Babi Movement

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Bábí Movement

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1. The Babi movement

Babism was a 13/19th-century messianic movement in Iran and Iraq under the overall charismatic leadership of Sayyed ?Ali-Mohammad Širazi, the Bab (1235/1819-1266/1850). Babism was the only significant millenarian movement in Shi?ite Islam during the 13th/19th century and is of particular interest in that, unlike other Islamic messianic movements of approximately the same period, it involved, in its later stages, a wholesale break with Islam and an attempt to establish a new religious system. Although the Babi movement as such was rapidly crushed and rendered politically and religiously insignificant, the impetus towards the proclamation of a post-Islamic revelation was continued in Bahaism which began as a Babi sect in competition with that of the Azali Babism during the 1860s. The relative success of Bahaism inside Iran (where it constitutes the largest religious minority) and in numerous other countries, where it claims the status of an independent religion, gives renewed significance to its Babi origins; indeed, Babi history and doctrine live on, albeit in a much revised form, in the literature and self-image of the modern Bahais.

The present article concerns itself with Babism up to about 1853, when the leadership of the sect moved from Iran to Iraq and internal developments began which led to the Bahai/Azali split. For our purposes, Babism may be divided into two main periods: 1) from 1250/1844 to 1264/1848, when the Bab claimed to be the gate preparing the way for the return of the Hidden Imam and the movement around him was characterized by intense Islamic piety and observance of the Šari?a or Islamic law; and 2) from 1264/1848 to 1269/1853, beginning with the Bab’s claim to be the Imam in person and the abrogation of the Islamic Šari?a, through his assumption of the role of an independent theophany and his promulgation of a new religious law, to his execution in Tabriz, the collapse of the leadership of the movement, the proliferation of authority claims, and the dispersal of a hard core of the sect to Baghdad. This second period also witnessed the outbreak of clashes between Babis and state in

several parts of Iran and the physical defeat of the movement as a challenge to the religio-political system.

1. 1260-64/1844-48. At its inception, Babism was an intense expression of certain radical tendencies in the Shaikhi school of Shi?ism which had come to the fore during the leadership of Sayyed Kazem Rašti. During the seventeen years (1242-59/1826-44) that he acted as head of the school from its center in Karbala?, Rašti stressed the essential orthodoxy of Shaikhi belief as originally expounded by the founder, Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa?i (d. 1753/1826), while teaching an elitist doctrine of the Shaikh as the morawwej or promoter of Islam in a new cycle of inward truth (baten) following 1200 years of outward teaching (zaher). Rašti's death on 11 Du'l-hejja 1259/1 January 1854 precipitated a serious internal crisis in the movement, bringing to the surface many concealed tensions, disagreements, rivalries, and ambitions within the Shaikhi community. His failure to appoint a clear successor and the absence of an agreed system for the selection of one led, inevitably, to much fragmentation, out of which two major schools emerged: that around Hajj Molla Mohammad-Karim Khan Kermani (1225/1810-1288/1871) and another around Sayyed ?Ali-Mohammad Širazi. These two factions expressed diametrically opposed tendencies within the Shaikhism of the period, the first wishing to preserve the name and identity of the school, emphasizing the continuing role of the Prophet and the imams and seeking accommodation with the Shi?ite majority by stressing its total adherence to Twelver Shi?ite orthodoxy and playing down the more unorthodox aspects of Shaikhi teaching; the second also regarding itself as wholly orthodox but adopting the name Babiya and moving away from the outward practice of Islam towards a concentration on the expression of its inner realities and, ultimately, a new revelation of divine truth. It was some time, however, before this divergence of tendencies became quite clear and, in the earliest period, emphasis must be placed less on specific doctrinal views and more on claims to charismatic authority within the wider context of Shi?ism as a whole. (For a detailed study of the role of charisma in early Shaikhism and Babism see MacEoin, From Shaykhism to Babism.)

There is evidence that a section of the Shaikhi community at this period regarded Ahsa?i and Rašti as "gates" (baban) of the imam, presumably fulfilling functions similar to those of the four abwab (plur. of bab "gate") traditionally regarded as channels of communication with the Hidden Imam during his "lesser occultation" (see Bab) and possibly presaging the return of the imam himself. The development of a Babiya school within Shaikhism may be regarded as having begun even before the announcement by Sayyed ?Ali-Mohammad of his own claim to be the bab. Various statements attributed to Rašti in the period just before his death suggest that chiliastic motifs were present in his teaching, and there is evidence that some of his followers expected the imminent appearance of an "affair" or "cause" (amr) somehow linked to the advent of the imam. It seems to have been a group of those Shaikhis most animated by messianic expectations who chose, in early Safar, 1260/late February, 1844, to engage in prayerful withdrawal (e?tekaf) in the main mosque of Kufa, and it was from this group

that the majority of the Bab's earliest disciples emerged.

Read the rest of this article, including "2: Babi executions and uprisings," online at www.iranicaonline.org/articles/babism-index.

The first to enter e?tekaf was Molla Mohammad-Hosayn Bošru?i (q.v.), a young Shaikhi ?alem or mulla who had only recently returned to Iraq from a lengthy period in Iran and who was himself regarded by a section of the school as a potential successor to Rašti. Leaving Kufa with a brother and cousin on or just after 12 Rabi? I 1260/1 April 1844, Bošru?i set out for Kerman, where he planned to consult with Mohammad Karim Khan (for references see MacEoin, "From Shaykhism," p. 144). En route he passed through Shiraz where he renewed an earlier acquaintance with Sayyed ?Ali-Mohammad Širazi, a young merchant who had studied briefly with Rašti in Karbala? a few years before and who had attracted some attention from a number of Shaikhis at the ?atabat (the Shi?ite holy shrines and cities in Iraq; q.v.) at that time. In recent months, Sayyed ?Ali-Mohammad had undergone a religious crisis culminating in at least two visions indicating a high spiritual station for himself. He had also begun the composition of works of a religious nature, including a commentary of sorts on the Koranic chapter (sura) al-Baqara. After some weeks, during which Bošru?i seems to have read at least a part of these writings, on 5 Jomada I/22 May, Sayyed ?Ali-Mohammad announced to him that he was the successor to Rašti and the bab of the Hidden Imam. Some time after this, a second group of Shaikhis arrived in Shiraz from Karbala?. Thirteen of these (according to one version, the entire group numbered thirteen) met the Bab through Bošru?i and were converted, together with Bošru?i's brother and cousin (Zarandi, Dawn-Breakers, pp. 69-70, 80-81). Among this second group was a brother-in-law of Fatema Kanom Baragani Qazvini (better known as Qorrat-al-?Ayn and Janab-e Tahera; q.v.), a woman who had already won a reputation as an outstanding and radical Shaikhi cleric while herself resident in Karbala?. Although then in Qazvin, she was enrolled by the Bab in the group of his first disciples, whose number was brought to eighteen by the late arrival of Molla Mohammad-?Ali Barforuši (q.v.), a young Shaikhi who was en route to Bušehr on a hajj or pilgrimage journey.

These eighteen disciples known as the "Letters of the Living" (horuf al-hayy) constituted, together with the Bab, the first "unity" (wahed = 19) of a series of nineteen unities which would make up a body of three hundred and sixty-one individuals—a kollo šay? (= 361)—the first believers in the imam through the bab. These horuf al-hayy are regarded as identical with the "precursors" (sabequn) referred to in early works of the Bab and his followers, both literally in preceding others in recognition of the Bab and esoterically in being identified with the first group of mankind to respond to God's pre-eternal covenant, a group itself identified in Shi?ite belief with Mohammad and the imams. It is, in fact, clear that the Bab came to regard the horuf al-hayy as incarnations of the Prophet, the twelve imams, the original four abwab and Fatema, an

identification which led to serious controversy in the early Babi community of Karbala? (see MacEoin, “Hierarchy,” pp. 104-09).

After a short period of instruction ending in early July, 1844, the Bab instructed sixteen of the horuf al-hayy to disperse in various directions, carrying transcriptions of parts of his early writings, notably his commentary on the Koranic chapter Yusof, the Qayyum al-asma?. They were not to reveal his name or identity but merely to announce that the gate or agent (na?eb) of the Hidden Imam had appeared. Through these disciples and the men they met and converted—almost all, like themselves, ?olama? or Muslim divines—the claims of the Bab were rapidly disseminated, principally to the Shaikhi communities in the areas they visited. In this way, a growing section of the Shaikhi school followed the Bab in the period of his earliest claims. The unity of Shaikhism was irretrievably shattered and a core of convinced Babis brought into existence, eager to put into practice the radical changes implicit in the Bab’s claims.

The most immediate impact made by the dissemination of Babi propaganda on the Shi?ite world occurred at its heart in Karbala?. The Bab’s message was brought to the region of the shrines in Iraq in the first instance by Molla ?Ali Bestami (q.v.), whose preaching there precipitated a major uproar among both Shaikhis and non-Shaikhis, leading to his arrest, trial and eventual dispatch to Istanbul. During his stay in Iraq, however, as is attested by contemporary diplomatic reports, Bestami and other Babis awakened a widespread chiliastic fervor among the Shaikhis of the area (see Momen, Babi and Baha’i Religions, pp. 83-89). The Qayyum al-asma?, portions of which now began to circulate there, indicated that the Bab had appeared on earth to prepare men for the imminent arrival of the imam and the waging of the final jehad or holy war against unbelief (which was widely interpreted to include not only Sunnism but non-Babi Shi?ism as well). News also arrived from Shiraz that the Bab had left the town in September in order to perform the hajj and that, on his departure, he had said that he would reveal his cause in Mecca, after which he would enter Kufa and Karbala? and fulfill the prophecies. In various letters of this period, he called on his growing body of followers to assemble in Karbala? in order to aid the imam on his appearance. A number of Babis appear to have traveled to Karbala? with this hope and, following instructions in the Qayyum al-asma?, to have purchased arms in readiness for the jehad that would follow the Bab’s appearance and the advent of the imam. In the end, the Bab failed to reach Karbala? as promised, returning instead to Shiraz via Bušehr in the summer of 1261/1845. His arrest en route to his home town by agents of the governor of Shiraz considerably restricted his freedom of action and prevented even a late arrival in Iraq. As a result, a number of the newly-converted abandoned their allegiance, leaving only a small core of believers, who were forced to begin the work of proselytization once more (al-Qatil b. al-Karbala?i, letter in Mazandarani, Zohur al-haqq III, p. 503).

Although the Bab remained at the heart of the movement, his personal

activities were now restricted. He remained under house arrest in Shiraz until September, 1262/1846, when he escaped to Isfahan following an outbreak of cholera. There, with the support of the governor, Manucehr Khan Mo?tamad-al-Dawla, he had greater freedom to write and meet disciples, but this interlude ended abruptly with the governor's death in February, 1847. The Bab was summoned by Mohammad Shah to Tehran but en route diverted to Maku in Azerbaijan, where he remained in confinement until his transfer in May, 1848 to the fortress of Cahriq, his place of imprisonment until shortly before his execution in 1266/1850. Although communications between him and his followers were never entirely severed, they were, at times, difficult, and it was, in any case, impossible to refer to him all questions for elucidation or arbitration.

The exposition of Babi doctrine (to the extent that we can speak of this in a period of considerable confusion) in a number of provincial centers fell increasingly to the leading followers of the Bab, both horuf al-hayy and other ?olama? in those areas: in Mašhad, Molla Mohammad-Hosayn Bošru?i, who was expressly appointed by the Bab to answer questions on his behalf for the community as a whole; in Borujerd, Kurdistan, Tehran, Qazvin, Isfahan, Qom, and elsewhere, the peripatetic Sayyed Yahya Darabi (Wahid) (q.v.); in Tehran and, later, Zanjan, Molla Mohammad-?Ali Zanjani (Hojjat) (q.v.); in Qazvin, Molla Jalil Orumi; and, perhaps the most important, in Karbala? and, for a time, Baghdad, Qorrat-al-?Ayn. The role of these and a few other individuals must be stressed. Bošru?i, Darabi, and Zanjani were to lead the Babi insurrections in Mazandaran, Neyriz, and Zanjan, while Qorrat-al-?Ayn was perhaps the guiding spirit behind the events at the enclave of Badašt (q.v.) in 1848, when a group of Babis proclaimed the abrogation of the Islamic Šari?a. More importantly, the main figures of the Babi hierarchy formed what Berger calls a "charismatic field," playing roles of messianic significance ("From Sect to Church," pp. 161-62). Thus Bošru?i and Molla Mohammad-?Ali Barforuši Qoddus were regarded by their followers at Tabarsi shrine as the "Qa?em-e Korasani" and "Qa?em-e Jilani" respectively, while quasi-divine honors were paid to the latter (such as the circumambulation of his house and the direction of prayers towards him as the qebla). While in Karbala?, Qorrat-al-?Ayn claimed to be an incarnation of Fatema, whereas some regarded her as "the point of divine knowledge" after Rašti. Unfortunately, with the exception of some interesting treatises by Qorrat-al-?Ayn and a few fragments by Qoddus, works penned by these individuals have been lost, and it is almost impossible to reconstruct the details of Babi doctrine as actually taught by them or to determine how far this may have coincided with or differed from the doctrine taught by the Bab and carefully preserved in his writings.

The role played by Qorrat-al-?Ayn in Karbala? was, as we have noted above, particularly significant. Residing in Rašti's home there, she assumed supreme control of the Shaikhi-Babi community of the region, stressing her authority as one of the horuf al-hayy and the incarnation of Fatema.

This led to the first serious crisis of authority in the movement, when her position was challenged by Molla Ahmad Korasani and his followers who were particularly opposed to the leadership role of the horuf al-hayy. The rift produced in the Babi community of Iraq by this conflict was further deepened by Qorrat-al-?Ayn's increasingly radical and unconventional behavior. In his early writings, the Bab stressed the necessity for his followers to observe the laws of Islam and, indeed, to perform acts of supererogatory piety, and there is some evidence that the Babis of this period were as noted for the zeal of their adherence to tradition as they were later to be known for their rejection of it (for details see MacEoin, "From Shaykhism," pp. 208-10). There were, however, elements inherent in the claim of the Bab to an authority direct from God which threatened to conflict with this more conservative position. Qorrat-al-?Ayn seems to have been particularly conscious of this and to have linked the concept of the Bab's overriding authority in religious matters with ideas originating in Shaikhism, to which we have referred earlier—the advent of an age of inner truth succeeding that of outer observance. She seems to have made this link before the Bab himself and by 1262/1846 had begun to stress the importance of inner realities at the expense of outward practice. In her classes attended by Babi men, she appeared unveiled, and on one occasion chose to celebrate the birth of the Bab during the early days of Moharram. Mirza Mohammad-?Ali Zonuzi states that, with the Bab's permission, Qorrat-al-?Ayn "rendered all the previous laws and observances null and void" (letter in Mazandarani, Zohur al-haqq III, p. 35). In a statement written after Rajab, 1262/June-July, 1846, she herself records that she began to call on her followers to "enter the gate of innovation" following the receipt of a letter from the Bab in that month, which she interpreted to mean that Islam was to be abrogated (letter ibid., p. 349; for details, see MacEoin, "From Shaykhism," pp. 210-16).

Controversy ensued within the Babi community. Many were scandalized by Qorrat-al-?Ayn's behavior, particularly that of appearing before men without a veil, and wrote to the Bab seeking support (which he would not give). Others, however, began to follow her example, and the controversy soon spread beyond the confines of the Babi community proper. In the end, Qorrat-al-?Ayn was arrested in Karbala?, forced to leave the city for Baghdad in 1263/1847, kept there for several months in the home of the Mufti, Shaikh Mahmud al-Alusi, and finally expelled from Iraq on orders sent from Istanbul. Traveling through Hamadan and Kermanšah, where she carried on an extensive campaign of proselytization, she returned in Qazvin in the late summer of 1263/1847.

The controversy surrounding Qorrat-al-?Ayn and the growing challenge presented by Babi missionaries in all the major provinces of Iran, where the number of converts was growing rapidly, led to a hardening of attitudes towards the sect. In Kerman, Mohammad Karim Khan Kermani, who had been acquainted with the Bab's claims from an early date, was engaged in laying claim to the leadership of the Shaikhi school for himself. Among his activities in this

respect was the composition of several works refuting the Bab and his claims. Not only was the Bab a threat to Kermani's position within the school itself, but the obvious heterodoxy of his doctrines and the activities of his followers threatened, because of their close association with the school he purported to represent, to further damage Shaikhism in the eyes of the Shi?ite ?olama? at large. Kermani's efforts, reinforced by the Bab's own rejection of "orthodox" Shaikhism, led to a growing sense of an absolute split between the two movements and a greater sense of independent identity for Babism, together with a hardening of attitudes on both sides. An analysis of later Babi membership indicates that the original Shaikhi dominance within the sect began to decline and that Babism came to have a much wider appeal among the general Shi?ite public. The motives for conversion seem to have become less doctrinal and more social or economic as fewer ?olama? and greater numbers of the public at large entered the movement. This in itself, however, led to a growing attack on the sect from non-Shaikhi clergy confronted by the challenge of the Babi missionary enterprise.

Matters began to come to a head in Du'l-qa?da, 1263/October, 1847. Until then, violence directed against the Babis had been limited and no one had died. The Babis, for their part, despite exhortations to jehad in several works of the Bab, still awaited the appearance of the Mahdi before commencing the holy war (a possible indication in itself of doctrinal rather than social motivation) and, in the meantime, contented themselves with issuing challenges to mobahala or mutual cursing (for the development of the themes of mobahala and jehad in the movement and the escalation of violence against and on behalf of the sect see MacEoin, "Babi Concept of Holy War," pp. 109-11). Some months after Qorrat-al-?Ayn's return to Qazvin in the late summer of 1263/1847, a group of three Babis attacked her uncle, Hajj Molla Mohammad-Taqi Baragani (q.v.), the leading cleric of the town; he died of his wounds three days later, on 16 Du'l-qa?da/27 October. There had already been a build-up of tension in Qazvin, much aggravated by Baragani's preaching against both Shaikhis and Babis. Now, large numbers of Babis were arrested, houses were broken into and looted, and several individuals were eventually put to death in retaliation for what was held to be a general Babi plot. At about the same time, relations between Babis and the civil authorities in Mašhad became strained, particularly after two incidents in which members of the movement tried to rescue two of their arrested coreligionists by force.

2. 1264-69/1848-53. The situation changed radically when, in the early months of 1848, the Bab wrote a letter in which he proclaimed himself the promised imam in person and declared the abrogation of the laws of Islam. Announcement of the qiama or resurrection, interpreted as a spiritual event, spread rapidly among the Babi communities of Iraq and Iran. In July, 1848, a gathering of some eighty Babi activists, including Qorrat-al-?Ayn and Molla Mohammad-?Ali Barforuši, formally proclaimed the advent of the qiama. Towards the end of the same month, the Bab himself was brought from Cahriq to Tabriz, where he was interrogated by a council of ?olama? and state

officials presided over by Naser-al-Din Mirza (shortly to be made king). Conflicting accounts of this examination exist, but all are agreed that the Bab insisted on his claim to be the Hidden Imam returned—a claim whose political implications would not have been missed.

Also in July, 1848, Bošru?i and a large body of followers left Mašhad, possibly headed for Azerbaijan to rescue the Bab from prison. Swelled along the route by others, this band encountered opposition as they moved into Mazandaran in September. The residents of Barforuš (Babol), alarmed by the arrival of a body of armed men immediately after the death of Mohammad Shah, offered fierce resistance to their entry to the town. Forced to travel on and attacked by a band of local horsemen, the Babis finally reached the shrine of Shaikh Abu ?Ali Fazl Tabarsi, where they constructed a fort and were joined by other Babis from all parts of Iran, including Barforuši and seven other horuf al-hayy, their numbers eventually reaching to near 500. A series of engagements soon ensued between the Babis and successive contingents of provincial and state troops until May, 1849, in the course of which all but a few of the defenders were killed. Two features of this incident stand out: the messianic overtones of the struggle, emphasized by the roles of Bošru?i and Barforuši as qa?em, the carrying of a black standard, the identification of the fort with Karbala?, its defenders with Hosayn and his followers, and their enemies with the Omayyad forces; and the related belief in the supreme authority of the Bab and his lieutenants as against the illegitimacy of Qajar rule. Babism now clearly posed a direct threat to the established political and religious order.

Further outbreaks of mass violence followed after an interval in Neyriz (Rajab-Ša?ban, 1266/May-June, 1850) and Zanjan (Rajab, 1266-Rabi? I, 1267/May, 1850-January, 1851), although these differed from Shaikh Tabarsi in their distinctly urban character and in the relative absence (as far as our sources indicate) of messianic motifs. The character of these struggles in particular has suggested to some commentators that they were more of an expression of social and political discontent than of religious fervor, and there is undoubtedly a measure of truth in this, particularly in the case of Zanjan. Nevertheless, in a recent study (“The Social Basis of the Babi Upheavals”), Momen has shown that it is difficult to reach clear conclusions as to the social composition of these outbreaks or of the Babi movement as a whole. Our emphasis must at present remain on the outwardly religious character of Babism, while recognizing the value of religious motifs as a means of socio-political expression in a society such as Qajar Iran. It should be stressed that the Babi leadership and much of the membership was drawn from the ranks of the ?olama? class, particularly its lower strata (for further details see ibid.).

In July, 1850, the Bab was again brought to Tabriz, where he was executed by firing squad on the 8th or 9th. Coupled with the debacles of Mazandaran, Neyriz, and Zanjan, in the course of which some 2,000 to 3,000 Babis, including most of the provincial leadership, perished (on these figures see

MacEoin, “From Babism to Baha’ism,” p. 236), the Bab’s death spelt the end of the movement as a vital political force in Iran. That the “Mahdi” had been executed and his followers everywhere defeated seemed to most people clear evidence of the falsehood of the Bab’s claims, and the potential following which would certainly have accrued to the movement had even a measure of success attended its struggle with the state was drastically diminished. In a final act of desperation, on 15 August 1852, a small group of Babis attempted to assassinate Naser-al-Din Shah. A plot led by Shaikh Molla ?Ali Toršizi was uncovered, large numbers of Babis in the capital and elsewhere arrested, and some fifty put to death. Among those arrested was Mirza Hosayn-?Ali Nuri Baha?-Allah, a Babi from a wealthy family connected with the Qajar court. Hosayn Nuri’s father, Mirza ?Abbas Nuri, had held various government posts (see Bamdad, Rejal VI, pp. 126-29), and he was distantly related to the prime minister, Mirza Aqa Khan Nuri (Balyuzi, Baha?u?llah, p. 13). Released on the intervention of the Russian Minister in January, 1853 (Zarandi, Dawn-Breakers, p. 636), he was instructed to leave the country and chose to go to Baghdad, accompanied by members of his family and other Babis. Before long, he was followed by his younger half-brother, Mirza Yahya Sobh-e Azal, appointed by the Bab his successor and regarded by most of the surviving Babis as their leader. During the next decade, Baghdad became firmly established as the main center of Babism, giving refuge to a small community of Iranian émigrés who sought to perpetuate the movement. There was considerable doctrinal confusion, in part due to the idiosyncratic teachings and legal prescriptions expounded by the Bab in his later works, notably the Persian Bayan, in which he attempted to codify a religious system destined to supplant Islam, with himself as the latest in a line of divine revelators. The system propounded by the Bab depended for its implementation on the establishment of a Babi state, which was now only a very remote possibility. There was, moreover, a lack of certainty over the question of leadership. Although the consensus seemed to favor the acceptance of Sobh-e Azal as head of the faith, he appears to have lacked the qualities of a good leader and to have adopted a retiring mode of life. The concept of theophanies, already apparent in the roles ascribed to Bab al-Bab, Qoddus, and Qorrat-al-?Ayn, led to a succession of at least twenty-four claimants to supreme authority in the movement, few of whom obtained a substantial following. A growing section of the Baghdad community, however, was willing to grant a measure of authority to Sobh-e Azal’s elder half-brother, Baha?-Allah, a more experienced man of much less retiring temperament with a leaning towards Sufism and political quietism. Sometime in the 1860s, he claimed the status of man yozheroho?llah (he whom God shall make manifest), a messianic figure referred to frequently in the Persian Bayan. The ensuing quarrel between him and Sobh-e Azal resulted in the splitting of the movement into the Bahai and Azali factions, with the majority belonging to the former. Azali Babism has remained essentially conservative, basing its tenets on the works of the Bab and Sobh-e Azal, whereas Bahaism represents a radical solution to the problem of continuing the Babi movement (see MacEoin, “From Babism to Baha’ism”). The harsher and less practical teachings of

the Bayan are either abolished or toned down, immediate pressure to create a Babi theocracy is transformed into a future Bahai world state to be created through peaceful conversion and indefinitely postponable, and the Babi legal system is extensively modified to suit “modern” conditions.

Babism is of considerable interest for the light it sheds on a number of problems in the sociology of religion, notably that of charismatic breakthrough. We can observe a process whereby an initial development of traditional charismatic roles is rapidly intensified by a more radical breakthrough still expressed in terms of traditional motifs but involving a sharp move away from established religious modes, leading finally to a wholesale charismatic renewal in which the norms of the religious environment are replaced by a fresh set of doctrines and practices deriving their authority wholly from the charismatic authority of the prophet-figure. Within the overall spectrum from Shi?ism through Shaikhism and Babism to Bahaism, Berger (“Motif messianique”) has delineated a process of messianic expectation—fulfillment—renewed expectation, which indicates the importance of Babism as a case study in millenarianism. Within the context of modern Shi?ism, Babism provides valuable evidence of extreme tendencies in the religious establishment of mid-13th/19th-century Iran. To see Babism as an aberration or side issue in Qajar Shi?ism (as does Algar, Religion and State, p. 151) is to ignore its original orthodoxy and the role within it of religious motifs central to the Shi?ite tradition. Careful retrospection will show not only that Babism came close to upsetting the balance of Qajar political life but that it owed its ability to shake the foundations of society so forcefully and in such a short period less to a chance concatenation of events and more to its character as a vital response to deep-rooted expectations and needs of the Iranian people of the time. Far from having been a maverick or aberrant outgrowth of post-Safavid Shi?ism, Babism—especially when its early, semi-orthodox phase is taken fully into consideration—may be regarded not only as a highly typical expression of certain strands of Shi?ite thought, but as particularly relevant to the social and religious circumstances of many Iranians at the time of its inception. It may, indeed, be argued that many later developments within the orthodox establishment (including the wide rejection of reformism) were reactions against Babism and the dangers it showed to be inherent in an extreme insistence on charismatic authority, in a situation where the religious hierarchy was engaged in a process of intensifying such authority (see further MacEoin, “Changes in Charismatic Authority”). Although extremist movements in other parts of the Muslim world in the nineteenth century (Tejaniya, Sudanese Mahdiya, even the Ahmadiya) represented serious departures from orthodox norms and involved considerable bed?a, or innovation, only Babism and its offshoot Bahaism present us with the phenomenon of outright severance from Islam and an attempt to introduce a new religious synthesis.

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