BABI-BAHA'I AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES ACADEMIC SEMINAR, July 25-27, 2014
ABSTRACTS

■ Lil Osborn, "The Extraordinary Life and Work of Alice Mary Buckton-Baha'i Mystic"

This is the third of three papers dealing with people who both self identified and were recognised by others as Baha'is, whilst simultaneously being involved with esoteric orders and occult practices. The two earlier papers dealt with Robert Felkin and Wellesley Tudor Pole, this paper examines the life and work of Alice Mary Buckton (1867 – 1944).

Buckton was, truly a polymath, writer, poet, film maker, educationalist, feminist and above all a mystic. She was a central figure in the re-establishment of Glastonbury as the premier spiritual centre of England, as well as an important figure in the Baha'i Movement. She visited Abdul Baha in Egypt and received him at her home in Surrey; she addressed a number of public meetings on behalf of the Baha'is. She travelled to the United States and met with Baha'is there. Unlike either Felkin or Pole she and her partner Anett Schepel both appear on the list of voters for the earliest Baha'i elections, suggesting they made a conscious choice to be Baha'is at that time.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Buckton's understanding of the Baha'i teachings in the context of her wider belief system which incorporated Christian mysticism, as well as ideas which would underpin the re emergence of Paganism. Indeed, as well as Baha'is, Buckton was well acquainted with important figures in a wide spectrum of movements which sought spiritual revival. Her neighbours in Glastonbury were Dion Fortune and Katherine Maltwood, her guests included Margaret Murray.

■ Caroline Sparey Fox, ""The Half of it Was Never Told"

As it nears completion, a brief overview, including an update on its progress and glimpses of some moments of discovery, of the book, 'The Half of it was never Told', a biographical history of Adventism in the early nineteenth century

■ Judy Greenway, "Elizabeth Gibson and Thomas Kelley Cheyne: the Marriage of Art and Religion"

In 1912 Abdu'l Baha, then touring the UK, visited Oxford at the invitation of Biblical scholar Thomas Kelly Cheyne. The previous year, Cheyne had married feminist poet Elizabeth Gibson; after meeting her at the Cheyne's home, Abdu'l Baha observed to his host that 'your wife ... is a partner with you in heavenly qualities.'

The partnership at first glance seems an unlikely one: Thomas an eminent academic and ordained minister in the Church of England; Elizabeth, almost thirty years younger, a poet and suffragette. This paper discusses the shared beliefs underpinning their marriage, in the context of the ferment of religious, political, and cultural ideas in the early twentieth century. That ferment created receptive conditions for the development of the early Baha'i movement, but while Thomas's membership of the Baha'i community became part of his religious identity, Elizabeth continued to describe herself as a freethinker. Her beliefs altered over time, affected by her personal experiences of marriage, widowhood, and the First World War; increasingly she became focused on what she called 'the marriage of Art and Religion.' Though in very different ways, both she and Thomas used writing as part of a spiritual quest, and to contribute to what they hoped would be a changed world.

■ Stephen Lambden, "The Abrahamic-Islamic Basmala and its Babi-Baha'i Re-creations"

بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمنِ الرَّحِيمِ

"The Greatest verse of the Qur'ān is the basmala " (Ibn `Abbas relayed in al-Suyuti, al-Itqān, 91)

"The Basmala is closer to the Greatest Name (al-ism al-a`zam) than the black of the eye is to its white" (words attributed to the 8th Imam `Alī al-Riḍā' [c. 148/765- d. 203/818] as narrated in the `Uyūn al-akhbār and the Tafsir al-`Ayyahi, etc).

Various Islamic traditions have it that no qur'ānic verse is of greater magnitude than the basmala. This Arabic Islamic term indicates the five or so word, nineteen letter Arabic invocatory Qur'anic verse, "Bi-smi'llāh al-Rahman

al-Rahim" which is often translated, "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." Islamic tradition also views the basmala as the Fātiḥa ("Opening") or commencement of the Qur'ān and of all past Abrahamic sacred books (al-Alusī, Tafsir 1:41 referring to al-Suyuti, Itqān etc). It occurs before all but one of the 114 Sūras of the Qur'ān and a few other times in this text in whole or in part. It is generally agreed among Islamic experts and western academics that the key roots of the basmala are to be found in Abrahamic, biblical or post-biblical literatures.

Over a more than 1,000 year period, hundreds if not thousands of learned Muslims have written commentaries on the opening basmala within the first Sūrah of the Qur'ān. They have compiled many statements expository of it attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and to those Imams whom the Shi`ī Muslims consider his successors (see the citations above).

The intimately related sometimes neo-Shī`ī Bābī and Bahā'ī religions both have an extensive sacred literature within which a post- or meta-Islamic basmala is of great moment. The Bāb (1819-1850 CE) and Bahā'-Allāh (1817-1892 CE) both made liberal use of the Islamic basmala but came to refashion, recreate and reinterpret it in line with their new post-Islamic theology, theophanology and addresses to a pleroma of individual devotees. They also wrote several specific commentaries on the Islamic basmala as the Baha'i leader `Abdu'l-Baha (d.1921).

In this summary paper dimensions of the evolving Bābī-Bahā'ī basmala recreations and select related huwa ("Ipseity related" = "He is") incipits, will be set forth and analyzed from a number of vantage points. It will be seen that the Bāb explicitly recreated the Islamic basmala on apophatic lines and that Bahā'-Allāh further utilized it in new ways so as to underline his elevated claims and global religious outreach.

■ Todd Lawson, "The Art of the Bab: a Comparison of the Qayyum al-asma with Joyce's Ulysses"

This is a continuation of a paper given at the ISIS Istanbul Conference (Summer 2012) for the panel on modern Quran commentary in Iran. In the course of that presentation a somewhat stream of consciousness reference to Joyce's Ulysses was meant to highlight the scandal and outrage that greeted the unusual and difficult text revealed by the Báb, the Tafsir sūrat Yusuf, also known by the title Qayyúm al-asmá. This work, written in 1844, was circulated widely if clandestinely throughout Iran as a proof of the Báb's claims to religious authority and as an announcement of the Shi'i eschaton (qiyáma). During the question period, the suggested comparison of the Báb's Quran commentary with the founding work of literary Modernism in the West was taken up in the form of a series of questions from a member of the audience. These questions in turn forced me to think more deeply about the usefulness of such a comparison. Now it is clear that one way to understand this challenging work by the Báb is, precisely, to think about it in terms of comparison with the work of James Joyce, the great Irish author whose writing has had such a strong impact on art, literature and the culture of "the modern" in what we are all growing more uncomfortable calling "the West". Striking spiritual, formal and literary techniques and presuppositions are shared by the Qayyum al-asma and Ulysses. These will be illustrated and explained.

■ Denis MacEoin, "'Qurrat al-'Ayn', the Initiator of the Babi Breach with Islam"

There is compelling evidence that, during the period when the Bab was portraying himself as a Qur'an interpreter and a gate of the Imams, Fatima Khanum Baraghani, a former pupil of Sayyid Kazim Rashti, had started to challenge the observance of shari'a law in Karbala and Baghdad, where she had already been teaching male students in a madrasa, and possibly appearing without a veil. Her later actions at Badasht and her writings on the centrality of the heart (al-Fu'ad) over the law, indicate that she was the first to take the movement in this direction and that the Bab himself was influenced by her and moved in the same direction. It is likely that, had she been a man, she would have taken Babism down a different path, emphasizing spirituality (as in Sufism and Ishraqi philosophy) instead of a new legal system. The Bab's own démarche to create new laws was doomed by its bizarre and wholly impractical demands to go nowhere, except in some minor points adopted for the limited Baha'i shar'ia. I may also add that there is no evidence of which I am aware that she was ever interested in feminism or male-female equality, and that it is certainly true that she was not the first suffragette as so many have claimed (the idea of votes for anybody would have been totally alien to her), if only because there are so many predecessors from the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries in Europe and America.

■ **Shahla Mehrgani, "Social Construction of Baha'i Theology"**

Basic beliefs are probably the main source for particular social actions and interactions. Therefore, it is necessary to understand these basic beliefs and insights to be able to interpret and understand those actions and interactions properly.

Theology is among the first religious education formed in previous religions periods, after 170 years of the Baha'i era; however, first components of the Baha'i theology are not identified. It seems that the time has come to ask ourselves, why?

This paper is not supposed to sketch out the substance of Baha'i theology, which is a serious task. It intends to explore the ways that Baha'i scholars have proposed and indicated Baha'i theology.

This research may be regarded as a primary attempt in sociology of knowledge and sociology of religion rather than theology per se.

■ **Moojan Momen, "Breaking Through Cultural Barriers: Migration and Change in the Baha'i Faith"**

The history of the Baha'i Faith can be conceptualized as a series of cultural breakthroughs, each of which was occasioned by a migration and required some degree of change to bring about successfully. The religion began as a heterodox movement in Iran and soon spread to most of the Middle East. Although by the 1890s, it included converts from Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and both Sunni and Shi`i Islam, these were all still within the cultural world of the Middle East (and mainly within a Persianate culture). A cultural breakthrough occurred when the Baha'i Faith was taken to North America at the end of the nineteenth century, initially by Arab Christian converts. The leader of the Baha'i Faith at this time, `Abdu'l-Baha adjusted his discourse to take in Christian themes and Western social reform concerns, which then changed the Baha'i self-identity from being part of a movement focused on millennial fulfilment of prophecy to one focused on social reform. Then in the second half of the twentieth century, the Baha'i Faith expanded into the Global South in a major way, such that the majority of Baha'is came to be there. This again necessitated changes, in language, in community life and in social action. The structure and functioning of the Baha'i community was changed in order to accommodate this development and there was again a change in self-identity.

■ **Geoff Nash, "The Ahmadiyya: a movement of messianic renewal in Islam?"**

This movement started in the late nineteenth century in India by Ghulam Muhammad Ahmad might be considered a response to Islamic decline, pressure of resurgent Hindu groups, and the proselytising activities of Christian missionaries. An admired defender of Islam in debate, Ghulam Ahmad developed a following and from the 1880s began to advance claims to be the expected mahdi and return of Jesus. This paper scrutinises the mission of the Ahmadiyya, their persecution by Muslims in Pakistan and elsewhere, and the challenge they represent to orthodox Islam. In addition it discusses the extent to which Ahmadi doctrines revise Islamic ones, and considers how their organisation aims to meet the crisis of authority and division that might be said to bedevil contemporary Islam.

■ **Sholeh Quinn, "Every Shade of Piety and Impiety:" Babi-Baha'i Books and Believers in E. G. Browne's A Year amongst the Persians"**

E. G. Browne's A Year amongst the Persians has long been hailed as a classic in nineteenth century travel literature. Leaving his native England in 1887, Browne spent a year traveling in Iran, meeting diverse peoples in cities and towns including Shiraz, Isfahan, Yazd, and Kirman. While considerable scholarly attention has been paid to Browne himself within the context of this book and his travels, less research has been done on the Babis and Baha'is themselves whom Browne met. This paper will analyze the information that A Year amongst the Persians, gives us about the nature of Babi-Baha'i belief. What were the Babis and Baha'is that Browne met reading? What was their self-understanding of their faith, and how did they articulate that self-understanding? Browne's narrative provides a unique perspective and insight regarding these questions. Particular emphasis will be placed on comparing and contrasting the experiences that Browne had in the four cities listed above.

■ **Miklos Sarkozy, "From Refusal to Conversion – Ármin Vámbéry and the Baha'i Faith"**

There has been much debate about the mysterious life and complexities of the world-famous scholar, explorer and orientalist Ármin (Arminius) Vámbéry (1832–1913). Born as Hermann Wamberger and originating from a very poor Jewish family of Pozsonyszentgyörgy (now Svätý Jur, Slovakia), Vámbéry started his life as the son of an impoverished Jewish family in a remote

Hungarian village and ended his career in a promising cosmopolitan metropolis, Budapest. Self-taught in science and having experienced many hardships in life, Vámbéry never could enjoy the fruits of a traditional academic career. Despite all of these vicissitudes he rose to the position of university professor by his own fame, by his practical experience of many oriental countries, as well as through his vast knowledge of numerous Turkic languages and Persian.

Though he was much more attracted by the Ottoman Empire, which he regarded as the most progressive Muslim country of his age, Vámbéry had excellent contacts with Iranians as well throughout his entire life.

His last momentous appearance in Iranian affairs occurred towards the end of his life in 1913, when 'Abd al-Bahā', the then leader of the Baha'i faith, made a visit in Budapest. Vámbéry, who had already been well acquainted with this new religious movement, and had had mixed views and statements about this religion in the previous decades showing both signs of antipathy and sympathy, now greeted enthusiastically the Baha'i delegation at his home and according to one of his last letters composed in a florid Persian style he himself converted to Baha'i Faith in the last weeks of his own life.

Vámbéry outlived many political and religious events, which markedly influenced his own personality. His encounters with different religions and religious identities are one of the most peculiar signs of his career. Himself a unique character who equally came into contact with Judaism, Christianity and Islam, though regularly regarding himself as an atheist, Vámbéry finally declared himself a follower of the Baha'i Faith in the last weeks of his life.

The aim of this paper is to throw light on Vámbéry's contacts with Baha'is, his perceptions on this religion and the possible reasons that led him to fully embrace this faith at the end of his life.

■ Saghar Sadeghian, "Tabriz New Catholic Church: a Construction of Urban Constitutional Crisis (1906-1912)"

In 1910, while Azerbaijan was under Russian occupation, a new French Catholic church was being built in Tabriz. How this happened was the question that foreign diplomats and Iranian authorities were asking. The church belonged to the Congregation of the Mission (Lazarites). The new building surprised everyone, because according to the Qajar Shahs' orders, the Christians in Iran were not allowed to construct new churches or any other buildings for institutional activities. They were only allowed to repair and restore the existing ones. For the same reason, each Christian group in Iran claimed the ownership of both big and small churches in different cities and towns.

Azerbaijan was a meeting point of different competing Christian groups; Iranian Armenians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Nestorians and Orthodox, as well as Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox missionaries from Britain, France, America and Russia. This new church was built, not in a lesser known village, but in Tabriz, this big key city. The church was not small by any means; rather it was 8 meters high, with a thirty-meter tower and a capacity of 500 people. It is actually the biggest church in Iran. The church was built right under the nose of American Presbyterians and British Anglicans, not to mention the Iranian authorities. The building was ready to use in 1912.

This paper seeks to establish the place of this incident in the urban history of Tabriz, under Russian occupation. To do so, it will first discuss the wider geopolitical context of the city in 1906-1912, during the constitutional movements. Using an array of sources, French, Persian and English –from diplomatic and Lazarites' archives - it will next narrate the procedure of this church's construction in this crucial context of the city. These are correspondences and reports from the missionaries, French Consuls, British diplomats, Iranian governors and ministers about the story, the problems, frictions or satisfactions, from the time these Catholics tried to buy the land up until the time the church was completed. The main conclusion of this paper is that the presence of the Russian army – whom the Lazarites called their "real alliance" - in Tabriz, on one hand worried the Iranian authorities and prevented them from understanding what was going on, and on the other hand, supplied the "power" the Lazarites needed to build this church.