, like his brother, was a prolific writer, his works consisting primarily of interpretations and elaborations of existing Babi doctrine, together with very large quantities of devotional pieces and poems. His best-known writings include the early *Ketab-e nur*, *Mostayqez* (a refutation of claims advanced by Mirza Asadallah Ku'i Dayyan), the *Motammem-e Bayan* (a continuation of the Bab's unfinished Persian Bayan), and the *Nagamat al-ruh*. One list of his writings gives 102 titles, some in several volumes, others very short.

Azali Babism represents the conservative core of the original Babi movement, opposed to innovation and preaching a religion for a non-clerical gnostic elite rather than the masses. It also retains the original Babi antagonism to the Qajar state and a commitment to political activism, in distinction to the quietist stance of Baha'ism. Paradoxically, Azali conservatism in religious matters seems to have provided a matrix within which radical social and political ideas could be propounded. If Babism represented the politicization of dissent within Shi'ism (Bayat, chap. 4) and Baha'ism stood for a return to earlier Shi'ite ideals of political quietism (MacEoin, "Babism to Baha'ism"), the Azali movement became a sort of bridge between earlier Babi militancy and the secularizing reform movements of the late Qajar period.

The first generation of Azalis were largely established Babis like Sayyed Mohammad Esfahani, Molla Rajab-ʿAli Qaḥer Esfahani, Molla Mohammad Jaʿfar Naraqī, and Haji Mirza Ahmad Kašani. In the writings of men like Qaḥer and Naraqī, as in those of Azal, we find an abiding concern with sometimes obscure religious themes that remain well within the tradition established in the Bab’s later writings. But for the second generation of Azal’s followers, “Azali Babism provided . . . a creed which seemingly justified their political activism and growing nationalist consciousness” (Bayat, p. 130). Often loosely applied, Babi affiliation (which came increasingly to mean Azali affiliation) was applied to or used as a badge by several important individuals active in demanding social change in Iran, in a manner paralleling the connection with Freemasonry used by Malkom Khan and others. It is, in fact, important to remember that the faramuš-kanas were regarded by many as centers for Babi recruitment and proselytizing (Gobineau, *Religions et philosophies*, p. 274).

The best known of the early Azali nationalist reformers were Shaikh Ahmad Ruhi Kermani (1272/1856-1314/1896) and Mirza ʿAbd-al-Hosayn Kermani (Aqa Khan Kermani, q.v.), both of whom were executed along with Mirza Hasan Khan Kabir al-Molk following the assassination of Naser-al-din Shah in 1896. Ruhi’s father, Molla Mohammad Jaʿfar Tahbagallahi Šayk-al-ʿolamaʿ (1241/1826-1311/1893) was an eminent ʿalem from Kerman who had been an early convert to Babism; he is described by Browne as “one of the early promoters of the Liberal Movement in Persia” (*Persian Revolution*, p. 414). Ruhi and Aqa Khan formed the core of a group of Azalis resident in Istanbul in the 1880s and 90s who had close links with political activists such as Mirza Malkom Khan (q.v.) and Sayyed Jamal-al-din Afgani (q.v.). A number of Azalis, particularly Aqa Khan, were closely associated with the influential Persian-language newspaper *Aktar* (q.v.), published in Istanbul under the editorship of Mirza Mohammad Taḥer Tabrizi. Both Ruhi and Aqa Khan wrote on Babism (they collaborated on the well-known work *Hašt behešt* and were married to daughters of Sobh-e Azal, but it would be a mistake to overstress the importance of their Babi affiliation in their wider activities. Like other Azalis of this period, they seem to have used Babism as a motif for dissent, much as Malkom Khan or Afgani (and, indeed, Aqa Khan at times) used Islam. It is chiefly (one might say, properly) as free-thinkers and secularist reformers rather than as thoroughgoing Babis that they made their impact on contemporary affairs.

Edward Browne noted that it was “a remarkable fact that several very prominent supporters of the Persian Constitutional Movement were, or had the reputation of being, Azalis” (*Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion*, p. 221). Notable among these were: Mirza Jahangir Khan Širazi (1292/1875-1326/1908), a teacher at the Dar al-Fonun in Tehran and a member of various *anjomans*, who edited the important Constitutionalist newspaper *Sur-e Esrafil* and was executed following the coup d’état of 1908; Mirza Nasrallah Esfahani Malek-al-motakallemin (1277/1861-1326/1908), a pro-Constitution cleric also killed in 1908, who was active with other

free-thinking 'olama' in promoting reform ideas; Shaikh Mahdi Šarif Kašani (d. 1301 Š./1922), author of the *Tarik-eJa'fari* and *Tarik-ewaqa'ye'-e mašrutiyat* and a son of the important Azali cleric Molla Mohammad Ja'far Naraqī, who was a member of the *Anjoman-e Ma'aref* in Tehran and head of the Šaraf school; Shaikh Mohammad Afzal-al-molk Kermani (1267/1851-1322/1904), a brother of Shaikh Ahmad Ruhi and a close associate of Afgani in Istanbul; his brother Shaikh Mahdi Bahr-al-'olum Kermani, a member of the first and second Majlis; and Hajji Mirza Yahya Dawlatabadi (1279/1862-1359/1939, q.v.), the well-known educationalist who served as a member of the second and fifth Majlis.

It is important to remember that these men, like their predecessors, acted as individuals rather than Azalis and that their ideas were frequently more secularist than religious in orientation. It must also be stressed that many individuals who have been suspected of harboring Babi sympathies or even of being Babis, such as Sayyed Jamal-al-din Esfahani, were hardly true converts: the mere suggestion of heretical leanings or association with known Azalis were often enough to earn a man the name. Neither Jamal-al-din Afgani nor Mirza Mohammad Reza Kermani, the assassin of Naser-al-din Shah, were Babis, although both were often described as such. Abu'l-Hasan Mirza Šayk al-Ra'is, a member of the Qajar family who was an outstanding reformer of the Constitutional period, has sometimes been called an Azali, whereas there is ample evidence that he was, in fact, a Baha'i.

Yahya Dawlatabadi was appointed Sobh-e Azal's successor after the death of his own father, Hajj Mirza Hadi, but there is little evidence that he was actively involved in organizing the affairs of the sect. He did not write on Babi subjects, nor did any other Azalis of note emerge after the death of Azal to produce significant writing on the topic or to develop the original ideas of the religion. With the deaths of those Azalis who were active in the Constitutional period, Azali Babism entered a phase of stagnation from which it has never recovered. There is now no acknowledged leader nor, to the knowledge of the present writer, any central organization. Members tend to be secretive about their affiliation, converts are rare, and association appears to run along family lines. It is difficult to estimate current numbers, but these are unlikely to exceed one or two thousand, almost all of whom reside in Iran.

Bibliography : Apart from general works on Babism, the following may be consulted: Shaikh Ahmad Ruhi Kermani and Aqa Khan Kermani, *Hašt behešt*, n.p. (Tehran), n.d.; 'Ezziya Kanom, *Tanbih al-na'emin*, n.p. (Tehran), n.d., with a section by Ahmad Ruhi; Molla Mohammad Ja'far Naraqī, *Tadkerat al-gafelin*, ms. Cambridge U. L., Browne F. 63; Molla Rajab-'Ali Qaher, *Ketab-e Molla Rajab-'Ali Qahir*, ms. Cambridge U. L., Browne F. 24. Lists of the works of Sobh-e Azal may be found in E. G. Browne, ed., *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion*, Cambridge, 1918, pp. 211-20; idem and R. A. Nicholson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Oriental*

MSS Belonging to the late E. G. Browne, Cambridge, 1932, pp. 69-75. Manuscripts of numerous works by Azal are located in the Browne Collection at Cambridge, the British Library, and the Bibliothèque Nationale. The following have been published, all in Tehran without date: Mostayqez, Motammem-e Bayan, and Majmu'ai az atar-e Noqta-ye Ula wa Sobh-e Azal. Further references may be found in: Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*, Syracuse, 1982, pp. 87, 129-31, 140-42, 149, 157-62, 167, 179, 180-83; H. Algar, *Mirza Malkum Khan*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1973, pp. 46, 58-59, 215-16, 221-25; H. M. Balyuzi, *Baha'u'llah the King of Glory*, Oxford, 1980, chap. 40; idem, *Edward Granville Browne and the Baha'i Faith*, London, 1970, pp. 18-41, 45-46, 50-52; Bamdad, *Rejal* (on individuals mentioned); Yahya Dawlatabadi, *Tarik-emo'aser ya hayat-e Yahya*, 3 vols., Tehran, 1336 Š./1957; Nazem-al-eslam Kermani, *Tarik-ebidari-e Iranian*, Tehran, 1332 Š./1953; N. Keddie, "Religion and Irreligion in Early Iranian Nationalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 4, 1962, pp. 265-95, esp. pp. 273-74, 284-89, 292-95; D. MacEoin, "From Babism to Baha'ism," *Religion* 13, 1983, pp. 219-55.

-->

METADATA

Views8753 views since posted 2002; last edit 2012;

previous at archive.org.../maceoin_iranica_azali_babism;

URLs changed in 2010, see archive.org.../bahai-library.org

Language

English

Permission

fair use

Share

Shortlink: bahai-library.com/3448

Citation: ris/3448

select Collection:

Archives

Articles

Articles-unpublished

Audio

Bibliographies

BIC

Biographies

Books

Chronologies

Compilations

Compilations-NSA

Compilations-personal

Documents

East-asia

[Encyclopedia](#)
[Essays](#)
[Etc](#)
[Excerpts](#)
[Fiction](#)
[Glossaries](#)
[Guardian](#)
[Histories](#)
[Introductory](#)
[Letters](#)
[Maps](#)
[Music](#)
[Newspapers](#)
[NSA-documents](#)
[NSA-letters](#)
[Personal](#)
[Pilgrims](#)
[Poetry](#)
[Presentations](#)
[Resources](#)
[Reviews](#)
[Scripts](#)
[Software](#)
[Statistics](#)
[Study](#)
[Talks](#)
[Theses](#)
[Transcripts](#)
[Translations](#)
[UHJ-documents](#)
[UHJ-letters](#)
[Video](#)
[Visual](#)
[Writings](#)

[home](#)

[sitemap](#)

[series](#)

[chronology](#)

[search:](#)
[author](#)

[title](#)

[date](#)

[tags](#)

[adv. search](#)

[languages](#)

[inventory](#)

[bibliography](#)

[abbreviations](#)

[links](#)

[about](#)

[contact](#)

[RSS](#)

[new](#)

— Azali Babism (Used by permission of the curator)