

**ABS RELIGIOUS STUDIES SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP, BI-ANNUAL SEMINAR NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE**  
**DECEMBER 5-7, 2003**  
**ABSTRACTS**

---

- Joan Barden, California State University.  
"Discovering Faith in the Age of Modernity: A Journey from Islam to Bahai"

The lives and works of three individuals, Bab, Tahirih and Baha'u'llah, are examined against the historical roadmap of Islam. Each one provides a glimpse into a worldview that proposes a renewal of belief and societal practices reflecting a spiritual resurrection. Islam, as the matrix for Bahai, is on this map from the direction of the Shi'a and the Imams to the rigid orthodoxy of a state religion. The mysteries of faith are redefined with a universal approach and appeal to a diverse audience as fundamental truths are re-affirmed in a voice proclaiming the oneness of humanity on one side, and chastisement on the other. To achieve the purpose of the thesis it begins with an historical survey of Islam and the divergence of the believers into two major sects, and the development of Shi'ism in particular and the emergence of the Shaykhi movement, which challenged the orthodoxy of the nineteenth century, CE. Next we examine the Babi phenomenon with the lives of the Bab, initiator of a new revelation, and Tahirih, who became a fulcrum between the teachings of the Bab and those of Baha'u'llah, from whom the final revelation defining religion with a new name and cultural identity manifested.

Added to the biographies are examples of each individual's writings, theme, style, and audience. The works of Baha'u'llah, divided into two distinct categories, are the final step of this journey. The interdisciplinary analysis examines metaphor and myth as a source of definition, audience recognition, and identification of purpose. Baha'u'llah's later writings asserts His authority and a pragmatic approach to avoid, if not, resolve, personal and societal challenges in an every changing world. His mission and the anticipated response from humanity is, therefore, a realization that a new energy exists for Divine Order. This statement reconciles the Age of Modernity with the past through the vision of faith.

- Stephen N. Lambden, Ohio University  
"A New Jerusalem on Mount Carmel?: An Overview of the Bab and Judaism, Scriptural Tablets of Baha'u'llah to Jews with Some Aspects of the Baha'i Approach to Ancient Israelite Religion and Modern Judaisms"

As far as is currently known, Sayyid `Ali Muhammad the Bab (d. 1850) never cited the Hebrew Bible or made references to modern Judaisms, the Jews, the Talmud or other distinctly Jewish tradition and concerns. It is not certain that any Jews converted to the Babi religion (Babism) during the lifetime of the Bab and only very sporadically during the decade or more of the middle-Babi period (1850-1863) and then mostly centered in Khurasan. It will be argued in this paper that the Bab was little or hardly at all influenced by Jews and Judaism.

Up until the time of his arrival in Acre in Ottoman Palestine (1868) Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i religion (d. 1892) only very rarely paraphrased or cited the Hebrew Bible. Reference to Jews or Judaism in his writings are also very few. In his *Jawahir al-Asrar* (c. 1861) and *Kitab-i Iqan* (c. 1862), for example, he utilized biblical testimonia cited from a Christian Arabic New Testament translation to prove the veracity of the mission of the prophet Muhammad and the centrality of a non-literal understanding of prophetic and other texts of sacred scripture. In this respect, almost in passing, he refers in his *Kitab-i Iqan* to the Jewish Rabbi `Abd-Allah Ibn Suriya (a contemporary of Muhammad). This in the course of challenging and modifying the Islamic doctrine of a biblical tahrif (scriptural corruption) involving textual corruption. The Hebrew Bible is never cited in writings dating prior to the *Kitab-i Iqan* (= KI) in which an Islamo-biblical, Isaianic rooted text (Isaiah 65:25a cf. Isa. 11:6f) referred to as a hadith-i mashhur ("well-known tradition") is once paraphrased with the words, "The wolf (Per. gurg) and the lamb (mish, "sheep") shall eat and drink from the same place" (KI 73/75).

Baha'u'llah wrote hundreds if not thousands of scriptural Tablets to Jews in both Arabic and Persian as did his son `Abd al-Baha' (d. 1921). These texts very largely date from the time of the Persian Jewish conversions to the Baha'i religion in the 1870s and 1880s, in the decade or so following the martyrdom of

the Bab (July 9th 1850), most notably in the Persian province of Khurasan (Turbati Haydari, Mashad, etc). It was not until Baha'i missionaries began to teach Jews in Iran and Iraq from around the time of Baha'-Allah's declaration in the early -mid. 1860s that Middle Eastern Jews began to be addressed in weighty Tablets (alwah) by the founder of the Baha'i religion. He lovingly called them to service and faith within the inclusive Baha'i religious universe of discourse which presupposed a full acceptance of all the major Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as the religion of the Bab).

In this presentation a few important alwah (Tablets) of Baha'u'llah dating after 1868 will be analyzed along with some notes regarding the Baha'i attitude towards Moses, Judaism and varieties of ancient and modern Zionisms.

■ Anne-Sophie Lamine, Professeur d'Université, membre du Centre d'Etudes Interdisciplinaires des Faits Religieux (CNRS - EHESS)

#### "Religious Truth, Identities, and Recognition of Otherness"

This presentation is based on one hand on empirical work on interfaith religions in France and on the other hand on a theoretical approach of validity and recognition, using concepts developed by Juergen Habermas and Charles Taylor. It aims to analyse how people of different faiths and convictions consider both other religions and other religionists, as well as the possibilities of recognition and collaboration. Although this general academic study was carried mostly about relations between Christians, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists, a specific part of analysis will be added in this presentation in order to consider specific situations (and difficulties) of Baha'i positions in this religious plurality.

■ Moojan Momen, Cambridge, UK  
"The Conversion of Zoroastrians and Jews to the Baha'i Faith in Iran"

The Bábi community had been drawn almost exclusively from the Shi'i majority in Iran. One of the developments of the Bahá'í community during this period that is of great significance in view of the later world-wide expansion of the religion was the enrolment into the community of members from the minority religious and ethnic communities of Iran. The religious minorities had resisted conversion to Islam despite centuries of pressure in the form of persecution and inducements to convert. In the process, they had developed very considerable mechanisms

and resources within their communities to resist conversion pressures. For the Baha'i community to extend its membership to these religious minorities was a considerable achievement since these minorities would initially have viewed the Baha'i religion as being based on Islam and the Baha'is as coming from the hated Islamic majority. While the Muslim conversions to the Babi and Baha'i Faiths never exceeded 2-3% of the population at their height, the conversions among the Zoroastrian and Jewish populations of Iran far exceeded this.

In this paper, we briefly survey the conversions from their start in the 19th century and into the 20th century. We then examine what various scholars have written about the factors that may have brought about these conversions and comment on these. Lastly we will look at the question of the process by which these religious minorities integrated themselves into the Baha'i community, looking both at the manner in which they took on Baha'i laws and gave up their former laws and customs and also the manner in which they were accepted by the majority of Baha'is who were from Muslim background.

■ David Palmer, Eileen Barker Fellow in Religion and Contemporary Society, Dept. of Sociology, London School of Economics  
"The Institutional Economy of Knowledge and the Science-Religion Dichotomy: the Case of Modern China".

A key principle of Baha'i doctrine is the harmony between science and religion, an issue which has been the subject of growing interest in religious and scientific circles in the past decades. Most of the discussion around this issue has remained at a theological and theoretical level. This paper will propose to look at the institutional organization of knowledge production, arguing that different types of institutional organization generate specific types of knowledge. Promoting the harmony between science and religion may thus involve the emergence of new types of institutional settings which generate and apply knowledge that is compatible with both scientific and religious principles. The implications of such an approach will be explored by examining the case of modern and contemporary China, where the boundaries between science and religion have been constantly shifting, and where several attempts have been made to unify scientific and religious knowledge.

- Roger Prentice, University of Sunderland, UK  
“Spiritual Inspiration in the Art of Bill Viola”

Drawing on mysticism, poetry, shamanism, Taoism, Sufism and Zen Buddhism Viola integrates many disciplines and philosophies to reveal contemporary art's relevance to the modern world and in particular to focus on the connection of the self as a part of the whole. This presentation will show some of Viola's work and will suggest some of the ways that spiritual inspirations manifest in his work. In doing this, the presentation will also make connection to concerns shared by Baha'is.

With every moment

A world is born and dies,  
And know that for you,  
With every moment  
Come death and renewal.

Jalaluddin Rumi, from 'The Mathnawi'

Viola recorded this Sufi poem in his notebook in 1976. He has long been a student of Eastern religion and philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism and Sufi mysticism.

“If I hadn't been studying texts and poems of the mystics and spiritual masters at the time I started with video (mid-1970s), I don't think I could have made as much progress. These individuals gave me the language to understand what I was really seeing. One of the common threads in all these traditions, cutting across all cultures, is the idea that everything in front of us right now is merely a world of appearances. It's only a surface. The task is to understand and master sensory experience because you need the language of the senses to help decipher this surface and penetrate to the deeper connections underneath.”

- Oliver Scharbort, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies  
“Encounters in the Land of Bá: Muslim and Bahá'í Accounts on the Relationship between 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Muhammad 'Abduh”

Placing the genesis of the Bahá'í Faith in the 19th century Middle East is a problematic task. Bahá'ís might fear that examining their faith in the context of

other 19th century religious movements in the Middle East undermines its elevated status as a new divine revelation and degrades it to a mere reform movement among others. Many Muslims would deny any links between leading reformers of that time with Bahá'ís, as this would question the orthodox credentials of these reformers and associate them with a religious group which has departed from Islam.

This paper compares Muslim and Bahá'í accounts on the relationship between 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), one of the most influential Muslim reformers of the 19th century. Both met in Beirut in 1887 and exchanged letter afterwards. Although the nature of their encounter and the correspondence suggest that both were in friendly terms and shared mutual concerns for the future of the Middle East and Islam, later biographers of 'Abduh attempted to prove 'Abduh's ignorance about the nature of the Bahá'í Faith and its claim to supersede Islam. One first hand account by 'Abdu' l-Bahá will be presented which provides new insights into their relationship. Based on both Muslim and Bahá'í accounts, an attempt will be made to describe the relationship between 'Abduh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá at a later stage, after 'Abduh had returned to Egypt and assumed prominence in the Muslim world as reformer and 'Abdu'l-Bahá succeeded his father as head of the nascent Bahá'í community.