

THE LOS ANGELES BAHAI HISTORY CONFERENCE

5TH - 7TH AUGUST, 1983

Held at the University of California, Los Angeles under the sponsorship of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Los Angeles and the Baha'i Club of UCLA.

An Informal Report by Peter Smith.*

Primarily designed as a forum at which Baha'i historians could present and discuss their research, the Los Angeles Baha'i History Conference, also provided an opportunity for a wider circle of American Baha'is to encounter and question the work of academic historians of the Baha'i Faith. Overall, this latter objective did not detract from the more academic purposes of the conference. About fifty persons were in attendance.

The conference itself was divided into four panel presentation and discussion periods, three concerned with substantive issues in Babi-Baha'i history in, respectively, the Middle East, the West, and the Third World, and one concerned with methodology. The conference was opened by Prof. Amin Banani of UCLA.

Outlining the purposes of the conference, Prof. Banani introduced some of the concepts of historical thinking to the non-historians present, in particular, expressing the view that there were no criteria by which "Baha'i history" could be distinguished from general history or "Baha'i historians" from any other historians. History is a multi-faceted and developing discipline in which no single approach can claim a monopoly on truth. Ultimately, all historians purport to be expressing what they perceive to be "the truth" of the historical situations which they study, and they are all similarly constrained by the inevitability of their own subjectivity.

* Where copies of papers were available (Momen (1), Stiles (3), Smith (6), Ewalt (7), I have based my summaries on those, for the rest I have had to rely on my notes. I have not reported on the lengthy discussion periods which followed each presentation.

Beyond recognition of the individual subject's spiritual dignity, the historian who was a Baha'i was bound by the same standards of scholarly accuracy and dispassionate enquiry as his non-Baha'i colleague. To theologize history into dogma was not the task of the historian and could form no part of his labours.

I. THE MIDDLE EAST PANEL

Moojan Momen being unable to attend, his paper "The Baha'i influence on the reform movements of the Islamic world in the 1860s and 1870s" was presented on his behalf.

Noting the great surge of interest in the notion of political and social "reform" amongst Middle Eastern writers during the 1870s and 1880s, Dr. Momen sought to relate Abdu'l-Baha's Risali-yi-Madaniyyih to these general currents of thought. Some possible basis for mutual influence was identified, for, although often limited in scope, there were contacts at various times between the Baha'i leaders and such reformers as Afghani, Malkam Khan, Mushiru'd-Dawlih, Mihdat Pasha, Muhammad Abduh and Safvet Pasha. More generally, the Risalih was at first circulated in Iran anonymously and may thus have attracted a readership well beyond the Baha'i community. In the absence of more definite evidence such issues of influence remained problematic, however.

What was more readily discernible was the distinct difference in emphasis given by Abdu'l-Baha as compared with the other reformist thinkers. Advancing many of the same general principles of legal, political and economic change as the other thinkers, Abdu'l-Baha diverged from them in the importance attached to mass education (but c.f. Tahṭawi); to constitutional democracy -- as opposed to the "enlightened despotism" favoured by many of the reformers; to the codification of legal procedure; and to religion as a means of bringing about a mass reformation in attitudes without which all institutional reforms would be unsuccessful.

Juan Cole (UCLA) "The attack on Karbala of 1843".

Drawing upon British diplomatic sources, Shaykhi references, and

letters from the Iraqi ulama to their Indian coreligionists, Mr. Cole presented a detailed account of the events leading up to the Ottoman occupation of the Shi'i holy city of Karbala in 1843, during which events the Shaykhi leader Sayyid Kazim Rashti was a prominent participant. Forced by Usuli enmity into political isolation, Rashti had become allied to the Arab faction of the local "mobsters" (i.e. lutis) who dominated the town. This political influence notwithstanding, Rashti had been unable to convince his fellow townsmen to submit to the Ottomans. The resultant blood bath and deliberate sacrilege against the Shi'i shrines carried out by the Ottomans may well have generated or reinforced the millenarian expectations which formed such an important theme in the early rise of Babism from 1844.

Susan Stiles (Arizona), "The Conversion of Religious Minorities to the Baha'i Faith in Iran: Some Preliminary Observations".

During the period 1877 - 1921, significant numbers of Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians converted to Baha'i. According to Ms. Stiles, this development was "essential to the emergence of the Baha'i Faith as an independent religion possessing a distinct identity apart from Islam". Although already possessing a distinct identity from the environing Shi'ism, the membership and ideational paradigms of the Baha'i Faith remained Islamic even after Baha'u'llah had inculcated the attitude of tolerance towards non-Muslims and provided the basis for Baha'i missionary outreach amongst these minorities. Actual conversions had to occur before any significant change was to come about. Rejecting existing conversion theories, devised in relation to conversions of Iranian Jews, Stiles argued that Jewish and Zoroastrian conversions should be seen in terms of the particular self-images generated by their relationship to the wider Iranian society. The ignorance and backwardness of their own clergy, together with the kindness and tolerance of Baha'i missionaries may well have influenced conversions, but failed to win any comparable response amongst the Iranian Christians. What distinguished the non-converting Christians was their existing sense of superiority to the Muslim majority, their relative freedom and their nationalist and western self-identities. By contrast, the Jews and

Zoroastrians shared the images of themselves generated by the Shi'is who dominated and oppressed them. Moreover, they identified themselves as Iranians and empathized with the Shi'i paradigm of persecuted sanctity. Combining an appeal to Persian identity (and the use of the Persian language) with the example of its own martyrs, Baha'i proved attractive to those who were no longer satisfied with their existing religions but were unwilling to convert to the alien religion of Christianity: Baha'i was less culturally dissonant. ("If Baha'u'llah was not more Jewish than Christ, he was at least more Persian"). Such alienation from their own religious traditions was most pronounced amongst the socially upwardly mobile members of the Jewish and Zoroastrian communities who constituted such a prominent element amongst the new Baha'i converts.

Diane Taherzadeh, "The leadership role of Bahiyyih Khanum".

Ms. Taherzadeh emphasized the importance of the role played by Bahiyyih Khanum in the stressful transitions in Baha'i leadership in 1892 and 1921 - 1924. Thus, in 1892, her support helped ease the stresses of opposition to Abdu'l-Baha's accession to headship of the Faith, whilst in the early twenties her own effective leadership of the Faith provided stability during the several years in which Shoghi Effendi came to terms with the role of Guardian so unexpectedly thrust upon him. During this period of her own effective leadership, Bahiyyih Khanum sought to implement the policies already established by her brother and later by her grand-nephew. Although making no innovations in policy, she made strong responses to the various situations which arose (such as the activities of the Muhammad Aliites in Palestine and America), and, despite the tendency of many American Baha'i women to elevate her to a religious station comparable with those of Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha, firmly refused to establish her own power, instead leading the Baha'is to adherence to Shoghi Effendi.

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II. BAHAI'S OF THE WEST PANEL

Richard Hollinger (UCLA), "Ibrahim Kheiralla and The American Baha'i Community".

From his study of recently unearthed archival sources Mr. Hollinger presented a detailed account of Kheiralla's early leadership of the American Baha'i Community. In contrast to earlier accounts (my own included), Hollinger stressed the derivative nature of many of Kheiralla's teachings, both from his own teacher and fellow practitioner of the occult sciences, Abdu'l-Karim Tihrani, and from the psychic healing/New Thought circles from which he drew his following in America. Thus, his distinctive classes and teachings were developed not just by Kheiralla, but by his leading converts, such as Chase, Miller, McNutt, and the Getsingers. This collaboration eased the "Americanization" of the teachings, whilst the effectiveness of propagandists such as Dealy and Lane greatly aided the rapid expansion of the movement. Despite his attempts to impose his own authority on the fledgling movement, Kheiralla felt himself increasingly challenged by the subordinate teachers even prior to the first pilgrimage to Abdu'l-Baha in 1898 - 99. Again, after his return, Kheiralla had already begun to alienate members of the Chicago community from himself by his innuendoes against Abdu'l-Baha prior to the formal schism which followed his public announcement in support of Muhammad Ali. Believing Kheiralla to be the reincarnation of St. Peter, some American Baha'is expected Kheiralla's return to the community to occur only after he had denied Abdu'l-Baha three times. Although Kheiralla was highly successful in attracting Americans to his teachings, the transient nature of much of the resultant Baha'i membership also needed to be stressed.

Peter Smith (Lancaster), "Emergence from the Cultic Milieu: The Baha'i Movement in America, 1894 - 1936".

Outlining two variant types of attitude towards religious authority, Dr. Smith described the developing role of such attitudes in the early American Baha'i Community. The initial

Baha'i expansion in the West was concentrated in the cultic milieu of the metaphysical movements, the resultant converts retaining a strongly "cultic" attitude towards authority, in that the individual adherent rather than any institution or group was regarded as authoritative. Although modified by the new Baha'is' devotion to Abdu'l-Baha, this attitude was more or less prevalent in the community until at least 1917, Abdu'l-Baha's own permissive style of leadership and the constraints imposed by his geographical isolation facilitating its continuance. The prevalence of this attitude disfavoured the development of any fixed doctrine or organization within the community, a situation which was resented by those new Baha'is with a more "sectarian" attitude towards authority. Emphasizing the need for structure and an authoritative definition of membership and belief, these more "sectarian" Baha'is readily dominated the various local and national administrative bodies which came into being from 1909 onwards. In 1917, cut off from Abdu'l-Baha by the war, the most determined advocates of structure embarked on what was effectively a crusade against deviation from what they perceived as orthodox attitudes towards authority and belief. Although limited in their success by Abdu'l-Baha's attempts at reconciliation after the war, their venture marked a decisive change in the balance between the two attitudes within the community. Henceforth, "sectarian" authority was to become dominant, a change reinforced by Shoghi Effendi's emphasis on Baha'i administration. After a period of apathy and passive resistance to this growing dominance during the twenties, changes in community membership and attitudes stabilized the new orthodoxy by the mid-1930s. Against this emerging orthodoxy, the overt attacks mounted by Dyar, White and Sohrab were remarkably ineffective. Although the more "sectarian" community lacked access to the fertile and volatile conversion field of the cultic milieu, it possessed far greater stability, and provided a ready basis for a renewed (but slower) expansion from the 1930s onwards.

Don Ewalt, Jr., "Abdu'l-Baha's Station During the Guardian's Ministry".

As Shoghi Effendi had both read and given approval to the first

(1923) edition of Esslemont's "Baha'u'llah and the New Era", and had later encouraged the use of that book as a basic Baha'i text, Mr. Ewalt suggested that it was reasonable to suppose that it had initially possessed some quasi-authoritative status amongst the Baha'is. If this was so, then a clear development in Shoghi Effendi's thinking concerning Abdu'l-Baha's religious station could be discerned. Thus, whilst the 1923 New Era text explicitly rejected the early American Baha'i belief in Abdu'l-Baha's Christhood, and proposed that some "mystic unity" existed between Abdu'l-Baha and Baha'u'llah (pp. 67 - 69), Shoghi Effendi, in turn, later (1934) firmly rejected the "mystic unity" concept. The various theological implications of this development were also discussed, and the contemporary absence of any authoritative source of Baha'i doctrinal definition noted.

A paper by Dr. John Paul Vader, "Professor August Forel in Defence of the Persecuted Persian Baha'is, 1925 - 1927" was circulated, but in Dr. Vader's absence was not presented.

III. THIRD WORLD PANEL

William Garlington (formerly of the Australian National University), "The Baha'is of India".

Dr. Garlington presented an overview of his work on the Baha'is of India, detailing the early penetration of the Faith amongst a small Iranian-oriented minority; its subsequent Indianization and administrative consolidation (during the inter-war period); the undertaking of systematic plans of expansion and consolidation (c.1940 - c.1961); and the upsurge of mass conversions amongst rural Hindus from 1961 onwards. In investigating the nature of these conversions various issues presented themselves: cultural adaptation as demonstrated in the Indianization of Baha'i language and symbols (and the failure to so indianize); the meaning of these conversions for the converts themselves -- especially as no radical changes in patterns of behaviour as regards caste boundaries occurred; and the "compartmentalization" of meaning and practice by these converts by which "Baha'i" and "non-Baha'i" contexts were carefully distinguished and the

appropriate patterns of behaviour adopted (e.g. inter-caste commensality and non-commensality). Similarities were noted between the compartmentalization of Baha'i practice and that associated with bhaktic sects, and between the Baha'i conversions amongst scheduled castes and the modern neo-Buddhist conversions. Sociologically, it was stressed that there was a need to abandon the concept of a fixed and universal "Baha'i Faith", there were rather a multitude of variant and particularistic Baha'i communities.

Peter Smith, "The Baha'i Movement in the Third World".

In a second, ad hoc presentation, Smith described the development of the Babi and Baha'i religions in terms of a series of "cultural breakthroughs" by which the movement expanded successively beyond the limits of its cultural milieu, that is, from Shaykhism to Iranian Shi'ism in general, to other Middle Eastern religious communities, to the West, to Western-oriented enclaves throughout the world, and to the Third World. Of the three main geo-historical areas of this growth, two -- the Middle East, and the West -- were at present extremely restricted in their potential for further Baha'i expansion, the first through the general hostility of its wider environment, the second through the pervasive process of "secularization" which tended to erode all but the most fundamentalist forms of belief. Only the "Third World" -- including such similar constituencies as the rural blacks of the southern United States -- showed the present potential for rapid growth; such growth being amply reflected in the world distribution of Baha'i Assemblies and localities. The expansion of Baha'i in these Third World areas displayed a strong uniformity of pattern, with mass teaching having particular effect amongst culturally marginal groups such as peasants and tribal minorities and in areas which lacked strongly established religious institutions. Although many of these new Baha'is were poor and illiterate, there was insufficient evidence to suggest that poverty as such was a factor underlying conversion, indeed, the importance of patronage relations with higher status converts was sometimes noted, and, more generally the middle class and well-educated

converts often provided much of the dynamic^{for}/expansion. Successful integration of the rural converts was impeded by the difficulties of resocializing remote and illiterate populations and by the occurrence of conversions to more than one religious movement at a time. The importance of linguistic and cultural translation and of the establishment of a rural institutional infrastructure was stressed. The growing politicization of the peasantry and the increasing totalitarianism of many Third World regimes were indicated as major potential impediments to future Baha'i growth.

Anthony Lee (UCLA), "The Establishment of the Baha'i Faith in West Africa".

In his case study of early Baha'i expansion in West Africa in the 1950s, Mr. Lee contrasted the evident success of Baha'i missionary endeavour in other parts of Africa with the low rates of conversion achieved in West Africa. The prime reason for this lack of success appeared to be the inflexibility of the American pioneers involved, in their pursuit of highly legalistic goals. Thus, all stress was on Assembly formation rather than on the building of Baha'i communities, and all meetings were dominated by legalistic and administrative considerations rather than more explicit religious or spiritual matters. Where explicitly religious concerns were presented by African Baha'is, the American administrators typically failed to respond. Consequently, in areas of West Africa which were dominated by American pioneers, Baha'i growth was extremely limited, those successes which did come being in areas where the pioneers had lost control. Those Africans who converted tended to be mission educated and often unemployed "marginal men" and were commonly alien migrants from other parts of West Africa who were uncommitted to local politics. Subsequent to their conversion many of these men "made good", and several migrated to America or Europe. The historical records at present available reflected almost entirely the views of the pioneers rather than of the indigenous believers.

In his absence, the projected paper by Don Addison on "Enoch Olinga in West Africa, 1953 - 1963" was not presented.

IV. METHODOLOGY PANEL

Explicitly theological in its concerns, the final panel of the Conference addressed questions related to the place of modern academic historiography within the Baha'i community. After two short formal presentations, a lengthy discussion ensued which raised many of the issues already familiar to British Baha'is concerned with academic research.

David Piff

The writing of history is constantly changing. Hitherto Baha'i historiography has been primarily inspirational or propagandistic. The present emergence of an alternative academic historiography has been experienced as threatening by many "fundamentalist" Baha'is. Such apprehension was not absolutely necessary in that a healthy historical revisionism did not necessarily clash with religious commitment. At the same time, academic Baha'i historians would undoubtedly be concerned with moral questions relating to the dignity of their subjects and their world-mindedness. Two ideal typical Baha'i approaches to history were outlined:

	"A" (Theologically grounded)	"B"	"C" (Academically grounded)
World View	Scriptural or institutional absolutism	?	Historical relativism
Methodology	Restate scripture	?	Agnostic
Caricature	"Fundamentalists"	?	"Reductionists"
Tendency	To censor "C"	?	To correct "A"

Anthony Lee

"Fundamentalist" Baha'i objections to the academic approach to history were based on misconceptions relating to what history was. There could be no unique "Baha'i approach" to history, which

transcended the possibilities and limitations of historiography. Academics did not (as was popularly supposed) reject values when they wrote history, rather they both recognized the integral and legitimate nature of such values in their writing and sought to observe the basic "rules of the game" with regard to the honest study of their sources. They were not impelled to abandon belief or subscribe to methodological agnosticism. There was no "Baha'i methodology" in history. Values do not admit to historical proof or verification. The actual workings of any divine plan can not be discerned by the historian in his study of the historical record of human actions. There was no need to perceive the Baha'i writings in "fundamentalist" terms. As the central figures of the Baha'i Faith themselves pointed out, revelation and authoritative interpretation often made use of metaphor, contained different levels of meaning and was adapted to the limited understanding of those addressed. The authorised interpreters of the Faith were not claimed to be infallible in matters relating to history or science. Creative imagination rather than "fundamentalist" rejection of academe or "reductionist" rejection of the Faith was the necessary response to the contradictions thrown up by these various approaches.