

Feast where Bahá'ís gather to say prayers, read from their scriptures, discuss the affairs of the community and share refreshments and food are rumored to be sexual orgies. The Bahá'í Faith itself is thought to have been a Russian and British plot to destroy the unity of Islam, notwithstanding the unlikelihood of those two countries having colluded on anything in the 19th century. Nowadays it is imagined that Bahá'ís are receiving their support from Zionists or the US government.

Although the Bahá'í Faith is a new religion, charges such as these are really very old. For this reason I would like to discuss the significance of such stories and the function they have played in Islamic history. Aside from the Bahá'í Faith itself, Islam has historically been the most tolerant of the world's religions. This is mostly owing to the fact that Qur'an itself asserts that there is no people to whom a prophet has not been sent. (Qur'an 35:24, 16:24.) This opened the door for the acceptance of the legitimacy of nearly all the previous religions, even those not formally considered People of the Book (i.e. Christians and Jews.) Much more problematic has been the acceptance of any claims to revelation after Muhammad. No religion likes to be superseded, but in Islam particularly the notion that there would be no revelation after the Qur'an came to be seen as every bit as fundamental to the religion as the Oneness of God and the Prophethood of Muhammad. Because of this any religious movement arising after Islam had to be explained away as something other than a religion. The stock explanation came to be that such movements were really political in nature, usually instigated by an outsider, often a Jew, aimed at creating disruption (fitna). For instance, Sunni Muslims hold a Yemenite Jew, Abdallah ibn Saba, responsible for the founding Shi'ism, a belief that goes back at least as far as al-Tabari (d. 934 A.D.).

A classical work which illustrates the manner in which Muslims came to view religious dissidence is in Nizam ul-Mulk's *Siyasat-Name*, or "Treatise on Government." Nizam u'l-Mulk served as Grand Vizier to the Seljuks who had invaded the Middle East under the pretext of saving Islam and the Caliphate from Shi'ite heretics. Most especially Nizam u'l-Mulk had to contend with the Ismaeli Assassins, to whom according to some accounts he eventually fell victim. The *Siyasat Name* presents the Sassanid ruler Khosrau the Just as the ideal ruler and one of the acts which is depicted as bringing him to power was his suppression of the Mazdakite heresy. Nizamu'l-Mulk presents the Mazdakite religion as a Manichean-type dualism which was especially dangerous for its social program of community of property and wives. It is difficult to know at this distance if the historical Mazdak really had anything more radical in mind than a more equal distribution of property and ending the practice of the wealthy having several wives while the poor could afford none, but the notion of communism and wife-swapping came to be associated not only with his heresy but with subsequent religious dissidence as well. The Ismaelites, as well as the Babis, were accused of engaging in such practices. While the economic prosperity of the Bahá'ís of Iran during the Pahlavi period may have dissolved any notion that Bahá'ís were communists, the idea that Bahá'ís practiced a 'community of wives' lived on in lurid stories about Bahá'í

sexual orgies.

As in Christianity, Manicheanism came to be seen in the Islamic world as the paradigmatic heresy, and in works like al-Tabari, it came to be associated with incest as well. Such charges have echoed down the ages and been associated with virtually any dissident religious movement which arose thereafter, especially in Iran.

It is within this context that one must understand the stories which are often spread about Bahá'ís in the Islamic World, especially the charges that they are tied to Zionism. The truth is that it was largely an accident of history that the Bahá'í World Centre ended up in Haifa, Israel, and not because of any ties it might have with Zionism. Bahá'u'lláh was exiled to Palestine when it was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire where He was imprisoned in Akka across the bay from Haifa, which was then a small fishing village.

Recently there has been a renewed effort in Iran to fabricate links between Bahá'ís and Zionism. The propagandists have gone so far as to masquerade as Bahá'ís on internet sites, such as <http://jewbahais.blogspot.com> run by someone using the name Yohanna, where misleading information is posted regarding the relationship of Bahá'ís to both Judaism and Zionism. Photos are included supposedly picturing Jewish-Bahá'ís in New York that in fact depict Bahá'ís of Christian background in London.

If the Bahá'í Faith is not part of a Russian-British-American-Zionist plot to destroy the unity of Islam, what then is its attitude towards its sister religion? I think this can best be summarized in Shoghi Effendi's statement written in the *Promised Day is Come* that: "As to Muhammad, the Apostle of God, let none among His followers who read these pages, think for a moment that either Islam, or its Prophet, or His Book, or His appointed Successors, or any of His authentic teachings, have been, or are to be in any way, or to however slight a degree, disparaged." (Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108) Indeed, in his correspondence with the Western Bahá'ís, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith repeatedly stressed that: "They must strive to obtain, from sources that are authoritative and unbiased, a sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islam -- the source and background of their Faith -- and approach reverently and with a mind purged from preconceived ideas the study of the Qur'án which, apart from the sacred scriptures of the Bábí and Bahá'í Revelations, constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God." (Compilations, Scholarship, p. 27) He even went so far as to predict that the Western Bahá'ís would become the defenders of Islam. One of the earliest Bahá'ís to do so was Stanwood Cobb who wrote *Islamic Contributions to Civilization*.

Since then there has been a stream of academically trained Bahá'ís, including myself, who have gone on to teach Islam in western universities, seeking to stem the tide of prejudice against the religion. Bahá'u'lláh's son Abdu'l-Bahá was held in the highest esteem by some of the most noted Muslim intellectuals, including Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Iqbal. Yusuf al-Khatib, a

well-known Muslim orator, said the following at Abdu'l-Bahá's funeral: O concourse of Arabians and Persians! Whom are ye bewailing? Is it he who but yesterday was great in his life and is today in his death greater still? Shed no tears for the one that hath departed to the world of Eternity, but weep over the passing of Virtue and Wisdom, of Knowledge and Generosity. Lament for yourselves, for yours is the loss, whilst he, your lost one, is but a revered Wayfarer, stepping from your mortal world into the everlasting Home. Weep one hour for the sake of him who, for well nigh eighty years, hath wept for you! Look to your right, look to your left, look East and look West and behold, what glory and greatness have vanished! What a pillar of peace hath crumbled! What eloquent lips are hushed! Alas! In this tribulation there is no heart but aches with anguish, no eye but is filled with tears. Woe unto the poor, for lo! goodness hath departed from them, woe unto the orphans, for their loving father is no more with them! "Likewise the Mufti of Haifa said: "I do not wish to exaggerate in my eulogy of this great one, for his ready and helping hand in the service of mankind and the beautiful and wondrous story of his life, spent in doing that which is right and good, none can deny, save him whose heart is blinded..."

O thou revered voyager! Thou hast lived greatly and hast died greatly! This great funeral procession is but a glorious proof of thy greatness in thy life and in thy death. But O, thou whom we have lost! Thou leader of men, generous and benevolent! To whom shall the poor now look? Who shall care for the hungry? and the desolate, the widow and the orphan?"Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá do admittedly have some harsh words to say about some of the clerics of religion, including Islam. These are mostly aimed at those who have taken advantage of their followers and interfered in the political affairs of Iran. Let's keep in mind however, that Muhammad spoke even more harshly of them:"The Apostle of God said: `There will come a time for my people when there will remain nothing of the Qur'an except its outward form and nothing of Islam except its name and they will call themselves by this name even though they are the people furthest from it. The mosques will be full of people but they will be empty of right guidance. The religious leaders (Fuqaha) of that day will be the most evil religious leaders under the heavens; sedition and dissension will go out from them and to them will it return.'" -ibn Babuya, Thawab ul-A'malIf one searches through the internet one will find dozens of Muslim-sponsored sites attacking the Bahá'í Faith, many of the sponsored by the Iranian government. You will not, however, find any anti-Islamic sites by Bahá'ís because they respect Islam and revere Muhammad. Given the amount of persecution Bahá'ís have suffered at the urging of certain members of the Islamic clergy, this attitude is truly remarkable. Bahá'ís accept the divine nature of all these religions, and wish only to promote unity amongst them. We consider the founders of other religions as occupying the same station as our own Founder. As Shoghi Effendi puts it:"The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of

whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.

"All the Prophets of God," asserts Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, "abide in the same tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech, and proclaim the same Faith." From the "beginning that hath no beginning," these Exponents of the Unity of God and Channels of His incessant utterance have shed the light of the invisible Beauty upon mankind, and will continue, to the "end that hath no end," to vouchsafe fresh revelations of His might and additional experiences of His inconceivable glory. To contend that any particular religion is final, that "all Revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the daysprings of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, that the ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the Tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest" would indeed be nothing less than sheer blasphemy." (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 57)

Some comments

(as selected by editor; see all comments at original post, bahai-islam.blogspot.com/2009/01/some-old-charges-for-new-religion.html. -J.W.)

'A' said (January 24, 2009:)

I read your first post, and I think there are some facts to it. But to add another interpretation to Muslim-Bahá'í/Bahá'í-Muslim relations, there are also Bahá'ís who hate Muslims and speak disparagingly of Islam too. I just don't want it to be portrayed as a one way street.

Some of the early Babis were militants who had hopes of overthrowing the Shah and creating a Babi State in Iran, which would entail making Muslims second-class citizens. And since Muslims were the majority of the population, etc. In that context, I think the population and the clergy were justified in being frightened and angered by such people. It doesn't mean all of the "clergy" (I've never heard that word in a Muslim context) were high-minded people. It is absolutely true that some of them were corrupt individuals, but I don't think all of them were.

I am a Muslim convert, so I don't see Islam as something of the past that was

once good but not anymore. That's the attitude I get from a lot of Persian Bahá'ís. It may be a reaction to the persecution over there, and I try to let that slide. It still offends me, but I've never been under persecution before. I try to be tolerant of it and just think of it as reactionary statements. It's easier said than done.

But I think that if Muslims and Bahá'ís/Bahá'ís and Muslims are to have a real dialogue with each other, we have to be honest and not resort to polemics on either side to discredit each others faiths. This includes the books and articles that say Bahá'ís are Zionists, pro-Israeli, U.S. backed revolutionaries who are trying to destroy Islam. Including also are Bahá'í books like the Dawn-Breakers, which paints an extremely negative picture of Islam and Muslims, makes them appear to be barbaric and evil monsters.

It should be interesting.

Susan Maneck replied (January 25, 2009):

Dear A,

You make some good points. The Bahá'ís I know of who have negative attitudes towards Islam seem to fall into two categories:

1. Iranian Bahá'ís of Zoroastrian (and sometimes Jewish) background whose families rather grudgingly accepted Muhammad when they became Bahá'ís. They sometimes take the attitude that Islam was meant for those barbaric Arabs who should never have conquered Iran. Leaving aside for a moment the rightness or wrongness of the early Arab conquests, the Bahá'í Teachings are quite clear that Muhammad's message was intended for everyone and not just Arabs.

Let's keep in mind that these Bahá'ís are not only suffering persecution from Muslims today, but they come from families who have been discriminated against for centuries. In other words, they've carrying a lot of package which I don't think the Faith itself is responsible for.

2. The second group of Bahá'ís who may have negative attitudes towards Islam are Western Bahá'ís who at times have picked up prejudices of their surrounding culture. As with Bahá'ís of the first category, having to accept the Prophethood of Muhammad may well have been their hardest hurdle in becoming Bahá'í. I know it was for me when I first became a Bahá'í nearly forty years ago.

As for your reference to the aims of Babi militants, keep in mind that the Bahá'í Faith is in some respects separate from the earlier Babi religion which could be seen as sharing Islam's militancy. In fact the notion that Muslims might be reduced to second-class citizen-ship within a Babi State would have been derived from Muslim conceptions of how dhimmis should be treated. The Bab, by the way, insisted that any jihad would have to meet the approval of "He Whom God Will Make Manifest" a reference to Bahá'u'lláh. But Bahá'u'lláh prohibited jihad entirely. In fact He insisted that we should "consort with the followers of all religions with joy and spirituality" and prohibited the

shunning of other religious communities and considering them najes or unclean as the 'ulama in Iran insist. There were some Babis uprisings in the 19th century but these seemed more aimed at recreating Karbila than attempting to establish a Babi State in Iran.

When I use the word 'clergy' I am, of course, referring to the 'ulama. I did not use the Arabic word because I don't think Bahá'u'lláh's criticisms of religious leaders is exclusive to Islam, and clergy seemed like the best term to cover all of them.

As for Bahá'ís not using primary sources like Dawnbreakers to avoid offending Muslims, I don't see how we can do that. The accounts where Muslims in your words appear as "barbaric and evil monsters" are likely those where the martyrdoms of various Babis are described, often times in gory detail. We can no more write this out of our history to avoid offending Muslims than Shi'ites can write out the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn in order to improve relations with Sunnis.

Anyhow, I appreciate the tone of your post and your genuine attempt to reach a better understanding between our two communities.

warmest, Susan

Christian Gruber said (January 25, 2009):

'A' wrote about Bahá'í attitudes of superiority towards Islam, particularly by some of the Persian believers. In truth, A, I think you're right - this often happens. I have heard Bahá'ís feel this way about Christianity as well, or Judaism, or Hinduism. However, consider for a moment. Bahá'ís believe that all these religions are of God. Bahá'ís also believe that Bahá'u'lláh is the latest revelator of God's Will. It is easy to accidentally decide that "more recent" means "better". This is not the Bahá'í position, but is an unfortunate emotional attitude that many Bahá'ís have, usually for a time. Often it's a reaction to their own excitement at the new religion. Other times it is, as you say, a reaction to feelings of persecution.

I would like to point out, however, that this attitude, unacceptable as it is to rational inquiry AND to an investigation of Bahá'í teaching, is present in almost every community of believers that sees itself as building upon a past. The very same "passé" concept I have seen Christians apply to Judaism, Buddhists apply to Hinduism, and, yes, Muslims apply to both Christianity and Judaism and Zoroastrianism, etc. If religion is progressive in its revealing (which Islam seems to assert as well as the Bahá'ís) then that progression can be seen as towards something "better", more refined, etc. So it's easy to take the wrong emotional lesson from this. I would not accept it from another Bahá'í, any more than I would accept it from a Muslim to a Christian, or a Christian to a Jew. (For reference, note that Christians call the Jewish scripture the "old" testament, and their own as the "new" testament)

Lastly, I would like to point out that when it comes to Bahá'ís persecuting others, that is the most extreme you find. There are some examples of more

extremes among the Babis, but please remember, we are not followers of the Bab's laws and community, but of Bahá'u'lláh's. It's a new Umma. I wouldn't blame a Sunni Muslim for the behaviour of a Khajirite. And further, if an attitude of superiority is the worst you'll find from a community (as a generalization), then we're doing pretty well. We don't hang people or behead them, or politically manipulate governments to kill them. These are all things you can find throughout the history of religion done in the name of the same. Pray God we never become that, or the Faith will be lost.

As to your comments about mutual respect, I agree. And as a Muslim convert, your views will likely be more informed than one who grew up in that Faith, as I find converts in general are more educated in their chosen tradition, than those who grew up in a cultural milieu. I commend you for investigating and choosing. Conversion is a wonderful and brave act of faith. I look forward to more lucid commentary from you in the future.

Susan Maneck said (January 25, 2009):

Dear Anonymous,

Care to share with us your understanding of Koran 51:51?

This, of course, would be the Bahá'í position: Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished. (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 94)
warmest, Susan

Christian Gruber said (January 27, 2009):

If you take the Qur'an as a revelation from God, then you have to take it all as a revelation from God, (it seems to me). Therefore, while this quote from 5:51 seems to indicate (in some translations) what you said, you have to balance it with other statements from the Qur'an. For example:

[60:8] GOD does not enjoin you from befriending those who do not fight you because of religion, and do not evict you from your homes. You may befriend them and be equitable towards them. GOD loves the equitable.

[60:9] GOD enjoins you only from befriending those who fight you because of religion, evict you from your homes, and band together with others to banish you. You shall not befriend them. Those who befriend them are the transgressors.

So if the Qur'an says you may befriend those who do not fight you because of your religion, that seems to me to be a clarification of God's intent around relations with non-believers. So making allies, as referred to in 5:51 is made clear by 60:9. It's not non-believers, but opponents from among the non-believers that you may not befriend and rely on as allies. To quote Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, President of the Fiqh Council of North America:

The Qur'an does not say that non-Muslims cannot be Muslims' friends, nor does

it forbid Muslims to be friendly to non-Muslims. There are many non-Muslims who are good friends of Muslim individuals and the Muslim community. There are also many good Muslims who truly and sincerely observe their faith and are very friendly to many non-Muslims at the same time.

Islam teaches us that we should be friendly to all people. Islam teaches us that we should deal even with our enemies with justice and fairness. Allah says in the Qur'an in the beginning of the same Surat Al-Ma'idah: "O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah as witnesses to fair dealings and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just, that is next to piety. Fear Allah, indeed Allah is well-acquainted with all that you do." (Al-Ma'idah 5:8)

Masud said (January 31, 2009):

Hello Anonymous,

About the Koran 5:51, that's not a very good translation for the Arabic word "awlia" in that sura; "awlia" means that you support non-Muslims in fighting against Muslims or reveal to them secrets (i.e. battle plans) of Muslims, etc. So that passage is not asking Muslims not to befriend the Jews, Christians, Bahá'ís, etc.

Warmest, Masud

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