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At home in the Ghettos:

Baha'is in Iran¹

By

Leila Chamankhah
Azad University, Kerman, Iran

I have always contemplated – why do *we*, the Shias, misunderstand Baha'ism or why *they*, the Baha'is, prefer to keep their distance from us? Are we frightened of each other? What really are the causes of this misunderstanding and estrangement?

These questions do not stem from dreams or hallucinations, but from historical facts. During two years – between 1999 and 2001 –, when I was engaged in writing my thesis on Baha'ism and their relationship with Iran's Qajar dynasty under former King Reza Shah Pahlavi, I came to the conclusion that there really is a 'gap and a clash' between Shiaism and Baha'ism. In spite of living in the same territory, speaking a common language, taking advantage of a shared and precious literature, it seems that we live in two separate territories. One is a majority, while the other a minority that has been growing since the past 200 years. Before I discuss the notion of Ghetto, let me first explain the cause behind this estrangement. Why did one religious group try

¹ I borrowed the title "At home in the Ghettos" from Marin Marty, the prominent protestant theologian. He has invented the phrase for describing the prevailing religious situation in America between various denominations and groups. He argues that despite this situation which is based on variety and diversity there is also a sort of misunderstanding between them.

to differentiate itself from the others? And why do we use terms ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ for demarcating these two religious communities?

From movement to minority

If we believe that each sentence or word must have a meaning and intended connotation, then as the first step, I must discern the application of ‘minority’ to Baha’is and ‘majority’ to Shias. By a minority, I mean a conventional, social and situated notion referring to a group of people who are by number smaller than other groups. In addition, a minority group has a subordinate position in society in relation to other groups.

Therefore, according to these criteria, a minority is a distinctive group of people that always feels subordinated and suppressed by the majority groups. This marginal position is the outcome of having a low social stratum, which leads to the feeling of being persecuted by others. Hence, they regard themselves as victims of collective discrimination. Unfortunately, in the case of Baha’is in Iran, a literature review is not of much help. The vast amount of literature – books, articles, manifestos and denials –, which have been created by the majority, especially by the Shaykhis, fail to answer the aforementioned questions and are simply reticent on the subject of how and why Baha’ism became a religious minority over centuries. Not only does the literature ignore the causes of the transformation of a religious movement into a suppressed minority; it is also biased and has fabricated theories; one has to take the content with a pinch of salt.

What are quite common in these sources are conspiracy theories – a phenomenon, which has a long-standing background in Iran. Under the shadow of this viewpoint, Bábism like Baha’ism was considered as foreigners’ plot agent supposed to weaken both Islam and the monarchy. As Ahmad Ashraf, a professor at Columbia University (US), has pointed out, ‘the popularity of conspiracy theories in the Muslim world has its roots in pre-Islamic religious beliefs’ in which the whole universe is caught in a battle between the good and the evil. This Manichean perspective divides world affairs into two distinct horizons and allocates a space to evil forces that are responsible for all shortcomings and misfortunes.

Baha’ism as a social Messianic movement was a reaction to many political failures and social and cultural backwardness during Qajar dynasty. Two disgraceful capitulations to the Russians led the country, especially the new and old middle classes, to a national awareness. In addition, a deep-rooted corruption among the Shia clerics and the Qajar court led to serious dissent among intellectuals and clerics. That is why most of the new believers were either high-ranking clergymen or Western-inspired intellectuals.

The causes of neglect

Baha'ism propounded ten principles that stand in sharp contrast to Shiaism and in my opinion these are the main source of the Shia antagonism and hatred toward Baha'is. In a nutshell, Baha'i leaders represented the ten-fold religious principles or doctrines, which constitute the fundamental principles of the new religion: missionary activities in order to spread the right religion; unity of all religions; cosmopolitanism; equality of men and women; non-involvement in politics; following the truth; separation of religion and politics; working for peace; compatibility of religion and science; and the importance of education for all.

Strangely for the Iranian society, these claims could shake it from within and step by step move not only beyond the Shia teachings, but also challenge them seriously, thereby antagonizing the Shias. In addition, some Baha'i figures, known as the main guilty of the assassination of the then king Naser al din Shah (1848-96) and also involved in the constitutional revolution, which was against the dynasty. Moreover, in the 20th century and in the Pahlavi era, they have enjoyed some social and economical privileges and also political rights (like voting), which provoked a majority of the Shias, especially Islamists. During 1953 and 1979, they were granted many political and economical benefits from the court, while gradually establishing the monarchy's social base. These are the main factors in estrangement of the Muslims and Baha'is. Hence,

The antagonism was manifested in numerous denials. It is noteworthy that the Shaykhi denials, which are mostly very detailed and complicated – severely criticized Bábism and Baha'ism. The Shaykhi School (established by Shaykh Ahmad Ahsai, a prominent zealous Shia leader who emigrated from Arabia in early 18th century) represented an alternative interpretation of Shiaism, especially on the role of the Imams. The exaggeration on their place in God's will added to the criticism of Bábism and Baha'ism.

These ten-fold principles on the one side, and the Baha'i people's wish to dismantle all clerical classes drew a modern picture of this religion that stands in sharp contrast to Islam and Shiaism, provoking the Shia clerics to take a unified position against the new peril. Even Grand Ayatollah Mohammad-Hossein Boroujerdi, who is generally regarded as a 'different' and more moderate religious leader, especially in the case of separation of religion and politics, played an important role in the anti-Baha'i campaign in the 1950s. There is only one exception: Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, who issued a revolutionary edict in 2008 that recognized 'the right of territoriality' for Baha'is. This right includes all political and civil rights given to Iranian citizens.

As I have mentioned, no Shia religious leader can believe in the rights to practice equality between men and women; convert easily from one religion to another; deny the prophecy of clerics; believe in 'the progressive revelation'; practice the unveiling of women; and diminish the social discrimination. What was more serious was that Bábism and Baha'ism fracture the

Islamic claim that Mohammad is the last prophet. Both Seyyed Ali Mohammad Shirazi known as *Bab* (gate) and Hossein Ali Noori known as Baha ollah (glory of God) denounced the prophecy.

Except for 25 years of relative peace and calm during the rule of Pahlavi's son, Mohammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavi (1941-79), Baha'ism through its history has been regarded as a false or fabricated doctrine invented by British and Russian spies to weaken both national security and religious principles. During the Pahlavi era, the UK and Russia as focus of conspiracy theories were replaced with the US and Israel in the mind of the public and clergy both, and Baha'is were accused of espionage and acts against national security. So, from this perspective, they have had a quite different history, which is not and never has been a matter of concern for the rest of the Iranians. However, affected by the 'fabricated past' Baha'is had, most of the Iranians have no real historical knowledge about them. There were always two options for the Baha'is: either to be persecuted and suppressed or to be forced to leave their land, which is known as the 'Sacred Territory of Iran' – *sarzamine-e moqaddase* Iran. Surprisingly, most of them have chosen the former option. Staying in the 'Sacred Territory' is a religious duty, and ideally, Baha'is should resist any force that will try to persuade them to leave it.

During the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Baha'is were attacked not because of their religion, but their relationship with the court and the benefits that they were granted. Moreover, inspired by the conspiracy theory, the revolutionaries accused them of being US and Israeli spies. Having said all this, one could claim that there is no common past between the majority and the minority. As Antony Smith has pointed out, one of the elements involved in making a new nation is a common past. Both Baha'ism and Shiaism lack this characteristic; there is a lack of binding ties between them. For example, in some occasions when talking about Iran's contemporary history, I wanted my Baha'i students to share their viewpoints with me about the eight-year Iran-Iraq war and persuaded them to open a dialogue on this subject. There is no 'common Baha'i narrative of the meaning and significance' of events like Iran-Iraq war. Neither is there any evidence of their participation in the war, nor any sympathy with the people. I think this attitude is understandable as the reality is that this historical event is considered not as a 'national war' between their countrymen and an enemy, but as an internal war between two Muslim rivals, in which they are not affected in any way.

In addition, the persecution is a part of their history, not that of our, and we have not experienced what they have witnessed over the past 200 years. Living in ghettos during this time has forced the Shias and Baha'is to become accustomed to the ghettoized way of life. By 'ghetto', I mean ideologically and not geographically separated communities that have no common language of understanding each other's past. When there is nothing in common in our past, then there will be nothing in common in our future as well. Smith refers to another phenomenon that plays a main role in making a nation – a collective memory, which is built up by individual memories. Unfortunately in this case, we have no collective memory, and though we share one home, we have different experiences, mentalities and lifestyles.

When I was writing my thesis, I had contacts with some Baha'is and also taught at their 'universities.' There is no university in the accepted sense of the term; there are some classes, which are run by Baha'i administrative and spiritual bodies – *Mahafel* – which aim to preserve the Baha'i culture. I had some precious experiences, which made me understand that most of the cultural, social and political problems we are facing these days neither play an important role in their lives nor do they interest them; this is similar to their reaction to the Iran-Iraq war and other important events like the Iranian Reform Movement (1997-2005) and Green Movement (2009). I believe Baha'is have far different experiences from us. Borrowing Michel Foucault's idea of 'otherness', which, as he points out, is the main cause for exclusion and identification of excluders, one can easily conclude that the Shia seminaries have formed a discourse which has been suppressed, marginalized and put the minority under control. This process determines a different destiny for the minorities, which prevents them from participating equally in any aspect of social life; this is precisely why one cannot find any indication of Baha'i presence in Iran after the revolution. They were not only the main loser of the revolution, which changed their destiny dramatically, but also have been affected by the wave of suppression that began with the end of the revolution and they returned to their traditional role: survival. Since then, they are the absentees of our recent history.

Their main concern is how to survive and preserve the life of 'The Divine Friends', Yaran or *Ahebaye elahi*. In the absence of a common past, our future horizon is different from their horizon, because we have experienced two distinct, separated lives. Some observers argue in favour of Iran's long-standing religious diversity and believe that this diversity has shaped our cultural treasure over the centuries. One can criticize such an explanation arguing that what appears as tolerance was actually based on social, economic and political discrimination prevailing in the relationships between majority and the minorities (Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews, some Islamic sects). These religious communities have barely survived, nothing more; and mere existence is not enough to claim religious diversity.

Moreover, we must distinguish between religious diversity and religious pluralism. The former, as discussed earlier, indicates at least a minimal presence of religious groups in a society. These groups live in the same territory and, in some cases, speak the same language. But religious pluralism refers to a higher level of diversity, which stems from variety, but goes beyond and constitutes a situation involving and implying a polity, a civic context, which provides rules of the game for ethos, and evokes response. By talking about pluralism one enters a terrain in which people have thought about what to do about diversity.

We can raise more questions: where does Baha'is stand at the moment? What is their stance toward the green movement? Do they have any stance at all? The answers depend definitely on our position toward the danger, which at the moment is threatening the lives of seven Baha'i leaders, who are accused of spying for Israel and the West. The Manichean perspective is still as actively at work as in the past.

Since the beginning, Baha'ism has been targeted by the rest of the Shia community, especially Shaykhis, who were representing the reformist trend within Shiaism. Their ten-fold principle in addition to taking up arms against the Qajars resulted in a bloody suppression and decline. Since then, they have been excluders of the Iranian society, who were deprived of all civil, political and economical rights and their situation has worsened after the tenth presidential election in June 2009. The Green Movement as the main representative and voice of the Iranian opposition has to address the question of religious minorities, especially Baha'is.

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Dr. Leila Chamankhah teaches at the Azad University in Kerman and can be contacted at: chamankhahl@yahoo.com

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