

UNIVERSITY OF LANCASTER
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

BAHA'I STUDIES SEMINAR, 7th - 8th APRIL, 1979

UNIVERSITY OF LANCASTER

Following the modest success of the 1977 and 1978 Baha'i Studies Seminars at the University of Lancaster, the Departments of Religious Studies and Sociology at Lancaster were again kind enough to lend their support to this year's Seminar. Designed to further academic research into the Babi and Baha'i religions, the yearly Seminars have afforded opportunity for various young academics (mostly research students) to present and discuss papers on various aspects of "Baha'i Studies". At present the papers continue to be mostly concerned with historical questions, although individuals connected with philosophy of religion, theology and social anthropology have expressed interest in presenting papers to some future seminar.

This year's main papers dealt with the social composition of the Babi movement in the 1848-53 period; the concept of Jihad as originally enunciated by the Bab and later rejected by the Baha'is; the development of millenarian ideas in both the Babi and Baha'i religions; and a discussion of the unsuccessful campaign to invalidate Abdu'l-Baha's Will and Testament which was mounted by various Western Baha'is. In response to last minute and unavoidable cancellations additional papers were presented on, charismatic authority in Imami Shi'ism (as part of the background against which Babism developed), and some of the tensions and trends in the early development of the American Baha'i community (1894-1917).

In "The social basis of the Babi upheavals: A preliminary analysis", Moojan Momen (Cambridge) undertook the first detailed analysis of the occupations and geographical origins of the participants in the various Babi upheavals (1848-1853). Whilst the sources for such an analysis are incomplete, the evidence which is available suggests that with the exception of the nomad tribes and the Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian minorities, all the major social groups of nineteenth century Iran (ulama , government officials and landowners, merchants, artisans, the urban unskilled, and peasants) were represented in the Babi movement. The ulama (religiously learned) formed the leadership of the movement and were numerically one of the strongest elements in its composition. Whilst adherents were drawn from almost all parts of Iran, large scale conversion only occurred in a few localities, invariably, following the conversion of some particularly influential local leader, usually one of the ulama . In contrast to previous accounts which have regarded the Babi upheavals as expressions of the social grievances

of some particular group, Momen argued that the Babis appear to have been motivated primarily by religious considerations, albeit against a background of general social restlessness and agitation.

Denis MacEoin's (Cambridge) first paper, "The concept of jihād in the Babi and Baha'i movements", initially reviewed the Islamic concept of jihād (holy war) against the "realm of unbelief", before turning to an examination of the place of the concept in Babi and Baha'i belief and practice. Whilst in the Bab's early writings (1843-1848), his doctrine of the jihād clearly resembles that propounded by Imami Shi'ism, in his later writings (1848-1850), following his open claim to be the Imam Mahdi, the inaugurator of the resurrection, certain modifications were introduced, of which the role of a putative Babi monarch as leader of the jihād and the place of holy war as one of several severe prescriptions directed against all non-Babis are particularly noted. In practice the Babis did not engage in offensive jihād. In the early period, there are several instances of mubahila, a form of trial by faith in which each of two parties would call down the wrath of God on the other, and also several instances of physical assaults on individual Babi propagandists. Only in the later period did the tensions between Babis and their opponents erupt into large scale violence. In the 1848 Shaykh Tabarsi struggle, the Babi participants seem to have been most concerned with primarily religious objectives, seeing their struggle as a defensive jihād likely to end in their martyrdom and salvation in an evocation of the death of Imam Husayn at Karbala. Similarly at Zanzan and Nayriz, the other two full-scale struggles, whilst the Babis' motivation seems more complex, religious motives would seem to predominate over social and political concerns. In his transformation of Babism into the Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah firmly rejected and absolutely banned the doctrine and practice of jihād, commending pacifism, loyalty to established government and universal peace. This "deradicalization" of militant Babism into the quietism of the Baha'i Faith provides an example of a process undergone by many millenarian movements. If the traditional view of many writers that the Babis were engaged in insurrection is inadequate and misleading, then so also is the prevailing view amongst modern Baha'is that the Babis were essentially reluctant militants.

In a second paper, extracted from an analysis of the Shi'i background of Babism, MacEoin described the developing Imami response to the occultation of their twelfth Imam in 260 AH/872 AD. Believing that "he who dies without an Imam, it is as if he has died in the age of ignorance", the Shi'is were greatly concerned to preserve their links with the hidden Imam, desiring to

maintain in some way the hereditary charismatic authority of the Imamate. These underlying religious concerns were reflected in the beliefs that the Imam was alive, living in a hidden interworld, and able to communicate with his devout followers in visionary encounters; that he would one day return in fulfillment of messianic hope; that in his absence the community would be guided and reinvigorated by outstanding scholars and saints; that the ulama in general acted as in some way the "bearers" of the Imam's charismatic authority; and that, in particular, there would always tend to be one individual member of the ulama who would act as the central figure of Shi'i authority, serving as the Imam's deputy. This latter idea, of a single religious scholar who would act as the "centre of imitation" (marja'-i taqlid) for all Shi'is, really only developed in the course of the nineteenth century, to a certain extent in tension with chiliastic hope and ideas of the general charismatic role of the ulama as a body. The parallel developments in Shaykhi and Babi thought which stressed the importance of a single charismatic leader should be seen against this background.

Peter Smith (Lancaster) also presented two papers, the first of which, "Millenarianism in the Babi and Baha'i religions", examined the usefulness of the social science concept of "millenarian movements" with reference to Babi-Baha'i history. Urgently expecting the salvation of the world and the end of the present order of things, millenarian movements in traditional societies commonly come into conflict with existing authorities and assume a political role, expressing underlying social discontent. Although basically a millenarian movement, Babism was untypical of the general type. Whilst developing within the typical context of a strong tradition of millenarian expectation and the focus of a charismatic leader, the Babi movement occurred in a society which generally lacked the conditions of marked deprivation, disaster and instability which normally prefigure the rise of millenarian movements. Again, its membership would seem to be untypically diverse, religious scholars rather than the disinherited and oppressed being over-represented in its ranks. Specific factors operating in certain localized centres of Babi activity might change this overall picture, but otherwise it would seem that simply labelling the Babi movement as "millenarian" does not by itself lead to an adequate account of its origin. On the other hand, its later transformation into the politically quietist Baha'i Faith does represent a type of transformation which millenarian movements in traditional societies frequently undergo in the aftermath of defeat. Whilst no longer a millenarian movement, the Baha'i Faith preserved a strong millenarian component in the beliefs and aspirations of its members. This

was represented by the claim that its founders had fulfilled the messianic expectations of previous religions, and ^{by the} expectation of a far distant "Most Great Peace", an earthly millennium, to be established in the fullness of time, as a result both of certain historical processes (which would lead en route to world peace and unity and perhaps to a limited catastrophe), and the strivings of the Baha'is themselves. This later belief provided individual Baha'is with an important goal and rationale for their endeavours to promulgate their religion and teachings of social reform.

In his second paper, an extract from "The American Baha'i community, 1894-1917: A preliminary survey" (to be published in M. Momen (ed) Studies in Babi and Baha'i History. Forthcoming), Smith outlined some of the main trends and tensions within the early American Baha'i community. Many American Baha'is regarded themselves as "free and equal" individuals, very much in the American tradition of "rugged individualism", yet for all the liberality of its theological and social ideas the Baha'i Faith implicitly emphasized the importance of obedience to religious authority. There was thus an underlying tension in the American Baha'i community which was only partly, obviated by the intense devotion to Abdu'l-Baha, characteristic of many American Baha'is. This tension was reflected in the contested development of increasingly effective organization represented by specific administrative bodies, and of some measure of control over what might properly be taught as Baha'i doctrine. Although it was not until the 1930s that the transformation of the American community from a fairly unorganized and clearly demarcated religious group was completed, the process of change was already well under way by 1917.

Loni Bramson's (Louvain) paper, "Internal opposition to Abdu'l-Baha's Will and Testament and the establishment of the Guardianship" dealt with one of the most specific attacks on the growth of "organization" in the Western Baha'i communities. In 1922 the American Baha'is received the news that Abdu'l-Baha had appointed his eldest grandson Shoghi Effendi, "Guardian" of the Baha'i Faith. In the years following, the American Baha'i community under Shoghi Effendi's guidance became increasingly organized. For one Baha'i, Ruth White, this development was intollerable. Already opposed to what she saw as "sectarian" and "dogmatic" tendencies, she began from 1927 onwards an extended campaign to prove that Abdu'l-Baha's Will and Testament was a forgery. This campaign was an almost complete failure, even other opponents of Shoghi Effendi, such as Ahmad Schrab, a former secretary of Abdu'l-Baha, testifying to the validity of the Will. Eventually losing interest in her campaign, White finally became a devotee of Meher Baba.

The only individuals convinced by White's efforts were a few German Baha'is who formed a "Baha'i World Union", one of whose members, Herman Zimmer, has recently reopened the campaign against Abdu'l-Baha's Will and Testament.

The 1977 and 1978 Seminars

Of the papers presented at earlier Seminars several have been or are shortly to be published:

Tony Lee "The Baha'i community of Ishqabad, Russian Turkistan" (1978) in slightly revised form as "The rise of the Baha'i community of Ishqabad" Etudes Baha'i (Toronto) 5 (1979): 1-13.

Denis MacEoin "The Shaykhi reaction to Babism in the early period" (1978) in M. Momen (ed) Studies in Babi and Baha'i History (Oxford: George Ronald, Forthcoming).

Moojan Momen "Some problems connected with the Yazd episode of 1850" (1977) in his The Babi and Baha'i Religions, 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Accounts (Oxford: George Ronald, Forthcoming) and "Early contact between Baha'is and Christian missionaries" (1978) in Studies in Babi and Baha'i History.

Peter Smith "The routinization of charisma? Some comments on Peter L. Berger's Motif messianique et processus social dans le Bahaisme" (1977) in shortened and amended form as "Motif research: Peter Berger and the Baha'i Faith". Religion 8 (1978): 210-34, and "The American Baha'i community, 1894-1917" (1978) forms a part of "The American Baha'i community, 1894-1917: A preliminary survey" in Studies in Babi and Baha'i History.

The other papers: Denis MacEoin "The late eighteenth century reformation in Shi'ism: Its background and influence" (1977); Denise Mossop "The mediatory role of Baha'i: A comparison of Sufi and Baha'i mysticism" (1978); and Harri Peltola "The history of the Baha'i Faith in Finland: A case study in the sociology of countercultures" (1978), remain unpublished.

A short account of the 1977 and 1978 Seminars is reprinted in the United Kingdom Baha'i Journal 245 (June 1978): 16-17. (See also the erratum in issue no. 248 (Jan. 1979): 11).

Once again our special thanks to Lancaster's Department of Sociology and to Sylvia Stackhouse for providing secretarial assistance. Suggestions regarding another such Seminar next year are welcomed.

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seminar conveners:

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