Azali Babism

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Azalí Babism

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AZALI BABISM, designation of a religious faction which takes its name from Mirza Yahya Nuri Sobh-e Azal (about 1246-1330/1830-1912), considered by his followers to have been the legitimate successor to the Bab. A son of Mirza Bozorg Nuri, a court official in the reign of Fath-?Ali Shah, Yahya was converted to Babism around 1260/1844, probably by his older half-brother, Mirza Hosayn-?Ali, the future Baha?allah, founder of the Baha?i religion. From about 1848, Mirza Yahya Sobh-e Azal was in regular contact with the Bab, who was then in prison in Azerbaijan. His letters were well received by the Bab, who claimed to find in them evidence of divine inspiration. Numerous references in writings by the Bab from this period seem to provide strong evidence that Azal (also referred to as al-Wahid, Tal?at al-Nur, and al-Tamara) was regarded by him as his chief deputy following the deaths of most of the original Babi hierarchy, and as the future head of the movement. Earlier criteria for leadership within the sect had been priority of belief and membership of the ?olama? class, but Azal appears to have been selected on account of his innate capacity (fetra) to receive divine knowledge and his ability to reveal verses—as had been the case with the Bab himself.

After the Bab’s death in 1266/1850, Sobh-e Azal came to be regarded as the central authority within the movement, to whom its followers looked for some form of continuing revelation. Recognition of his authority was, however, only one of a number of doctrinal positions adopted by Babis in the 1850s and early 1860s. Numerous other claimants to theophanic status emerged in this period, some of whom were seen by Azal as rivals, while others appear to have been regarded as reflections enhancing the prestige of the original theophany (in accordance with the Bab’s theories concerning limitless descending emanations or manifestations of the Primal Will). It is particularly significant that, with few exceptions, these claimants were from non clerical backgrounds like the Bab and Azal—an indication of the new social role now emerging for Babism in its second phase.

Following the attempt by several Babis on the life of Naser-al-din Shah in 1852 and an abortive uprising organized by Azal in the same year, he and other Babis chose to go into exile in Baghdad. Here he lived as generally-acknowledged head of the community until their removal to Istanbul in 1863. By adopting a policy of seclusion (gayba), Sobh-e Azal gradually alienated himself from a large proportion of the exiles, who began to give their allegiance to other claimants, notably Azal’s half-brother, Baha?allah. During this period, Azal set up a network of agents (termed šohada? “witnesses,” i.e., of the Bayan) in Iraq and Iran. But this attempt to routinize further the charismatic authority of the faith seems to have clashed with the continuing appeal of original charisma within the movement and further weakened Azal’s position.

In Edirne in 1866, Baha?allah made public his claim to be man yozheroho?llah (he whom God shall manifest), the messianic figure of the Bayan. Sobh-e Azal responded by asserting his own claims and resisting the wholesale changes in doctrine and practice introduced by his brother. His attempt to preserve traditional Babism proved largely unpopular, however, and his followers were soon in the minority. In 1868, bitter feuding between the two factions, leading to violence on both sides, induced Ottoman authorities to exile the Babis yet further. Baha?allah and his followers (now known as Baha?is) were sent to Acre in Palestine, and Azal with his family and some adherents to Famagusta in Cyprus, where he remained until his death on 29 April 1912.

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Sobh-e Azal, like his brother, was a prolific writer, his works consisting primarily of interpretations and elaborations of existing Babi doctrine, together with very large quantities of devotional pieces and poems. His best-known writings include the early Ketab-e nur, Mostayqez (a refutation of claims advanced by Mirza Asadallah Ku?i Dayyan), the Motammem-e Bayan (a continuation of the Bab’s unfinished Persian Bayan), and the Nagamat al-ruh. One list of his writings gives 102 titles, some in several volumes, others very short.

Azali Babism represents the conservative core of the original Babi movement, opposed to innovation and preaching a religion for a non-clerical gnostic elite rather than the masses. It also retains the original Babi antagonism to the Qajar state and a commitment to political activism, in distinction to the quietist stance of Baha?ism. Paradoxically, Azali conservatism in religious matters seems to have provided a matrix within which radical social and political ideas could be propounded. If Babism represented the politicization of dissent within Shi?ism (Bayat, chap. 4) and Baha?ism stood for a return to earlier Shi?ite ideals of political quietism (MacEoin, “Babism to Baha?ism”), the Azali movement became a sort of bridge between earlier Babi militancy and the secularizing reform movements of the late Qajar period.

The first generation of Azalis were largely established Babis like Sayyed Mohammad Esfahani, Molla Rajab-?Ali Qaher Esfahani, Molla Mohammad Ja?far Naraqi, and Haji Mirza Ahmad Kašani. In the writings of men like Qaher and Naraqi, as in those of Azal, we find an abiding concern with sometimes obscure religious themes that remain well within the tradition established in the Bab's later writings. But for the second generation of Azal's followers, "Azali Babism provided . . . a creed which seemingly justified their political activism and growing nationalist consciousness" (Bayat, p. 130). Often loosely applied, Babi affiliation (which came increasingly to mean Azali affiliation) was applied to or used as a badge by several important individuals active in demanding social change in Iran, in a manner paralleling the connection with Freemasonry used by Malkom Khan and others. It is, in fact, important to remember that the faramuš-kanas were regarded by many as centers for Babi recruitment and proselytizing (Gobineau, Religions et philosophies, p. 274).

The best known of the early Azali nationalist reformers were Shaikh Ahmad Ruhi Kermani (1272/1856-1314/1896) and Mirza ?Abd-al-Hosayn Kermani (Aqa Khan Kermani, q.v.), both of whom were executed along with Mirza Hasan Khan Kabir al-Molk following the assassination of Naser-al-din Shah in 1896. Ruhi's father, Molla Mohammad Ja?far Tahbagallahi Šayk-al-?olama? (1241/1826-1311/1893) was an eminent ?alem from Kerman who had been an early convert to Babism; he is described by Browne as "one of the early promoters of the Liberal Movement in Persia" (Persian Revolution, p. 414). Ruhi and Aqa Khan formed the core of a group of Azalis resident in Istanbul in the 1880s and 90s who had close links with political activists such as Mirza Malkom Khan (q.v.) and Sayyed Jamal-al-din Afgani (q.v.). A number of Azalis, particularly Aqa Khan, were closely associated with the influential Persian-language newspaper Aktar (q.v.), published in Istanbul under the editorship of Mirza Mohammad Taher Tabrizi. Both Ruhi and Aqa Khan wrote on Babism (they collaborated on the well-known work Hašt beheŝt and were married to daughters of Sobh-e Azal, but it would be a mistake to overstress the importance of their Babi affiliation in their wider activities. Like other Azalis of this period, they seem to have used Babism as a motif for dissent, much as Malkom Khan or Afgani (and, indeed, Aqa Khan at times) used Islam. It is chiefly (one might say, properly) as free-thinkers and secularist reformers rather than as thoroughgoing Babis that they made their impact on contemporary affairs.

Edward Browne noted that it was "a remarkable fact that several very prominent supporters of the Persian Constitutional Movement were, or had the reputation of being, Azalis" (Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion, p. 221). Notable among these were: Mirza Jahangir Khan Širazi (1292/1875-1326/1908), a teacher at the Dar al-Fonun in Tehran and a member of various anjomans, who edited the important Constitutionalist newspaper Sur-e Esrafil and was executed following the coup d'état of 1908; Mirza Nasrallah Esfahani Malek-al-motakallemin (1277/1861-1326/1908), a pro-Constitution cleric also killed in 1908, who was active with other free-thinking ?olama? in promoting reform ideas; Shaikh Mahdi Šarif Kašani (d. 1301 Š./1922), author of the Tarik-eJa?fari and Tarik-ewaqaye?-e mašrutiyat and a son of the important Azali cleric Molla Mohammad Ja?far Naraqi, who was a member of the Anjoman-e Ma?aref in Tehran and head of the Šaraf school; Shaikh Mohammad Afzal-al-molk Kermani (1267/1851-1322/1904), a brother of Shaikh Ahmad Ruhi and a close associate of Afgani in Istanbul; his brother Shaikh Mahdi Bahr-al-?olum Kermani, a member of the first and second Majlis; and Hajji Mirza Yahya Dawlatabadi (1279/1862-1359/1939, q.v.), the well-known educationalist who served as a member of the second and fifth Majlis.

It is important to remember that these men, like their predecessors, acted as individuals rather than Azalis and that their ideas were frequently more secularist than religious in orientation. It must also be stressed that many individuals who have been suspected of harboring Babi sympathies or even of being Babis, such as Sayyed Jamal-al-din Esfahani, were hardly true converts: the mere suggestion of heretical leanings or association with known Azalis were often enough to earn a man the name. Neither Jamal-al-din Afgani nor Mirza Mohammad Reza Kermani, the assassin of Naser-al-din Shah, were Babis, although both were often described as such. Abu’l-Hasan Mirza Šayk al-Ra?is, a member of the Qajar family who was an outstanding reformer of the Constitutional period, has sometimes been called an Azali, whereas there is ample evidence that he was, in fact, a Baha?i.

Yahya Dawlatabadi was appointed Sobh-e Azal’s successor after the death of his own father, Hajj Mirza Hadi, but there is little evidence that he was actively involved in organizing the affairs of the sect. He did not write on Babi subjects, nor did any other Azalis of note emerge after the death of Azal to produce significant writing on the topic or to develop the original ideas of the religion. With the deaths of those Azalis who were active in the Constitutional period, Azali Babism entered a phase of stagnation from which it has never recovered. There is now no acknowledged leader nor, to the knowledge of the present writer, any central organization. Members tend to be secretive about their affiliation, converts are rare, and association appears to run along family lines. It is difficult to estimate current numbers, but these are unlikely to exceed one or two thousand, almost all of whom reside in Iran.

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MSS Belonging to the late E. G. Browne, Cambridge, 1932, pp. 69-75. Manuscripts of numerous works by Azal are located in the Browne Collection at Cambridge, the British Library, and the Bibliothèque Nationale. The following have been published, all in Tehran without date: Mostayqez, Motammem-e Bayan, and Majmu?ai az atar-e Noqta-ye Ula wa Sobh-e Azal. Further references may be found in: Mangol Bayat, Mysticism and Dissent, Syracuse, 1982, pp. 87, 129-31, 140-42, 149, 157-62, 167, 179, 180-83; H. Algar, Mirza Malkum Khan, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1973, pp. 46, 58-59, 215-16, 221-25; H. M. Balyuzi, Baha?u?llah the King of Glory, Oxford, 1980, chap. 40; idem, Edward Granville Browne and the Baha?i Faith, London, 1970, pp. 18-41, 45-46, 50-52; Bamdad, Rejal (on individuals mentioned); Yahya Dawlatabadi, Tarik-emo?aser ya hayat-e Yahya, 3 vols., Tehran, 1336 Š./1957; Nazem-al-eslam Kermani, Tarik-ebidari-e Iranian, Tehran, 1332 Š./1953; N. Keddie, “Religion and Irreligion in Early Iranian Nationalism,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 4, 1962, pp. 265-95, esp. pp. 273-74, 284-89, 292-95; D. MacEoin, “From Babism to Baha’ism,” Religion 13, 1983, pp. 219-55.

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