

Religious Texts in Iranian Languages

**Symposium held in Copenhagen
May 2002**

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Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab • København 2007

The Persian Bayan and the Shaping of the Babi Renewal

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In the history of modern reform movements in the Muslim world, the Bayani religion of Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad the Bab (1819–1850), otherwise known as the Babi Movement (the forerunner of today’s Baha’i faith), holds a unique place. It is the only movement which consciously and concretely broke away from Islamic beliefs and community and initiated a new prophetic cycle with its own scripture, sense of community, and vision. The Babi religion nevertheless was the product of the religious environment of Shi‘i Iran, and was deeply influenced by the inherent esoteric culture and apocalyptic vision embedded in that tradition. Some features of Babi thought may also be traced back through the Shi‘i sectarian milieu to religion and heresies of pre-Islamic Iran. Yet, in many respects the Babi movement was a new phenomenon. This novelty can be observed in its social composition and historical development, but more so in the apocalyptic urgency by which it meant to transform the prevailing religion of its time. As the Bab put it, his religion was “a new [prophetic] creation (*khalq-i-badi*)” that had come to advance the cycle of human perfection. “The grand cycle is in progression (*kawr dar taraqqist*)”, he declared at a time when Iran, like the rest of the Muslim world, was beginning to experience a sense of despair in the face of Western hegemonic presence and its material and technological advances. The Bab’s call for progress offered an endogenous “modern” answer to the crisis of self-confidence which had lurked in the political, economic, and moral fabric of the Iranian society.

Such a perspective could perhaps be entertained only in an esoteric (*batini*) world view with apocalyptic dynamics of its own and with historical precedence in movements ranging from Isma‘iliyya and Hurufiyya to the Shi‘i-Sufi movements of the early modern period. Yet “esoteric” they all remained, at least so far as articulating new prophetic cycles beyond Islam. The idea of “Perfect Man” in Sufi thought perhaps is the closest alternative to the problem of terminal prophecy in Islam. The only exception in recent centuries, however, is the 14th to 17th century Nuqtavi movement and its advancing of the doctrine of a new

“Persian cycle” (*dawr-i-‘ajam*) which intended to abrogate Muhammad’s mission and terminate Islam.¹ Most esoteric texts, whether speculative or popular, however, are externally conforming to the overarching primacy of Islam as a system of norms and references even though internally they may subvert the sacred text to the level that is beyond the pale of accepted Islam. The Shi‘i doctrine of the Imamate, too, provides a sacred continuity through the line of the Imam only within the frame of Islam. Yet, here, too, the apocalyptic Mahdi in the Final Days brings to an end the rule of the *shari‘a* and effectively ends what may be defined a normative Islam and establishes the post-millennial heavenly order.

What sets the Babi movement apart from this Shi‘i esoteric tradition is that it eventually escapes the binary of inner (*batin*) versus outer (*zahir*) scheme, hence setting about to actualize what may be called the progression of the “divine sacred” from the inner truth into the outer reality. This attempt to “reveal” the inner sacred beyond the perimeter of the adepts (*khawas*)* into the world at large, set Babism at once at odds with both the ‘ulama, as guardian of the external world of the *shari‘a*, and with the guardians of esoteric truth. The Shaykhi school, out of which the Babi movement first emerged, meticulously negotiated the accepted boundaries of the Islamic inner truth and outer reality. The *Bayan* of the Bab, the most important text of a religion named after it, thus denotes “revelation” (*bayan*, lit. ‘explanation’) and has a Koranic connotation that implies divulging the secret truth, presumably to all people.² The Bab applies the term not only to the *Bayan*, as the sacred scripture of his new religion, but to the entire body of his writings, which he considers as key to the secrets of past scriptures. The existential truth that he reveals is for all people to grasp. It is a direct appeal beyond the medium of the elite, whether the mystical adept or the ‘ulama of the *shari‘a*.

The *Bayan* is primarily a manifestation in word, a written text, sig-

¹ See A. Amanat, “The Nuqtawi Movement of Mahmud Pisikhani and his Persian Cycle of Mystical Materialism”, in *Mediaeval Isma‘ili History and Thought* (Cambridge, 1996), 282–98.

* *Recte*, adepts (*khawāṣṣ*, ‘men of distinction’). Singular *khāṣṣa*.

² From the Arabic root *b-y-n* (‘to be or become plain, to explain, to come out’) thus *bayan* denoting clearness, manifestation, elucidation, and explanation. The Koranic verse (3:138) reads; “This is a clear explanation/evidence for people and is a guide and counsel for those who fear God.” The other occurrence (55:4) implies teaching mankind the sacred word: “God the merciful; taught the Qur’an; He created man; taught him to speak/the explanation (‘*allama-hu al-bayan*).”

nifying the ancient Middle Eastern and Indo-European preoccupation with the scripture which culminated in the Qur'an. Muhammad's "proof" (*hujja*) and "evidence" (*bayyina*) as repeatedly pointed to in the Qur'an is primarily the miracle of his words. This emphasis on the miraculous quality of the word also appears in the writings of the Bab. He not only deliberately imitates the Koranic style in his Arabic writing, but he offer speed in uttering words and verses as the proof of his divine inspiration. Furthermore, he is preoccupied with the cabalistic quality of letters and words. This, too, is part of an ancient esoteric tradition that stretches from ancient Babylonian, Judaic and Greek past to Sufism and folk Shi'ism. The Bab employs the Qur'an, and especially the esoteric reading of it, as a point of reference for creating his own innovative text.

This revelatory quality of the *Bayan* can be better understood in the context of the Koranic commentaries that the Bab produced throughout his short prophetic career. Esoteric Shi'ism upholds the view that the existing Qur'an is incomplete and has been corrupted, especially on the issue of 'Ali's succession and the legitimate right of the House of 'Ali. The true Qur'an was believed to be in the Heavens and only to be revealed by the *Mahdi* on the Day of Resurrection. Thus the *Bayan* of the Bab, who himself was a *sayyid* (i.e. a descendent from the House of the Prophet), and the entire body of his work, was perceived as an apocalyptic revelation that was meant to bring down the heavenly book in its entirety and offer it to the people as the true test of their loyalty.¹ Hence the term *furqan* ('the separator'), which is one of the attributes of the Qur'an, in the writing of the Bab is used for the *Bayan* as a text that differentiates between the believers and the deniers. The Islamic "occult sciences" (*al-'ulum al-ghariba*), specifically the cabalistic *al-jafri-i-jami'* and its corollary, the numerological *al-hisab al-jammal*, were viewed as tools to discover the apocalyptic secrets of the scripture and to distinguish between the believers and the deniers. Similarly, belief in the

¹ At the time of writing the *Bayan*, the Bab was familiar with the new Persian translation of the New Testament and therefore must have read John's Book of Revelation. Yet, it is doubtful that he was inspired by it in his composition of the *Bayan* or in the choice of the title. Henry Martyn translated St. John's Book of Apocalypse (or Book of Revelation) as *Mukashifat-i-Yuhanna*. Nowhere in the *Bayan* does this term occur in any form. For the Bab's familiarity with the NT see A. Amanat, *Resurrection and ReNewal: the Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca, 1989), 197-98. For the new translation of the NT see A. Amanat, "Mujtahids and Missionaries: Shi'i Responses to Christian Polemics in the Early Qajar Period", *Religion and Society in Qajar Iran*, ed. R. Gleave, London & New York, 2005, pp. 247-69.

magical quality of the *awrad* (incantations) and *adhkar* (prayers) put great emphasis on the recitation and chanting of the divine words. The talismanic images and composition (and by extension their calligraphic production) were of equal significance. As evident in the writings of the Bab, including the *Bayan*, the oral and written text are not exclusively, or even primarily, viewed for their functional value as means of communication. As a meditative tool, remembrance (*dhikr*) in the Babi writings, as in Sufi traditions, served an entirely different purpose of intuitively revealing to the reader the divine sacred. The author of the divine word, in this case the Bab, as well as those who utter them, all become part of the magical practice of the incantation (*dhikr*). The fact that the Bab calls himself the *dhikr* implies that he is an inseparable part of his own text.¹ This discourse between the text, the author, and the reader is one of the remarkable features of the Babi writings.

The *Bayan* as a discursive scripture

To better appreciate the innovative character of the *Bayan* and its place in the Babi corpus we must first look at the circumstances of its authoring and highlight some of its pertinent themes. The *Bayan* was viewed by the Bab and his followers as well as by his opponents as the most consistent exposition of the Babi theology, law, and world view. First started in 1263/1847 in Maku, where the Bab was incarcerated in a frontier fortress in north-western Azarbaijan, the *Bayan* received relatively wide publication within the Babi circles even during the Bab's own short life. Before his execution in 1266/1850 his followers possessed copies of the yet incomplete *Bayan* and already were speculating on the identity of the Messiah promised by the Bab. The so-called "He Whom God shall manifest (*man uzhurullah*)" had received an extraordinary preferential treatment in the *Bayan* as the forthcoming "manifestation" who will complete, alter, enforce and even abrogate the laws of the *Bayan*.²

¹ This also corresponds to the NT notion of *logos* as in John's gospel.

² So far the *Bayan* has received little scholarly attention. Except for the French translation by A. L. M. Nicolas and E. G. Browne's classifying its contents (*Nuqtatu'l-Kaf being the Earliest History of the Babis compiled by Haji Mirza Jani of Kashan* [London, 1910], liv-cxcv). See also D. MacEoin, *Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism*, Pembroke Persian Papers, vol. 2 (London, 1994) and his entry in *Elr*: "Bayān". The

Yet, as a text consciously conceived as a scripture, the *Bayan* barely provides a comprehensive social program or even a coherent vision of the communal life. Rather, it is a curious blend of speculative theology with *shari'a*-orientated legal and pragmatic instructions. Its organization is governed by a sacred numerological order that is replicated beyond the text in the community of the believers and further through the entire divinely-ordained universe. The *Bayan* was originally perceived of as having 19 units (e.g. *wahid*), each consisting of 19 chapters (e.g. *bab*) to constitute the total of 361 chapters ($19 \times 19 = 361$). According to the *abjad* numerical system the number 361 equal the Koranic phrase “all things” (*kullu shay'*), a highly charged mystical notion often rendered in Shi'ite speculative literature as the Being (*wujud*).¹

In reality, the *Bayan's* divine structure remained incomplete. For uncertain reasons the Bab did not proceed beyond chapter 10 of unit 9 of his book. He may have abandoned it because of [a] lack of inspiration prompted by captivity, home sickness, and grief (*huzn*), sentiments that mark the writing of the Maku period. No doubt the looming threats of harsher incarceration and even execution were in his mind especially after the 1848 inquisition in Tabriz when he was interrogated by the 'ulama, humiliated, and physically punished. Later, in his testimonial will the Bab assigned the task of completing the remaining units of the *Bayan* to his successor, if suitable conditions prevailed. This was interpreted by later Babis as the task of the ‘He Whom God shall manifest’.²

Baha'i apathy toward the study of the Babi texts is particularly disheartening given the immense place that [the] *Bayan* holds in the evolution of the Baha'i law and outlook. As late as the 1860's in Edirne, Baha'u'llah in the Muslim tradition of addressing the Qur'an, referred to the *Bayan* as “the mother book” (*umm al-kitab*). The impact of the *Bayan* on the Babi-Azali world view is also worth attention. It can be argued that the teachings of the *Bayan* influenced Babi activists during the Constitutional Revolution. The early Azali treatment of the *Bayan* was largely in line with the Islamic notion of scripture as a source of the *shari'a*, as for instance in the writings of Mirza Yahya Subh Azal. A vivid exception is the *Ta'rif-i-Shari'at-i-Bayan*, a modernistic commentary presumably authored by Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani which aims to reconcile the Babi teaching[s] with the ideas of the Enlightenment and with the positivistic philosophy then in vogue.

¹ See for example Qur'an 21:34. See also Amanat, *Resurrection*, 191–93.

² *Bayan* (Tehran, n. d.) appendix p. 340. The Arabic *Bayan*, written at the same time period as the Persian version, and with identical structure, was completed up to [the] end of the unit 11. Based on the Arabic version, Subh Azal added twenty eight units to the Persian *Bayan* which brought it to the end of unit 11. He left the rest incomplete for the time of glory (*'izza*), as the Bab had requested. Baha'u'llah's *Iqan* and later [the] *Aqdas* are both viewed by the early Baha'is as addenda to the *Bayan*.

The Bab produced two versions of the *Bayan*, one in Persian and another in Arabic, presumably during the same time period. Though they are not entirely compatible, they were intended to serve the same purpose. Whereas the Arabic *Bayan*, a summary of the Babi doctrine, was aimed at emulating the Arabic Qur'an, the Persian *Bayan* intended to offer all believers a direct access to the canon of the Babi theology and law free from any human intermediary and linguistic obstacles. This drive toward "democratization" of the scripture, a reminiscent of vernacular translations of the Bible during the Reformation, was in sharp contrast to the Islamic learned culture of the time and the Shi'i 'ulama' textual monopoly. Even by the middle decades of the 19th century, very few works of religious scholarship were written in Persian.¹ The principal of *ijtihad* further reinforced the legal monopoly of the dominant Usuli elite and in effect made the lay access to the sources of the sacred law more difficult. The 'ulama's reluctance to employing Persian carried a certain cultural bias in favor of Arabic as the language of religious scholarship. Persian works by the 'ulama were not rare, ranging from Islamic fundamental creeds to the literature of Muharram eulogy and anti-Sufi and anti-missionary polemics. Yet, by the time the *Bayan* was composed, there was little public access to any sacred text, including any Persian translation of the Qur'an. The printed Persian translation of the New Testament, first published in 1815 and reprinted three times by 1834, was the first widely printed scripture available to the Persian-speaking public. The *Bayan*, which intended to address this cultural lacuna, may have been influenced by the message and tone of the New Testament, given numerous references in the text to Jesus and the Gospels. Yet in the main, the *Bayan* came in a long line of such inspirational literature either of Sufi or apocalyptic character, including Isma'ili, Hurufi and Nuqtavi texts.

The fact that the Bab recommended the printing of the *Bayan* and other Babi writings only confirms his intention to make his works more widely available. In the *Bayan* he specifies:

About printing (*chap*) and what is ordained. The summary of this chapter is that printing is permitted [of] the *Bayan* and whatever is written under its wing and according to it, until the manifestation of

¹ The most widely used work of the Shi'i law available to the general public, for instance, was still Shaykh Baha' al-Din 'Amili's *Jami'-i-'Abbasi*, a *fiqh* compendium commissioned by Shah 'Abbas I in the early 17th century.

He Whom God shall manifest. By that time if all [people] are empowered in a manner that they could preserve the divine words in a good writing hand, he then will order it [to be done in long hand]. Otherwise, whatever necessitates his generosity and grace, he will permit it. And after that there will be no excuse for any single person before God for not having a [copy of the] *Bayan* so as to remember He Whom God shall manifest. It is [to be produced] in the best of hand, not like what is customary today, to the extent that they print whatever bad writing they can lay their hands on. It has reached a stage that the gift price of the Qur'an has been reduced to 28 *nukhud* of silver. If it was not out of concern for the poor [financial] capacity of most believers, no doubt this [i.e. printing] would not have been permitted but now [i.e. in future] that all live in the shadow of the essence of God's grace, by his permission whoever can write the *Bayan* best, it is favorable for his own being rather than possessing even a well printed copy.¹

The above passage demonstrates the Bab's pragmatic recognition of printing as an invaluable tool of mass communication in the wake of a new era of greater literacy, even at the expense of condoning the decline of his beloved art of calligraphy. Yet the same passage quoted above, typical of the *Bayan*, betrays some of the peculiarities of the Bab's style, which made its comprehension difficult even for the educated believers. His fascination with speed in uttering "verses" (*ayat*), no doubt in the manner of the fragmented style of the Qur'an, is frequently offered in the Bab's writings as proof of his divine inspiration. Preoccupation with speed as a prophetic miracle nonetheless seriously affected the Bab's style and hindered its public appeal. His Persian is often hurried, convoluted, and repetitive and as far as grammar is concerned, it leaves much to be desired.

Peculiarities of the *Bayan*, which makes the text at times disjointed and even incoherent, at least by the standards of conventional Persian, nevertheless betrays a certain degree of originality. It can be argued that the *Bayan's* inspirational style was shaped in the form of a discourse with an amanuensis, or more likely, as expressions of the Bab's inner dialogue with his believers. Frequent use of intimate second person singular and colloquial pronoun *un* ('that'), instead of proper *an*, and similar features of colloquial speech, also indicate a desire to break away

¹ *Bayan* 8:7 (188).

from the formalities of classical Persian so as to incorporate features of the spoken language. His unhappy experience with the *madrassa* education and his consistent resistance to conventional learning may also have contributed to his improvised style. Many instances in the *Bayan*, as in his other works, betray an artistic search for a new medium of expression, in language as in calligraphy and in talismanic images, mostly in his favorite *shikasta* (broken) style.

Yet, this use of plain Persian in the *Bayan* is often blended with advanced, and at times obscure, technical terms from *hikmat* and *fiqh* literature that carry complex textual references to philosophical and esoteric Shi'ism. This concoction of colloquial and technical diction, with its philosophical and legal references, once wrapped in the Bab's liturgical style, give the *Bayan* a certain surreal quality which may best be called "post-modern", in the vogue of our time. It is this intuitive quality that invites the reader to experience with the author the esoteric dimension of the text; and through the text experience its unifying context in the external universe; a context which becomes readable through the numerological key of verses, words, letters and numbers.

This numerological organizing principal of the *Bayan* in its external expression divides mankind into the believers and non-believers, or in the Babi idiom, into the letters of the light and the letters of the fire (*huruf-i-nur wa huruf-i-nar*). The cornerstone of this communal order is the "point of the *Bayan*" (*nuqta-yi-Bayan*), or the "primal point" (*nuqta-yi-'ula*), associated with the Bab himself. Emanated from this primal point is the building block of the community, the letters (*huruf*) of believers, who are to be organized in words and chapters, identical with the structure of the *Bayan*. The eighteen "Letters of the Living", as the Bab designated his early believers, together with the primal point, constituted the foundation of the Babi community and its revitalizing force. The units that are to be generated by the Letters, were to create the Babi community symbolically, the so called "all things" (*kullu shay'*). The same divine principle is also at work in the organization of time. The new solar Babi calendar of 365 days consisted of 19 months of 19 days each plus four extra days known as the days of *ha*. The New Year is to be celebrated at the vernal equinox, the Iranian festival of *Nowruz*. Through numerological equivalents the Bab thus defines as a text the Babi community and the Babi time, a symbolic order that is waiting to be read.

This Neo-Platonic binary system of microcosm and macrocosm, long enduring in the Islamic esoteric circles, is also evident in the Bab's preoccupation with talismans and emulates, [*recte*, amulets] which are recommended in the

Bayan. The production of a series of pentagram figures known as *hayakil* and of circular tables known as *dawa'ir* were intended to connect the sacred text with its human and universal context.¹ This esoteric symbolism may be viewed as an expression of worldly empowerment and a desire for controlling the material surrounding[s] by thaumaturgic manipulation of words and numbers. In its popularized application, the charms (sg. *harz*) and talismans (sg. *tilism*) possess protective and remedial qualities which shield their wearer against bad omens, whether physical or metaphysical. The emphasis on this magical power of the words is not accidental. At the time, we may speculate, the Bab, his followers and countrymen had many causes to aspire for a measure of control over intrusive forces that appeared in their surroundings. Among them we may include the Europeans.

Indeed the bipolar division between the believers and non-believers in the *Bayan* is further complicated, or perhaps modified, by the presence of a new category of people, namely the Christians. The “letters of the Gospel (*huruf-i-injil* or *huruf-i-alif*)” may primarily be read as a reference to the Europeans, towards whom the *Bayan* remain essentially ambivalent. They are a potential threat to the land of the *Bayan*, and therefore are to be expelled if they pose an actual danger to the security of the community. This assertion may be taken as a relic of the long-standing Islamic prohibitions against the entry of the infidel into the abode of Islam, reinforced here, no doubt, by the actual menace of [the] European presence. This threat became more tangible to the Bab in Maku, where he witnessed Russian advances in the north after two rounds of war with Iran. Between 1805 and 1828 the Persian defeats resulted in [a] major loss of territory, a sizable population of the émigrés (*muhajirin*) in Azerbaijan, and a great loss of Islamic confidence and state prestige. Earlier in his career [*recte* career] as a trader in the southern port of Bushehr on the Persian Gulf, the Bab also witnessed the growing British commercial and military presence in his homeland, the Far province.

Yet the Bab's entrepreneurial background partially overcame his understandable concern for [the] foreign presence. He states in the *Bayan* that the letters of the Gospel are not to be entirely avoided, especially if they are “merchants and engage in useful professions.” In these cases they are allowed to settle among the believers, even though trade with them is subject to some regulations. Moreover, Europeans are praised in the *Bayan* for their demeanor and public conduct, their cleanliness, and

¹ *Bayan* 7:10 (252). See also MacEoin, *Rituals*, 14–21.

technological advances. Reference to book printing and regular postal service in Europe may also be seen as his recognition of the importance of mass communication in the spread of his religion. He seems to be anticipating the emergence of the press as the defining character of a modern national community.

On another level, the Bab's frequent references in the *Bayan* to Jesus and his mission, demonstrate a deep engagement in the figure of Christ whom he rediscovered in the printed Persian translation of the New Testament. His preoccupation evidently goes beyond the Muslim polemical response to the Christian missionaries on the validity of the Gospels and absorbs the Bab at a personal level. He identifies with the story of Jesus and with his forbearance, suffering and sacrifice. Such an affinity seems to be particularly fitting to the Bab's non-violent disposition and his denouncing in the *Bayan* of resorting to violence as [a] means of spreading his message. Desire for peaceful growth, in contrast to the dominant paradigm of *jihad* and military conquest, placed the word, rather than the sword, at the center of [the] *Bayan's* engagement with power.¹

In challenging the prevailing norms of his time, the Bab also encouraged greater inclusion of women in the Babi community. He refers to them in the *Bayan* with the talismanic name of "possessors of the circle" (*dhawat-i-dawa'ir*), presumably a gender signifier in contradistinction to men as pentagram frames (*hayakil*). Both sexes are needed for the building of the primeval letters of the Babi community. Reaffirming women's legal personality similar to the Islamic law, the *Bayan* further facilitates more communication between the sexes and imposes fewer gender restrictions though it does not altogether escape the patriarchal mores of its time. An indication of the Bab's favorable view of women's public role can be observed in the case of Fatima Zarrin-Taj Baraghani, better known as Qurrat al-'Ayn and Tahira. The Bab conferred on her the title of *Tahira* ('the pure') in defiance of the charge of immodesty which was brought against her because of her attempt to remove her facial veil. Furthermore, he recognized her equal rank among the Babi primal rank of the Letters of the Living, an unprecedented position in the Bab's communal sacred scheme.²

¹ *Bayan*, 7:6 (245). The *Bayan* even goes so far as prohibiting the believers from carrying weapons of any sort, an aversion no doubt reflecting the level of violence the Bab witnessed in his urban surroundings and at a national scale.

² It is questionable, however, whether the Bab condoned Tahira's emergence after 1848 as the prime leader of the radical wing of the movement during the Badasht gathering.

Other features of an endogenous communal awareness are evident in the *Bayan*'s designation of Shiraz, the Bab's birthplace and the capital of the Fars province, as the "mother of all cities" (*umm al-qura'*) and a place of pilgrimage for all believers. This significant shift of the center of the sacred from Mecca to Shiraz, especially after the Bab's disillusioning *Hajj* pilgrimage in 1261/1845, displays a doctrinal autonomy that sets him apart from the prevailing Islamic identity of his time. Even though the shadow of the Shi'i culture was never lifted from the *Bayan*, there was an urge for what may be called a constructive disengagement from Islam by inventing a new Bayani *shari'a* tradition. A number of revolutionary injunctions in the *Bayan*, including obliteration of all non-Bayani books (*mahw-i-kutub*), aimed at that doctrinal break. The *Bayan* unabashedly commands the believers to destroy all books that are not "in support of God's faith (*amr Allah*) and His religion." The Bab's aversion towards Islamic *madrassa* schooling, which he considered as a futile exercise in sophistry and fallacy, may be responsible for this ruling. Yet the severity of this apocalyptic injunction has been softened, as virtually in all similar cases, by placing the final judgment at the desecration of the He Whom God shall manifest.¹ It is as though the Bab viewed his own *Bayan*, and the religion it represented, as a transitory stage towards establishing a more mature and balanced social order in the future. How near a future remains a mystery but most assertions in the *Bayan* implies an impending appearance of the Babi Messiah. It is as though the Bab's disillusionment with prospects of mass conversion and his own incarceration and sufferings persuaded him to project into the future the creating of a utopian order.

The messianic hope for this utopian order to come did not diminish what may be called the divine absolutism of the *Bayan*, and by implication, the mystic-theocratic order it envisioned. The Bab's political vision no doubt acknowledged the believers' collective responsibility, even collective leadership and a shared destiny for the Bayani community. The Bab's own peaceful and non-violent disposition was also inclined towards delegation of power to a hierarchical leadership. Yet, the *Bayan* even more than the Qur'an required from the believer the total submission to the will of a monistic and omnipotent God. Every page of the *Bayan* acknowledges the all-embracing power of this divine source and man's sheer powerlessness before him. In this community of hermeneutical symbiosis, the Bab does not arrogate great power to the

¹ *Bayan* 6:6 (198–200).

‘ulama or to the kings, though both parties do appear in the *Bayan*. The ultimate power rests with the unknowable truth (*haqq*) that only emanates in the mirror of all people (*khalq*), but not through the media of the kings and the priests. Rather, he manifests himself through successive prophetic “manifestations” (*zuhurat*) that appear at the renewal of each cycle and will appear in future cycles of a progressive course of divine revelation. They are in effect the masters of the universe as far as they actuate the unequivocal divine will at their own time.

This unsettling landscape of absolute theocracy in the *Bayan*, however, is sharply modified even undermined, by frequent emphasis on the changing will of God and the impermanence of human conditions. This divine will, the *Bayan* insists, requires successive manifestation[s] and frequent change[s] of the *shari’a* according to the need of the time, the idea which is at heart of the Babi theory of prophecy. The laws of the *Bayan* itself, the Bab constantly reminded the believers, will be subject to abrogation upon the appearance of He Whom God shall manifest. The believers were repeatedly forewarned that they should anticipate, and indeed welcome, this Messiah’s impending advent. Reflecting on his own persecution, the Bab admonishes his own believers from opposing any claim even if it may be false, lest they may impede the appearance of the true Messiah. This state of perpetual manifestation borders on the notion of a pantheistic prophecy whereby any human being can claim to be a manifestation of God.¹

This democratization of the sacred is one of the most important aspects of the *Bayan* and directly corresponds to the Babi theory of progressive revelation. The very apocalyptic dynamism that the Bab set in motion was a quest for future human improvement. The ever-growing “tree of truth” (*shajara-yi-haqiqat*) with its seasonal turns, a favorite imagery of the Bab, demanded that the course of prophetic revelation continue and even accelerate with the ultimate aim of human spiritual perfection. This perfection, as the *Bayan* alludes, comes with He Whom God shall manifest, who is not only a person but a state of human development.

The *Bayan* present a fully-fledged version of the Babi theory of prophecy. Like the Qur’an, it considers and recognizes the Abrahamic chain of prophets from Adam on and traces among them a certain historical continuity and doctrinal affinity. Yet unlike normative Islam that

¹ Not surprisingly, after the execution of the Bab the same spirit of democratic epiphany came to haunt the distraught Babi community for decades.

considers Muhammad as the “seal of the prophets” and the end of the prophetic revelation, the Bab, and especially in the *Bayan*, views divine revelation communicated through the prophets, or rather divine “manifestations”, as an open-ended and unstoppable process. In an ingenious symbolic interoperation of the eschatological doctrine of Resurrection (*qiyamat*) in Islam, the Bab considers each resurrection as the end of an old prophetic cycle and the beginning of a new one. The “tree of truth”, which in its Babi context stands for divine interaction with humankind, goes through seasonal turns. Each prophetic revelation and religious tradition that it generates has its own cycle with spring of new birth, summer of development, autumn of coming to fruition, and winter of decay and death. The end of each cycle in this theory of progressive prophecy does not terminate the life of the “tree of truth”. Rather in a spiral process of cyclical progression it leads to its growth and further maturation. The Bayani manifestation, in the Bab’s view, is one more in the chain of gradual perfection of human truth (or human wisdom: *‘ilm*), but with an important exception. The *Bayan* seems to suggest that the advent of He Whom God shall manifest is not merely another cycle of prophecy, like those of the past and even that of the Bab. Rather, it is a divine manifestation that brings mankind into its full maturation and free from any future prophets, and subsequently, of any *shari‘a*-orientated tradition.

Conclusion

As a text which meant to be a “revelation” (or *apocalypse*), divulging the esoteric meaning of the Qur’an (and past prophetic revelations as a whole), the *Bayan* came to mark the final stage of the Babi break with Islam. In attempting to establish a new relationship between humankind and the divinity, between the profane and the sacred, the Babi movement in a way put an end to the long held Sufi-Shi‘i taboo of differentiating the esoteric from the exoteric. By declaring an independent cycle of revelation, the *Bayan* demonstrated a genuine desire to generate in content and language a new scripture. Yet it did not free itself from the very Islamic (or monotheistic) *shari‘a* model that it set out to abrogate in the first place. In contrast to the Islamic clerical emphasis on Arabic, the Bab’s opting for Persian as the sacred language signaled a budding sense of national awareness. Its message of cyclical yet progressive renewal was rooted in the Shi‘i as well as the Manichaean and Zoroastri-

an traditions. Both these features, the new language and the message of renewal, presented a discourse of indigenous modernity unique to modern Iranian religious experience.

It may be argued that it was only through revealing the esoteric culture of Shi'i Islam that a self-educated layman like the Bab could improvise a crucial crossing from the traditional religion to an endogenous form of modernity. The essentially progressive, rather than regressive, historical perspective presented in the *Bayan* offered revolutionary potential for moral and material transformation of the Iranian society, potentials which remained unfulfilled even in the twentieth century.