

earlier than would be natural or necessary. Generally I did not feel a great sense of joy in those years and spent very little time on games and sports and entertainment. Instead I spent most of my time reading. I don't say this as a good thing, but as I was something of a recluse and didn't relate to people too easily, reading was a kind of refuge for me... My only regret now is that I didn't serve the Bahá'í Faith much during my youth.[2]

On finishing high school, Davudi left for Tehran where he graduated from the teacher training college after three years of studying education, literature and philosophy. He then taught Persian literature at various schools in different Iranian towns. In Zanzan, at the age of thirty-one, he married Malikih Afagh Iranpoor, who became a Bahá'í some twenty years later. They had three daughters and two sons. The young family spent their summer holidays at Davudi's ancestral village where he would see to the health and educational needs of the villagers by, for example, building public baths and schools.

In 1955, at the age of thirty-three, Davudi moved to Tehran and began to study philosophy at Tehran University while working full-time as a school teacher. He spent one year in France to improve his command of French (which proved important for his later translations of French philosophical texts; see below). In 1964, he gained a doctorate with a thesis on the philosophy of Aristotle and Descartes, one of the first doctorates in philosophy ever awarded by Tehran University. He was then invited to join the university's faculty where he subsequently became a professor.

Davudi was elected to the Iranian Bahá'í community's national governing body (the National Spiritual Assembly or NSA) in 1973. He became its secretary (or its chief executive officer) one year later. This position entailed substantial travel throughout the country, leaving little time for his writing and lecturing. He once commented that he much preferred an academic life to an administrative life, but he nonetheless served the Bahá'í community tirelessly and accepted neither a salary for what was effectively full-time work nor reimbursement for expenses. In addition to his wide-ranging

administrative responsibilities as NSA secretary, he played a key role in the development of Bahá'í literature in Iran, serving on both the national publishing and review committees. He also made a significant contribution to the deepening work of the community, co-supervising (with B. Farid) the establishment of the Institute for Advanced Bahá'í Studies in 1976, an initiative proposed by the Universal House of Justice to promote scholarship and research, especially among young Bahá'ís: "The training of a few talented youth with the capacity and ability to undertake research and acquire deep knowledge in the field of religious studies and mysticism is very important." Davudi devised much of the Institute's curriculum, including classes on philosophy and mysticism in which he encouraged the study of primary texts (rather than the prevailing preference for commentaries), especially by Islamic authors such as Attar, Tusi and Shabestari whom he believed provided a rich context for understanding Bahá'í mystical writings.

Perhaps Davudi's most important contributions to the Bahá'í community were through his lectures and writings. He was a very popular speaker: his university classes attracted large audiences, and he devoted a great deal of his time to the Bahá'í youth, running regular study classes in Tehran and at summer schools. I personally attended two summer schools for the youth in Iran where Dr Davudi gave impressive talks on rational proofs for the existence of God, and the concept of Godhood and manifestation in the Bahá'í writings. The youth, in return, admired him greatly. One of his pupils writes: "Students truly love him and regard him as their teacher. He is one of those rare teachers that when the time comes for saying good-bye, many of the students are in tears."

His rare gift for public speaking was described by Hooshang Mahmudi, also a member of the NSA of Iran who was himself kidnapped (presumed dead) in August 1980 for being a member of that body. He frequently drove Davudi to the recording studio for his regular taped lectures that were subsequently distributed as

cassette tapes

to the Bahá'í community. Mahmudi recounts how Davudi was normally informed of the

subject matter of his talk for the first time on the way to the studio! He would then

deliver a detailed and eloquent lecture without notes, from memory, and without any

need to edit or retape any sections of the recorded talk.

Davudi had a distinctive and absorbing literary style reflected both in his talks and

written work. In addition to Persian, the extensive use of Arabic quotations in his talks

revealed his fluency in both languages. His superb literary skills were evident even in

rudimentary NSA correspondence, while the annual reports written and read by him at

national conventions were greatly appreciated by the assembled delegates for the beauty

of their prose.

Davudi's lectures and writings on philosophical and metaphysical themes from a Bahá'í standpoint probably still remain unmatched in the Bahá'í world, and are rich and

untapped resources for serious Bahá'í scholars. His essay on "Divinity and Oneness"

and his talks on "The Station of Bahá'u'lláh" shed light on some of the foundational

aspects of Bahá'í beliefs. His essays and lectures on life after death; the meaning of

freedom; freewill and determinism; the station of man; prayer; the soul; philosophy; the

study of history; science and religion; and non-involvement in politics are impressive

examples of his ability to apply his substantial knowledge of western and Islamic

philosophy and the Bahá'í writings to many diverse areas of vital interest to Bahá'ís.

His writings on Bahá'í themes were published by the Bahá'í journals in Iran or

separately as booklets. His publications in the field of philosophy consisted primarily

of translations into Persian of French philosophical works which received high praise,

not least due to his mastery of Persian. Most of these were published by Tehran University Press and included works by L. Meynard, Emile Bréhier and Étienne Gilson. He also published original articles in the Journal of the Faculty of

Literature and Humanities of Tehran University on the philosophy of Farabi, Avicenna and the Greek philosophers.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Society of Muslim Students declared Dr Davudi "anti-Islamic" and "anti-revolutionary". He found it impossible to continue his work as a professor and resigned from his post. During this time, members of militant Islamic groups frequently gathered outside his house. In the midst of the escalating persecution of the Iranian Bahá'ís, Davudi was the most visible member of the national body that had the task of representing the Bahá'í community and defending the rights of its members to the new government. As secretary of the NSA he also had to encourage the community through letters and talks to be patient and to act with wisdom, co-ordinate the relief efforts, and do what he could to protect the community and mitigate its sufferings.

He was aware of the danger he was facing and had prepared himself for arrest and imprisonment. His daughter described the situation:

In April 79, a few months after the Revolution, I went to Iran and begged my father to go to the USA or Canada. He refused, saying that the Bahá'í youth in Iran needed him and he did not want to disappoint them. The phone would ring all day and night and he would talk to the friends, comforting and consoling them. He also received several phone calls from people who said that they were coming to arrest him. I cried so much. All my father did was to pack his pyjamas, razor, aftershave and prayer book in a small bag and kept it by his bed and waited. In all that time he didn't even look concerned. I cannot forget his smiles in those days.

A few days before his disappearance he told one of his relatives that "I have not suffered much for Bahá'u'lláh. I have not even been slapped on my face for the Faith. I hope that I have a chance to attain this honour."

A glimpse into the character and devotional attitude of Dr Davudi can be discerned from the account of his visit to the House of the Bab in Shiraz soon after its partial destruction in 1979 by the authorities. He had asked for arrangements to be made for him to be taken there. At this stage, the House had already been severely damaged, its roof caved in, walls broken and doors and windows smashed, with piles of rubble and debris in every room. As Davudi approached the stairs leading to the upper room where the Báb had declared Himself to Mulla Hussein, he removed his shoes, climbed the stairs and, with great reverence and unconcerned with the state of the building, simply sat on a heap of broken stonework, surrounded by the debris, and prayed.

On 11 November 1979, while out for a walk alone in a park near his home in Tehran, Davudi was kidnapped. The newspaper Liberation Front reported the incident with the headline, "Dr Davudi, University Professor is Kidnapped". He was never

seen

again. The Iranian government has denied any involvement in his disappearance, but

three revolutionary guards later admitted that Dr Davudi had indeed been kidnapped on the order of the government.

Novin Doostdar[3]

End Notes

S. H. Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, edited by Mehdi Aminrazavi (London: Curzon Press, London) 1996.

Quoted in *The Collected Works of Dr Ali-Murad Davudi (Persian)*, Volume One, compiled and edited by Vahid Rafati, (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1987) [online here].

In writing this article I have relied heavily on the three volumes of essays and transcribed and edited talks of Dr Davudi produced by Dr Vahid Rafati. Dr Rafati has rendered the Bahá'í world a tremendous service in compiling these volumes, which also contain a substantial amount of biographical material on the life and works of Dr Davudi.

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