

THE BABI UPHEAVALS IN IRAN (1848-1853): IN SEARCH OF A PARADIGM

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The rise of the Babi movement in mid-nineteenth century Iran was certainly one of the most surprising and arguably one of the most important features of nineteenth century Iranian history. The discussion as to the significance of the Babi movement, and its later development the Baha'i movement, for the emergence of the Iranian constitutional and modernist movements will no doubt continue for many years to come. [1] The Babi movement began as a faction of the minority Shaykhi school within Twelver Shi'ism and culminated in a series of violent upheavals in the period 1848-1853, following which the movement was effectively driven underground. The effects of this repression were however only shortlived for, demonstrating notable resilience, the movement was to emerge only a decade later, just as widespread but without militant overtones, as the Baha'i movement. The Baha'i movement, or the Baha'i Faith as it now is, has itself overflowed its Shi'i origins and even the geographical confines of Islam and is increasingly taking on the features of a world religion.

It is precisely this remarkable growth which has caused, as we shall attempt to demonstrate in the course of this paper, problems in interpreting the origins of the movement and in particular the nature of the series of violent Babi upheavals that occurred between 1848 and 1853. For the growth and conflicts of a small Shi'i faction cannot be considered by a modern historian without also taking into account the fact that that small movement has subsequently grown into a world religion with numerous adherents. This subsequent development inevitably casts those events at the beginning of the movement in a new light if only for the reason that one must also look to see what factors there were in this movement that could have been the seed of such growth. Indeed the very fact that the Babi-Baha'i movement has been studied to an extent which, for example, the politico-religious revolt of Shaykh 'Ubaydu'llah in Iran in the 1880s has not, is in itself a reflection of the fact that the later developments of the movement must inevitably influence and colour our judgement and evaluation of the early history.

The purpose of this paper is not so much to shed light on the Babi upheavals themselves (although it is to be hoped that one result will be a clearer overview of this episode) but rather to examine the manner in which we interpret historical events and the extent to which our interpretations are the result of the paradigms that we choose to use.

1. See in particular Mangol Bayat, Mysticism and Dissenti
socio-religious thought in Qajar Iran, Syracuse, 1982, chap 4

THE BABI UPHEAVALS 1848-1853

Before discussing the various interpretational paradigms, it would be as well to survey briefly the events to which we are referring.

Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819-1850) was a merchant of Shiraz who was loosely associated with the Shaykhi movement in that he had spent a few months attending the lectures of the Shaykhi leader Sayyid Kazim Rashti in Karbala. Then in 1844, a year with apocalyptic overtones [2], during a succession crisis in the Shaykhi movement caused by the death of Sayyid Kazim Rashti without the appointment of a new leader, Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad put forward a claim to leadership and took the title of the Bab. The exact nature of this initial claim is a matter for discussion and indeed we have suggested elsewhere that it may be that the claim was understood differently by different strata within and without the Babi movement [3]. Initially the Bab instructed his followers to keep to the Islamic laws and there was only minimal conflict with the religious and political authorities. In late 1847-early 1848, however, the Bab produced his book the Bayan in which he laid out the details of a new code of religious law abrogating the Islamic Shari'a. Then in the summer of 1848, three events occurred almost simultaneously which ended the comparatively peaceful co-existence between the Babis and the religious and secular authorities: the Bab at his trial in Tabriz openly put forward his claim to be the occulted Imam Mahdi of Shi'ism; the Babis met at the conference of Badasht and began to discuss the implementation of the new religious law; and one of the Babis, Mulla Husayn Bushru'i, raised a Black Standard at Mashhad in Khurasan [4] and began to march with a small band of followers towards the centre of the country.

There followed a series of violent upheavals. In the first, Mulla Husayn Bushru'i proceeded with the Black Standard until he was surrounded by troops at the religious shrine of Shaykh Tabarsi in Mazandaran. Here, he and Mulla Muhammad 'Ali Barfurushi, known as

2. The Islamic year 1260 (1844-5) was the one thousandth year of the Greater Occultation (Ghaybat-i Kubra) of the occulted Shi'i Twelfth Imam, the Imam Mahdi. There were indications in prophecy and a general expectation in the Shi'i world that the hidden Imam would return in this year. See Mrs Meer Hassan Ali Observations on the Mussulmans of India, 1832 (repr. 1974), p. 36; Abbas Amanat, "The early years of the Babi movement: background and development", D. Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford, 1981, pp. 75-90; Juan R.I. Cole and M. Momen, "Mafia, mob and Shiism in Iraq: the rebellion of Ottoman Karbala 1824-1843", Past and Present, No. 112, 1986, pp. 133-4, 139-140

3. "The trial of Mulla 'Ali Bastami: a combined Sunni-Shi'i fatwa against the Bab" Iran vol. 20, 1982, pp. 140-2

4. Regarding this see note 12

Quddus, led a band of under six hundred Babis [5] with no military training in defence of hurriedly erected fortifications for a period of six months (October 1848-May 1849). Their opponents were initially local militia but later government troops, to the eventual number of some 5-7,000, backed by artillery. But the Babis were not overcome by military defeat but rather were tricked into accepting an amnesty and then massacred.

The second upheaval into the small southern town of Nayriz where about one-third of the population became Babis following Sayyid Yahya Darabi, known as Vahid, the son of one of the leading ulama of that time, Sayyid Ja'far Kashfi. Vahid had gone to Tehran in 1849 hoping to join the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi but his way was blocked by the besieging forces. After remaining for a period at the house of Mirza Husayn 'Ali, Baha'u'llah, he travelled south to Yazd. There he became embroiled in local disorders centring on a gang leader by the name of Muhammad 'Abdu'llah, who had been in a state of revolt against the governor for a number of years and who now proclaimed himself a Babi. Finding his position untenable there he came to Nayriz where his father-in-law was the prayer-leader (Imam-Jum'a) of the Chinar-Sukhtih quarter of the town. After converting most of the Chinar-Sukhtih quarter to the Babi movement, he was opposed by Zaynu'l-'Abidin Khan, the governor of the town. Vahid withdrew to a fort outside Nayriz and Zaynu'l-'Abidin Khan sent to the provincial governor for troops to help quell the disturbance. Approximately five hundred men and an equal number of women faced some two thousand government troops supported by local militia and artillery (May-June 1850). Again the episode was concluded not by a military victory but by the offer of an amnesty followed by a massacre of the Babis when they surrendered.

The third episode occurred at Zanjan on the main road between Tehran and Tabriz. Here a local religious leader Mulla Muhammad 'Ali Zanjani, known as Hujjat, became a Babi and brought a large number of the town's population into the movement with him. Opposition from the other 'ulama in the town led to street battles and eventually troops were called in. Some 2-3,000 Babis were besieged by government troops numbering in total some 10,000 troops and at least 19 cannon for some eight months (May 1850 - January 1851).

There was then the abortive attempt on the life of the Shah by a small group of Tehran Babis which led to the arrest and execution of a large number of Babis (August - September 1852). This was followed by a further episode in Nayriz (October - November 1853) in which the remnants of the Babi community there took up defensive positions in the hills around Nayriz, where they were attacked by government troops. Yet again the episode ended as a result of treachery by the leaders of the government troops.

5. Regarding numbers of Babis in this and the subsequent episodes see M. Momen, "The social basis of the Babi upheavals in Iran (1848-53): a preliminary analysis", International Journal of Middle East Studies, vol. 15 (1983), pp. 161-170.

PARADIGMS FOR THE BABI UPHEAVALS

Having presented the main features of the episodes of the Babi upheavals, we will now move on to the major paradigms that have been suggested as frameworks within which to understand these events.

1. Political Revolt. Historically, perhaps the first paradigm to be suggested was the Iranian government's assertion that, although the claims of the Bab were couched in religious terms, these episodes had nothing much to do with religion but were expressions of political revolt or criminal activity. This is the picture depicted in the court histories such as the Nasikhu't-Tawarikh of Muhammad Taqi Sipahr. In the official Iranian government gazette, the Babis are described as having "turned their thoughts to sovereignty, thinking that they might be able to seize power and they set up a commotion so that under the pretext of summoning people to their false doctrine, they might rob and plunder. [6]" This was certainly the interpretation that the Iranian government gave to the foreign diplomatic missions in Iran and is reflected in their dispatches to their respective governments. Dolgorukov, the Russian minister, for example, in his dispatches states that the Babis "are promoting communism through the force of arms. [7]" The British Charge d'Affaires, Lt-Col. Farrant, states that "It is supposed their true object is not in any way relative to religion, but to create a revolutionary movement against the Government [8]."

Interestingly, this is still the official position of the Iranian government to this day with regard to the Baha'is. In trying to justify their depriving the Baha'is in Iran of fundamental human rights, the present Iranian government asserts that the Baha'i Faith is not a religious movement but a political party. Indeed, on the basis of some spurious memoirs of the Russian minister Dolgorukov [9], they assert that the movement was started by the Russians as a way of increasing their influence in Iran.

Much evidence can be produced against this paradigm. Firstly, a

6. Ruznamih Vaga'i' Itifagiyya, No. 82, 10 Dhu'l-Qa'da 1268

7. Dolgorukov quoted in M. Momen, The Babi and Baha'i Religions, 1844-1944; some contemporary Western accounts, 1981, p. 93

8. Farrant quoted in Momen, Babi and Baha'i religions, p. 92

9. These spurious memoirs were first published in Khurasan in 1322 Sh/1943. Despite the fact that a number of eminent Iranian historians have pronounced these memoirs to be completely fabricated (for example Prof 'Abbas Iqbal Ashtiyani in Yadgar, 5th year, No. 8-9, 1328 Sh, p.148; Mujtaba Minovi in Rahnama-yi Kitab, 6th year, No 1-2, 1342 Sh, p. 22), the Iranian government continues to use this material; see publications of Iranian government and embassies such as Baha'ism, its origins and its role, n.d., The Hague, pp. 4-6; What is Baha'ism, Rome, 1985, pp. 6-20.

study of the Bab's writings will demonstrate that there is little in them of political or even social import. They are almost exclusively concerned with religious issues: theology, eschatology, exegesis, religious law, etc. Secondly, there is no evidence that the Babi upheavals were part of a planned uprising or even that they had any political or social objectives. Although the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi routed the government troops on several occasions, they did not press home their advantage nor utilize the opportunity to link up with other Babis or obtain territorial or strategical advantage. Thirdly, although the Bab's writings do contain a bare outline of plans for a Babi state, the Babis neither attempted to set this up nor did they declare this as their goal during the course of the upheavals. Fourthly the Bab is reported as having dissuaded Manuchihr Khan the powerful governor of Isfahan from giving his political support.

2. Defence and martyrdom. The Babi upheavals are seen in the standard Baha'i histories, such as Nabil's Narrative, as having been forced upon the Babis by an antagonistic clergy and a hostile government. In this paradigm, the Babis are considered to have been primarily interested in spreading the message of the Bab through peaceful means of debate and persuasion but the ulama rose against them and began to attack them. At first the opposition of the ulama was confined to instigating the imprisonment or expulsion of the Babis [10] but eventually, as the Babi movement continued to spread, this persecution became more and more violent culminating in the upheavals of 1848-53.

Intermingled with this theme of defensive action taken against implacable enemies is the notion that these events were in a sense inevitable both because they were foretold in prophecy and because of the Babi doctrine of "return" (raj'a). According to this doctrine, in each cycle there occurs a "return" of certain archetypal characters. Thus the disciples of the Bab are the "return" of the holy Imams and their companions, the "letters of affirmation", and there must also occur the "return" of the enemies of the Imams, the "letters of denial" [11]. And therefore inevitably there must also occur the re-enactment of the cosmic drama of Karbala. Thus the "martyrdom" of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi and elsewhere represents proof of the validity of the Bab's mission. In such a cosmic drama, the opponents become the very embodiments of evil while the Babi heroes become the exemplars of virtue. Events and persons are depicted in very black-and-white terms.

Those who would argue against this paradigm can point to the action

10. For example the expulsion of Mulla Sadiq Khurasani and Quddus from Kirman and the arrest of Mulla 'Ali Bastami in Iraq. See H.M. Balyuzi, The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative, Wilmette, 1962, pp. 90-91, 180-181, 186-7; M. Momen, "The Trial of Mulla 'Ali Bastami: A combined Sunni-Shi'i fatwa against the Bab", Iran, vol. 20 (1982) pp. 113-143.

11. On the Bab's doctrine of "return", see Persian Bayan Wahid 1

of Mulla Husayn in raising the Black Standard in Khurasan [12]. This and the subsequent march towards the centre of the country by a band of armed men seems an obviously provocative and political action. Other examples of such militant actions scarcely compatible with a quietist stance include Vahid's linking up with the Yazdi rebel leader, Muhammad 'Abdu'llah and the manufacture of arms by the Qazvin Babis [13]. Finally of course there is the attempt on the life of the Shah in 1852.

3. Jihad. It has been argued by MacEoin that the correct paradigm for the Babi upheavals is to view these episodes as expressions of the Islamic concept of Holy War (ijihad). The Bab in his early works re-iterated the Islamic concept of ijihad [14] and it was popularly expected by the Shi'a that the occulted Twelfth Imam would, on his return, lead them in a victorious ijihad against all of the enemies of the Imam and against the unbelievers. There are a number of indications that some, at least, of the Babis did think of their actions in the context of ijihad. MacEoin quotes in particular the early Baha'i historian, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Zavara'i, who uses the term ijihad frequently in relation to his account of the Babi upheaval [15].

Those who question MacEoin's views on the usefulness of Babi ijihad as a paradigm point [16] to the fact that the passages in the Bab's writings that most clearly refer to an ordinance of ijihad relate to the early period of the Bab's writings from 1844 to 1848. During this period, the Bab was, in his writings, enjoining his followers to follow the Islamic code of law most carefully [17] and his words on ijihad are no more than a re-iteration of the Islamic law of ijihad. In fact, by making ijihad conditional on his orders for it and then not giving any

12. The significance of the raising of a Black Standard was two-fold: firstly, in Islamic history, the Umayyad Dynasty had been overthrown by the 'Abbasids through the raising of a Black Standard in Khurasan by Abu Muslim and his subsequent march towards Baghdad; secondly, there were many well known Traditions that stated that the Imam Mahdi when he came would raise a Black Standard in Khurasan and Shi'is were instructed that if they saw it they should rally to it "even if you have to crawl over the snow"; see Moojan Momen, Introduction to Sh'i Islam, New Haven and London, 1985, pp. 168.

13. Fadil Mazandarani, Zuhur al-Hagg, vol. 3, n.p., n.d., p. 374

14. See passages quoted by MacEoin, "The Babi concept of Holy War" Religion, vol. 12 (1982), pp. 102-5.

15. MacEoin, "Babi concept of Holy War", p. 117.

16. See M. Afnan and W.S. Hatcher, "Western Baha'i Scholarship and Baha'i Origins", Religion, vol. 15, 1985, pp. 29-49

17. See MacEoin, "Early Shaykhi Reactions to the Bab and his Claims", Studies in Babi and Baha'i History, vol. 1 (ed. M. Momen), Los Angeles, 1982, p. 19.

such permission, the Bab was effectively preventing ijihad without appearing to contravene the Islamic provisions. And indeed during this initial period, when one might have thought, from the large number of references to it in the Bab's writings, ijihad would have broken out if it was going to, there were in fact very few episodes of violence. Paradoxically, during the second period of the Bab's writings, the period during which the Babi upheavals occurred, the actual occurrence of references to ijihad become very few and vague. In the whole of the Bab's Persian Bayan, the most authoritative and systematic of the Bab's writing of the later period, there is no specific injunction to wage ijihad. The fact that the Bab does not actually forbid ijihad can only be inferred on the basis on a number references to the actions of putative future Babi kings [18] - not a matter for immediate concern. Moreover, any statements that appear to allow ijihad must be set against other statements such as the following: "The killing of anyone is forbidden in the Bayan more strongly than any other matter and no other matter is more emphatically prohibited - to such an extent that if even the thought of killing someone should enter a person's heart, that person is outside the religion of God ... [19]". It is difficult to see how Holy War can be waged without people being killed.

4. Social Protest. Various writers have presented the Babi movement as an expression of social protest. In the pre-modern society of nineteenth century Iran, they argue, the only vehicle for an expression of social aspirations would be a religious movement. One of the first to argue along these lines was M. S. Ivanov, a Soviet orientalist. Taking a Marxist perspective, he criticises those who "saw in the Babi movement not a popular mass movement, born out of definite social conditions and directed against the ruling class, but only the birth

18. A statement that I made to this effect in my work, The Babi and Baha'i Religions 1844-1944 (Oxford, 1981, p. xxi) was peremptorily rebutted by MacEoin in his paper "From Babism to Baha'ism", (Religion, vol. 13, 1983, p. 242). However, I have seen nothing in my subsequent studies of the Persian Bayan to make me change my mind on the accuracy of this statement.

19. Persian Bayan 4:5. MacEoin has stated that this injunction only refers to the killing of believers ("Babi concept", p. 108). While it is true that later in the same chapter, there is a similar injunction in relation to believers, that later injunction is separated from this present passage by eight lines of closely written text and it could be argued that it represents a separate injunction. Certainly Browne has interpreted this passage to refer to all persons; in his abstract of the Persian Bayan, Browne summarizes this passage thus: "No one is to be slain for unbelief, for the slaying of a soul is outside the religion of God." (Cambridge University Library, Browne Manuscripts, Sup. 20 (9), p. 54

and development of a religious sect, or even of a new religion [20].²⁰ Ivanov therefore analyses the economic situation in Iran demonstrating the considerable imbalances that existed [21]. He then goes on to analyse the historical texts for evidence of social aspirations among the Babis. He finds some support in a controversial early history, the Nuqtatu'l-Kaf. He quotes from a lengthy section of this work which appears to be a speech made by the Babi leader Mulla Muhammad 'Ali Barfurushi known as Quddus. This speech makes some radical social statements such as the idea that property is usurpation. Taking this together with Quddus's peasant background, Ivanov argues that effective leadership in the latter period was taken away from the imprisoned Bab and devolved upon such people as Quddus and that the Babi upheavals can be considered as a form of social protest by the peasant classes rising against feudalism and enslavement to foreign capital [22].

However, Ivanov's evidence is open to criticism. The evidence that he quotes from the Nuqtatu'l-Kaf is a contorted and confused passage which is difficult to interpret. It is not even clear whether it is meant to be the words of Quddus himself or, more likely, one of a number of similar digressions by the author. Ivanov's thesis is made even weaker by the fact that in at least one case, that of the village of Bihnamir, the peasants who joined the defendants at Shaykh Tabarsi from there did so under the leadership of the local landlord, Aqa Rasul Bihnamiri, and can scarcely be considered to have been "rising against feudalism" as Ivanov would have them [23].

5. Faction-fighting The present author would like to present here yet another paradigm through which the Babi upheavals can be seen. Throughout modern Iranian history, one of the most frequent causes of urban upheaval and disorder has been the tradition of faction-fighting that has arisen in most Iranian cities. This involves the dividing of towns into usually two quarters each of which would on any slight pretext (and particularly if the governor was weak) engage the other in street battles. The actual fighting itself would usually be initiated

20. M.S. Ivanov, Babidski Vostanii i Irane (1848-52), Moscow, 1939; quoted in V. Minorsky's review of this work, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, vol. 11, 4 (1946) 878.

21. For a further consideration of these factors, see M. Momen, "The Social basis of the Babi upheavals in Iran (1848-53): a preliminary analysis", International Journal of Middle East Studies vol. 15 (1983) 158-9.

22. A similar line of argument is taken by Kurt Greussing, "The Babi movement in Iran 1844-1852: from merchant protest to peasant revolution", in Religion and Rural Revolt (ed. Janos M. Bak and Gerhard Benecke), Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, pp. 256-269.

23. For a more detailed criticism of this viewpoint, see Momen, "Social Basis of the Babi upheavals in Iran (1848-53): a preliminary analysis", International Journ. Middle East Studies, vol. 15 (1983), p. 177.

by gangs of street roughs known as lutis but it was not uncommon for large numbers of the population to join in. This mechanism was of course used to settle arguments and feuds and thus any dispute could result in street battles. The ulama were also not averse to using this mechanism when it suited their purposes. The ulama would use the lutis to enforce their legal edicts while the lutis in turn depended on the ulama to intercede for them when the government decided to restore order. The more influential ulama had around them a number of students (tullab) who not infrequently acted in a similar manner as the lutis particularly in order to enforce the ruling of their master [24].

The ulama did not hesitate to use this mechanism of faction-fighting in order to settle religious disputes. They had already used it with great effect against Sufi shaykhs in the 17th and early 18th century. They set the lutis and the mob against the Sufis causing the death of several prominent Sufi leaders. In this way they combatted the influence of the Sufi shaykhs who were at this time strongly challenging their hold over the masses. The ulama also used this method against the Akhbaris and Shaykhis [25].

Certainly some of the episodes during the Babi upheavals can be seen in the context of this paradigm. This is most clearly evident at Zanjan, where the Babi leader Hujjat had, even prior to becoming a Babi, been at odds with the rest of the ulama in Zanjan for he adhered to the minority Akhbari school. Thus even before the advent of Babism, the town was divided into factions supporting and opposing him and there had been faction-fighting. With the conversion of Hujjat to the Babi movement, his supporting faction also converted. The early stages of the Zanjan upheaval were very reminiscent of typical faction-fighting in Iranian cities. After a minor episode that acted as the triggering factor, the two factions took to the streets, each being led by the lutigari pahlavans (luti champions). It was only the later action of the other ulama in calling in troops that made this episode significantly different from other factional fights. A similar set of circumstances prevailed in Nayriz where the Babi leader, Vahid, controlled one of the town's quarters although in this case his main opponent was the governor of the town. At Yazd prior to his arrival in Nayriz, Vahid had clearly been caught up in factional disputes involving the luti leader Muhammad 'Abdu'llah. At Barfurush, prior to the upheaval at nearby Shaykh Tabarsi, long-standing factional disputation between two of the clerics of the town involved the Babi leader Qudus and was one of the factors leading to the subsequent

24. Thus for example, from time to time in almost every town the ulama would decree that the wineshops should be closed down and the tullab would proceed to demolish and loot the wineshops

25. Two schools that appeared in Shi'i Islam and gained the support of an appreciable minority of the ulama

26. See A. Amanat, "The Early Years of the Babi movement", Ph.D., Oxford University, 1981, pp. 87-8

upheaval [26]. At Mashhad, prior to Mulla Husayn's hoisting of the Black Standard, there were clashes between the Babis and the lutis supporting the ulama which were strongly reminiscent of typical factional disputation.

6. Other Paradigms. Nor does this exhaust the number of different paradigms through which the Babi upheavals were seen both in their own time and subsequently.

Many of the Iranian ulama were genuinely shocked by the claim of the Bab and for them the extipation of the Babis was seen as a religious duty. From such a viewpoint, the explanation of the Babi upheavals is very simple. It was nothing more than the extirpation of a heresy in accordance with the dictates of the Shari'a.

The British and Russian diplomats based in Tehran sought to categorize the Babis in terms of paradigms with which they were familiar. They therefore described them as Socialists and Communists (1848 the year that the Babi upheavals began was also the 'Year of Revolutions' in Europe) [27].

Nikki Keddie of the University of California, Los Angeles, has advanced a further explanation of the Babi upheavals. Her thesis is that the impact of the West on pre-modern Asia produced such upheavals. She has drawn a comparison between the Babi upheavals and the Tai-Ping revolt in China [28].

WHAT IS HISTORICAL TRUTH?

Thus it can be seen that a number of plausible paradigms exist through which the Babi upheavals can be viewed. However these paradigms have some potentially conflicting implications. Were the Babis political rebels or engaged in Holy War or were they merely defending themselves heroically against overwhelming odds? Each paradigm has its advocates who assert their viewpoint to be the "truth"; they consider their case convincing and bring forward much evidence in favour of it. They also consider those holding to other paradigms as having either a limited or biased viewpoint, based on very selective use of quotations and evidence.

We are thus left with a number of paradigms each claiming to represent the "Truth" of the events. And so we must go back to the more fundamental question of the definition of the truth for these parties. It would appear that the "Truth" for the State (paradigm A) is that the interests and order of the State are paramount and

27. See M. Momen, The Babi and Baha'i Religions, pp. 15-10, 17, 44-5.

28. "Religion and Irreligion in early Iranian Nationalism", Comparative Studies in Society and History 4 (1964) 265-295.

therefore anything which disturbs or threatens to disturb this order must be rebellion and revolt.

The "Truth" for Baha'i historians (Paradigm B) is somewhat more difficult to define since there are many statements about truth in the Baha'i writings and therefore if we try to come to a definition, the question of selectivity will once again arise. But among the concepts of truth encompassed within the Baha'i writings is the idea that it includes whatever is conducive to unity, love and harmony: "...the quintessence of truth is this: we must all become united and harmonized in order to illumine this gloomy world, to abolish the foundations of hostility and animosity from among mankind. [29]" But for practical purposes, as MacEoin has stated, the Baha'i viewpoint on historical truth must include "the basic premise of the underlying validity of divine revelation as expressed in the Baha'i scriptures" [30].

For MacEoin, an academic whose viewpoint is formed mainly from logical positivism, truth is what is arrived at by following a particular methodological pathway. Anything that does not follow this pathway is relegated to "a tendency to rewrite... history" and is described as "entirely unscholarly" [31].

For Ivanov, a Marxist, truth or at least social and historical events can only meaningfully be analysed in relation to class struggle. Any other historical analysis is ignoring the major factor that motivates history, the historical dialectical forces, and is therefore shallow and delusory.

We will here concentrate on the second and third paradigms described above since the cases for and against these have been argued out at length and with clarity [32]. What I propose to do at this stage is to examine the structure of the argument advanced for and against these

29. Tablets of Abdul Baha Abbas, New York, 1930, p. 432. See also Paris Talks, London, 11th ed., 1969, p.121.

30. "Fundamentalism", p. 60

31. "Fundamentalism, pp. 64, 73.

32. The arguments and counter-arguments have been presented in a series of five papers in the Journal Religion. The following is a list of these - together with the abbreviation by which they will be referred to in the rest of this paper: MacEoin "The Babi Concept of Holy War", Religion, vol. 12 (1982) pp. 93-129 ("Holy War"). Afnan and Hatcher, "Western Islamic Scholarship and Baha'i Origins", Religion, vol. 15 (1985), pp. 29-57 ("Scholarship"). MacEoin, "Baha'i Fundamentalism and the Academic Study of the Babi Movement", Religion, vol. 16 (1986) pp. 57-89 ("Fundamentalism"). Afnan and Hatcher, "Note on MacEoin's 'Baha'i Fundamentalism'", Religion, vol. 16 (1986) pp. 187-192 ("Note"). MacEoin, "Afnan, Hatcher and an Old Bone", Religion, vol. 16 (1986) pp. 193-95 ("Old Bone").

two paradigms. What I hope will emerge clearly to the reader is that it is not just a case that the two sides to the argument have examined the same evidence and come to contradictory conclusions about it. The difference lies at a far deeper level. There is a fundamental incongruence between the way that the two sides even approach the question. There are four basic areas in which the two sides do not agree.

1. The facts that need explaining. Much of the disagreement stems from the fact that the two sides disagree as to what facts about the Babi upheavals need explaining. MacEoin points to a number of actions by the Babis, which were certain to provoke the Government and the 'ulama, and writings of the Bab, which appear to incite his followers to Jihad: the raising of the Black Standard in Khurasan; the manufacture and carrying of arms by some of the Babis; certain passages in the writings of the Bab which appear to endorse the waging of Jihad; and certain passages in early histories that appear to point towards a Jihad mentality [33]. These "facts", Maceoin feels, can only be explained in terms of his theory of Jihad. MacEoin's opponents, Hatcher and Afnan point to a different set of facts that require explanation: the Bab's refusal to call for a Jihad; the refusal of the Babis besieged at Shaykh Tabarsi to pursue their enemies when they had the advantage; the comparative lack of reference to Jihad in the Bab's later fully-developed doctrine and writings; [34].

2. The Data to be considered as evidence The second fundamental area of disagreement between the two sides relates to the question of what data is admissible as evidence. For example, the decision as to which passages in the writings of the Bab are relevant to the subject of Jihad and which are not is also a matter of judgement. One could, of course, say that any passage that includes the word Jihad is of relevance. But MacEoin has for example presented as being relevant to this subject a large number of passages relating to the actions of future Babi kings that do not contain the word Jihad. On the other hand he has chosen to interpret a passage that prohibits the killing of any person as referring to believers only and therefore not relevant [35]. Similarly, Hatcher and Afnan have chosen most of their quotations from Nabil's Narrative and have more or less ignored other sources for Babi history thus demonstrating selectivity, which MacEoin considers to be because Nabil's Narrative is an example of a Baha'i tendency "to bowdlerize and re-write the events of Babi history in a manner conformable to later Baha'i attitudes and expectations. [36]."

33. "Holy War", p. 103-6, 111-112, 115, 121; "Fundamentalism", p. 70

34. "Scholarship", p. 40-46.

35. An interpretation not supported by Prof. Browne - see note 19 above.

36. "Fundamentalism", p. 64.

These two areas of disagreement (failure to agree on the facts that need explaining and failure to agree on the data admissible as evidence) account for the mutual accusations that the other side has been selective in their use of the historical data and of the textual material. Hatcher and Afnan assert that MacEoin has been "highly selective in the material that he quotes from the Bab [37]." MacEoin reciprocates the allegation and charges that Hatcher and Afnan "have done serious damage to the textual evidence" [38]. And yet both parties in establishing their case have used quotations from the writings of the Bab and the relevant contemporary histories. Neither side has accused the other of actually forging or misquoting the passages that they have brought forward as evidence. The only accusation is that of having been selective and of having quoted out of context.

If the two sides are seeking to explain different facts and are willing to admit different items of data as evidence, it is not surprising that each views the others material as being selective. A moment's reflection will show that both sides have of course been selective in the materials that they present. Without turning their papers into lengthy books, neither side could possibly analyse all of the quotations from the writings of the Bab, from the writings of his disciples and enemies, and from the various histories written, that have relevance to the theme. Therefore both sides must select which quotations they will include and which quotations they will exclude. And one can be certain that the passages selected will be the ones that relate to those facts that the writer has chosen to explain and will, of course, tend to prove them. But the selection of those passages will be incomprehensible to the other side which is trying to prove a different point and thus appears to be selective and out of context.

3. What kinds of laws of causation will be accepted? The third area of fundamental disagreement between the two sides is over the question of what kinds of laws of causation will be acceptable, what processes are perceived to be at work in history. MacEoin, having reviewed the historical data, states that there is no indication that the Babis ever declared an offensive ijihad [39]. Both sides are agreed on this [40]. However, MacEoin then goes on to postulate that, nevertheless, ijihad played what might be called a psychological role in creating a mental paradigm for the actions of the Babis which he terms a "defensive ijihad" [41]. Hatcher and Afnan reject this "defensive ijihad" as a causative paradigm for the Babi upheavals. They claim that there is in effect nothing in this concept that is any different from their

37. Afnan and Hatcher, "Scholarship" p. 32

38. MacEoin, "Fundamentalism", p. 71.

39. "Holy War", pp. 120-121.

40. "Scholarship", pp. 32-3, 44.

41. "Scholarship", pp. 117, 120-121; "Fundamentalism", pp. 69-71.

original position: that the Babis were simply seeking to defend themselves against aggression.

At one point, Hatcher and Afnan described the fact that the Bab confirmed the law of jiḥād but rendered it ineffective by never issuing a call for it, as an intermediate stage between the Islamic injunction to wage jiḥād and Baha'u'llah's later prohibition of this [42]. MacEoin rejects this writing: "to make later events the effective cause of earlier ones may be acceptable theology, but it is very bad history" [43].

4. When has a theory explained the facts. Finally, the two sides disagree on the question of whether a given theory has explained the facts or not. Hatcher and Afnan do not accept that MacEoin has proved his thesis about jiḥād as a valid paradigm for considering the Babi upheavals [44]. While MacEoin dismisses the Hatcher and Afnan material as "apologetics" [45].

In summary then, the two sides disagree over the following four fundamental issues in the debate:

1. What are the facts that need explaining?
2. What data is admissible as evidence?
3. What laws of causation will be allowable as valid?
4. When can it be said that a given theory has explained the facts?

Although I have above used the word disagreement to describe the difference between the two sides, it would be more accurate to say that the two sides are talking at cross-purposes. They cannot agree about the picture that they are describing of the Babi upheavals because they are in fact looking at two different pictures. They cannot agree on the answers because they are not even agreed about the questions.

It is not therefore suprising that the discussion breaks down with a sense of exasperation on both sides and with mutual recriminations. MacEoin writes of Hatcher and Afnan's presentation as "entirely unscholarly", "tendentious", "absurd", "sweeping generalisations" and even "fatuous" [46]. Hatcher and Afnan protest that MacEoin has misrepresented their arguments and sought to "divert attention from

42. "Scholarship", p. 41

43. "Fundamentalism", p. 77

44. "Scholarship", pp. 31-34

45. "Fundamentalism", p. 77.

46. "Fundamentalism", pp. 73, 75, 76, 77.

substantive issues" [47].

Ultimately then it would appear that we are prisoners of these various paradigms. For by what criterion can we choose between the conflicting paradigms? What absolute external criterion can be found that would act as a standard and resolve the issue? For surely the choosing of such an external criterion would itself be subject to the internal biases of the chooser. And it is no use appealing to the facts (in this case the events of the upheavals and the writings of the Bab), for each paradigm does precisely that. Therefore if we choose to favour one paradigm over another, this is a reflection on the biases existing within ourselves and has no absolute significance.

Such a conclusion may indeed be painful to those academics who, brought up on the certainties of the western academic tradition of empiricism and logical positivism, feel that they ought to be possible to select between these different paradigms on the basis of a critical analysis of the empirical evidence. What approach works best? What approach gives the best insight? What approach explains more of the data? Part of the attraction of this approach is the fact that it appears to be a close approximation to the scientific method of approach. Since science has been so successful at uncovering the natural world, it is felt that historians will achieve equally good results by following a "scientific" methodology. But there a number of problems with this line of thinking:

1. The empiricist paradigm pictures the historian as surveying the facts of history and then picking out those facts that are relevant to the particular topic that he or she is writing about and from this exercise producing a thesis that best fits the facts or explains most of the facts. It is a necessary part of the empiricist tradition that the historian and the historical facts be kept separate from each other - i.e. Cartesian dualism, the notion that the same facts are available to all and are therefore "pure" in the sense that they are not contaminated by subjectivity or value judgements.

The problem arises over the question of whether there are any such things as "pure" historical facts. Some may argue along the lines that surely the fact that the Shaykh Tabarsi Episode occurred in 1848-1849 is a "pure historical fact" that all are agreed about. But this is to confuse a "historical fact" with a "chronicler's fact". The chronicler is concerned with establishing dates and places for events. The historian is concerned with interpreting the events in terms of causal explanations. Once one goes from the realm of the "chronicler's fact" into the realm of the "historian's fact" then it is doubtful whether there is any longer any such thing as a "pure historical fact". We have seen above how, from the vast range of material available, those writing in one paradigm will "see" one set of facts while others will "see" other facts. The question of the class status of the individual's involved will be a fact that a Marxist will consider

47. "Note", p. 188 and passim.

central to the issue. A non-Marxist may not even mention the matter let alone consider it of any importance. Indeed even in the case of non-Marxist historians, we may raise the question as to whether, had it not been for Marx, the interest of the present generation of historians for economic factors in history would exist - would these economic facts of history not have remained "unseen"?

Another example may illuminate the matter better. The present writer has written a paper on the social basis of the Babi upheavals [48]. In that paper, I devoted a section to the role of women in the Babi movement. I would maintain that, if this paper had been written thirty years ago by another historian, this section would not have been present in this paper. That putative historian of thirty years ago would have had access to the same materials as I had, but the influence of thirty years of the feminist movement on the mind of the present writer has meant that I "saw" these facts while our putative historian of thirty years ago would not have "seen" them even though he was looking at the same material. It is in this sense that there are no "pure historical facts" all facts are apprehended by a particular individual with a particular cultural and historical background and this background influences which facts he or she "sees" and which are not "seen" [49].

2. In the field of history, we unfortunately return to the nagging problems of the subjective nature of the subject that we are dealing with. By what criteria are we to judge what is the "best insight"? How are we even going to decide which facts need explaining? On what criteria are some data going to be regarded as admissible evidence and some as not admissible? What kinds of laws of causation will be acceptable? How do we determine whether a given theory has indeed explained the data? These questions can to a large extent be answered in the sciences, where there is a broad consensus on the question of methodology. But how can we proceed in history where there is no consensus on the above questions of methodology and where the facts are very pliable and will fit a number of different explanations as seen above.

3. In science we can set up hypotheses and then test them by controlled experiments. In history we have no ability to set up experiments. It is mainly data from such experiments that forms acceptable evidence in favour of one theory over another.

4. Science itself has come full circle and now acknowledges the fact

48. International Journal of Middle East Studies, vol. 15 (1983), pp. 157-183

49. Exactly the same process of paradigm shift has occurred in scientific history. After Copernicus, although all scientists were still looking at the same sky, all of a sudden they "saw" all sorts of things that had not been seen before. On this matter, see T. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Chicago, 1962.

that the pursuit of a "pure truth" is illusory and that the truth obtained is relative to one's methodology. This conclusion that science has come to can in historical terms be restated as saying that the interpretation given and the conclusion arrived at depends on the paradigm used.

Although we tend to think of academic research in terms of the scholar pursuing a path to the truth but rather, it would appear that it is more accurate to think in terms of each person having an image of the truth that then determines which path he or she pursues.

SPECIFIC CONCLUSIONS

Where then does all of this leave the history of the Babi upheavals? I would venture the following observations:

1. Firstly, it would appear that there is no sense in which there can be said to be a "true" or "correct" interpretation of the events of the Babi upheavals. Each paradigm reveals some aspects of the truth and conceals others. No paradigm or methodology has an exclusive or perhaps even a priority claim to "truth". Each should be examined for what truth it contains.

2. Secondly, it is all too easy for the historian to sit down and write sweeping generalisations such as "The Babis thought such-and-such" or "The ulama considered such-and-such" as though all of the Babis or the ulama acted as a unit and all had the same motivations and the same concerns. Whereas it is probable that this was far from being the case. Different individual Babis may have been acting within completely different paradigms - some may indeed have seen their actions as ijihad as MacEoin suggests while others may have been acting purely in self-defence and may have had no insurrectionary or aggressive intent as Hatcher and Afnan suggest. Indeed, the same individual may even have been working within different paradigms at different times.

3. Furthermore, individuals usually act in accordance with what appears to them the right thing to do at the time ("right" could of course be in terms of "morally right" or "financially beneficial" etc.). Explanations such as "the waging of ijihad" are rationalizations of these actions made to justify one's actions to others either before or after carrying them out. To an Iranian born and brought up in a tradition in which the highest emotional charge is given to the story of the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn, it may have felt right to express one's convictions in a manner leading to martyrdom and sacrifice. Alternatively, it may have felt right to implement the Qur'anic injunctions to ijihad. But it seems probable that, when they acted as they did, most Babis did not have in mind any elaborated logical reasons for their actions but rather they felt that it was the "right" thing to do, they were being true to their faith as they saw it. To try to superimpose rational schemata such as the ijihad theory or other paradigms onto this situation may be satisfying intellectually but is in fact a rather false and forced a posteriori procedure.

4. The most useful analysis of the Babi upheavals will take into account all of the above paradigms showing how each paradigm illuminates certain aspects of the events but also showing that no paradigm accounts for all the facts. Even apparently-conflicting paradigms can be useful for analysing the empirical data. But it must be realised that such an approach may become very complex and convoluted.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

This is not of course a new debate. Ever since the nineteenth century, historians and philosophers of history have debated these issues. W.H. Walsh in his book An Introduction to the Philosophy of History [50] states: "The interpretations of one historian are indignantly repudiated by another and how to reconcile them is not apparent, since the disputes are not merely technical (over the correct interpretation of evidence), but rather depend on ultimate preconceptions which in this case are emphatically not universally shared (p. 97)."

In general, as a result of the above analysis, we can say that the scholar is left with one of two possible courses of action in attempting to analyse the material relating to a particular historical event.

1) He or she may try to follow all the threads of all of the different viewpoints available for analysing the event - to explain the event in terms of every available paradigm. But this may lead to a mind-boggling complex process and would require a book to be written about even the most trivial episode. Also the resulting loss of clarity will diminish the usefulness of the exercise.

2) Alternatively, the writer may commit themselves to one particular paradigm and write from just that viewpoint. Although this would inevitably give a certain narrowness of vision, at least the argument can be carried further and with greater clarity.

What we really appear to be saying is, at the most general level, that thought can never occur in an ideational vacuum. All human thought and activity is grounded in values. One cannot begin to think about a question without having a starting point for one's thought and a certain direction or pathway to follow in the process of thinking. But this starting point and pathway of thought to a large extent pre-determine the outcome of the process of thinking. Every individual, whether following a particular discipline of thought or not, has pre-set, pre-figured guiding images and unproven assumptions - a mythology if one follows the terminology of depth psychology. And so the writing of history inevitably brings into play an ideological component from the writer's mind. This component may or may not be a conscious position adopted by the writer. Indeed in most cases, the

50. 3rd ed, London: Hutchison, 1967.

adoption of a paradigm occurs at a pre-conceptual, pre-critical level. It is the starting point for the writing of a history. It is the direction from which the writer approaches the subject and thus prefigures everything that flows therefrom.

As E.H. Carr said in his Trevelyan lectures, What is History?: "Study the historian before you study [his] facts... When you read a work of history, always listen out for the buzzing [of bees in the bonnet]. If you detect none, either you are tone deaf or your historian is a dull dog [51]"

These different paradigms are due to the different mind-sets of their authors. It is impossible to say that one is the Truth and the others are false because there is no Absolute Truth to act as the criterion. The historian is like someone who is trying to walk across a narrow bridge. On the one side we are in danger of falling into the comfortable assumption that we have access to "pure facts" and can give objective judgements about them, on the other side we are in danger of coming to the nihilistic conclusion that all history is subjective and that therefore one can write whatever one wants and it is just as acceptable as anything else is because there are no objective or absolute criteria by which to judge these matters. Somehow we have to steer a course between these two sides of the narrow bridge without any firm guidance.

Such conclusions are uncomfortable for some who prefer firmer more certain conclusions but I would maintain that they are more in keeping with the realities of life. They mirror, in a way, a whole host of other areas of life where we are similarly uncertain and can come to no firm conclusions. For example, none of us can be sure with regard to ourselves how much of us is heredity and how much is the results of the conditioning of our upbringing. Nor can we be sure when we make a decision about something, how much it is our own free-will and how much the result of our conditioning and of unconscious forces acting on us. Are we dependent or independent of our environment? I would maintain that the problems of writing history fall into a similar category of things that we can never be sure of. The most that can be hoped for is to make this a conscious rather than an unconscious process.

POST-SCRIPT

It will not have escaped the reader that if the general thesis of this paper is correct, i.e. that all conceptualisation and writing of history is based on an ideational paradigm that pre-figures the structure of the discourse, then this paper is also written within a paradigm. Since I have urged that at the very least we can strive to make this a conscious rather than an unconscious process, I should make an attempt to analyse the structure of this paper. It is written in a structuralist, relativist mode or paradigm. Relativism has been much criticised by many academics as leading to conceptual anarchy,

51. What is History?, 2nd ed., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, p. 23

vacuousness and skepticism. I hope I have show that rather than these things, in the specific case under study, the Babi upheavals in Iran, by being sensitive to the variety paradigms through which the events can be viewed, a moderate degree of relativism can lead to a greater understanding of what occured (in comparision to adopting a single paradigm).