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Our diverse cities

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The Experience of Iranian Bahá'í Refugees in Atlantic Canada

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This article describes the experiences of Iranian Bahá'ís who came to Atlantic Canada in the 1980s as refugees and, unlike the vast majority of non-European immigrants, stayed. The experiences of these immigrants shed light on the challenge of retaining immigrants to the Atlantic provinces. The material comes from an ongoing, in-depth interview study with Iranian Bahá'í refugees who have lived in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island for at least 10 years, and, in most cases, 20.¹ The article provides background and then focuses on the contrast between the welcome participants received from local Bahá'ís and the broader community.

The Bahá'í faith originated in Persia (now Iran) in 1844. Its founders, the Báb (1819-1850) and Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), were respectively martyred and exiled and imprisoned. Bahá'ís assert the common foundation of all revealed religions and that there is one God.² Although persecution intensified after the Islamic revolution, including widespread arrests and the execution of more than 200 Bahá'ís, they have experienced ongoing persecution that has waxed and waned over the past 150 years (Dosa 2004).

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A relatively small number of Persian Bahá'ís have come to live in Atlantic Canada since 1984. Although figures are hard to come by, perhaps some 200 Persians initially settled in Atlantic Canada, the majority of whom have since left the region. While some came directly from Iran, most came from Pakistan, Malaysia, Oman, India and other countries to which they had escaped or where they were unable to secure their Iranian passport.

Brief literature review

There are a handful of studies about the experiences of Persian Bahá'ís in North America. They indicate that their adjustment and integration has proceeded more successfully than that of other Iranians, such as those in Los Angeles (Bozorgmehr 1992). In Vancouver, Bahá'ís “presented moral cosmopolitanism as a

¹ This study was funded by a grant from Atlantic Metropolis Centre and the Canada Research Chair program.

² For more information on Bahá'í teachings, see www.Bahai.org.

³ Often, Iranian Bahá'ís refer to themselves as “Persian Bahá'ís,” perhaps to highlight the culture rather the politics of Iranian society. Bahá'ís, whether Iranian or not, are politically non-partisan; they are the well-wishers of government.

constitutive component of belonging to a world community...a concept that embodies the notions of unity, diversity and the oneness of humanity, central teachings of the Bahá'í faith" (Swanton 2005:32-33). Researchers have found similar situations in Australia (Feather et al. 1992).

Very few studies have explored the experiences of non-European immigrants in Atlantic Canada. Although Atlantic Canada has a strong interest in attracting and retaining immigrants, it has a much lower rate of retention than larger centres (Houle 2007). Until recently, the population of Atlantic Canada has had little experience welcoming immigrants who do not come from England, Scotland or Ireland, and, as Radford (2007: 50) has commented, almost no work has been done regarding the "experiences of newcomers" in communities that have previously not had "immigrant or visible minority populations."

The Persian Bahá'ís of Atlantic Canada provide a unique situation because, although they did not have an in-place ethnic group in which to embed themselves, they were greeted by an eager local community of co-religionists made up of Canadians. Gilad's (1990: 238) ethnography of refugees from a variety of ethnic backgrounds who settled in Newfoundland describes the integration of Iranian Bahá'ís into the community as "somewhat astounding." She notes that they "quickly prove an asset to the [Bahá'í] community."

This article explores two dimensions of experiences of the Iranian Bahá'í newcomers' in Atlantic Canada: their reception from Canadian Bahá'ís and the strategies they used to overcome the prejudice they faced in the host society.

First contact with Canadian Bahá'ís

When the Persian refugees arrived in Canada, they had little idea of what to expect, and what they knew was more relevant to large cities. For example, this couple who arrived in Canada as newlyweds at the age of 20 flew into Halifax and then came to Fredericton by train:

There were no tall buildings....I thought we were going to a place like New York...nothing but trees...coming from a country that's got 68 million people...people everywhere. Here, there's nobody on the streets in the wintertime.

The culture in Canada was unfamiliar. Two significant differences were the timing of meals and the lack of an element of Persian culture called *tarof*.⁴

Supper is very early in Canada....[At] lunch time, P. called....Just soup or some bread....This is lunch?....And around 4:30, 5:00, she announced supper was ready. We couldn't believe that....We had very much Persian *tarof*Sometimes we missed the supper or lunch because we said, "no thank you" [laughter]. And later on, they found out [about] *tarof*...and they tried to learn our culture.

The first Persian Bahá'ís to arrive did not know anyone. Many came in the dead of winter. Three things about their arrival stand out: first, the local Bahá'ís met them at the airport or train station; second, the Bahá'ís treated them like family; third, the host Bahá'í communities let the newcomers know that they were very important to them. Gilad (1990: 121) reports a similar welcome extended to Persian refugees by the Bahá'ís of Newfoundland. She notes that immigrants reported "sharing a happy reunion [with local Bahá'ís] even though they had not met before."

When the newcomers landed, they did not expect to be met by the local Bahá'ís. M. recalled:

When we came to the train station...all the Bahá'ís were [there]....Very exciting time, and [they] took my wife, took my luggage, took myself, and I'm thinking, "Wow! Where are we going?"...We stayed at B.'s house for two months....I felt that being a Bahá'í was the most incredible thing in life, because I knew nobody.

His wife, still moved to tears by the memory 20 years later, described it this way:

First arrived....I saw the big banners reading "Bahá'ís"....all kinds of faces...all white and blonde....We were thinking that one...person would come see us at the train station, but not the entire [Bahá'í] community....It was just overwhelming.

⁴ *Tarof* is a component of Persian etiquette whereby the guest refuses offers of food three times before accepting. Many immigrants found that when they said, "no, thank you," the host did not continue to offer the food, and they missed many meals that way. These experiences have come to represent cherished memories shared by the newcomers and host Bahá'ís.

The ties between the Persian Bahá'ís and the families with whom they stayed, often for several months, remain strong: "They didn't have any idea who I was, but they accepted me with open arms. And we became almost like a family....We still feel like a family."

Many refugees arrived without appropriate winter clothing. The local Bahá'ís brought appropriate clothing with which to welcome them:

Ten years in India...we had no winter clothes, nothing. I had slippers and a sari...The second of February and snow up to here....And [they] brought some jackets and coats and boots...to the airport.

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The local Bahá'í communities were very excited to greet members of their faith who had come from their faith's birthplace. The greeting was not an act of charity, but rather one of welcoming people who were valuable to the community and would be given an opportunity to become actively involved immediately. One man remembers that as soon as he arrived in a small town in Nova Scotia, he was told that he was a member of the local governing board which, at the time, was in need of a ninth member.⁵ A woman explained that the Bahá'ís communicated the newcomer's importance by taking turns accompanying her to arrange paperwork and look for apartments and jobs. She commented, "There were times...you just feel lonely...far from your family. But thinking...you have a family here, which helped a lot."

Encountering the broader society

The larger society offers a contrasting image of how the Persian Bahá'í refugees were received. They noted that the broader community demonstrated prejudice, fear of people who are "dark" and an unwillingness to include newcomers in their social lives.

⁵ When there are nine adult members in a local area, the community elects a local spiritual assembly to administer its affairs.

These reactions were immediately obvious in the unwillingness of employers to hire people who looked and sounded different:

It's what motivates the idea of saying, "No, I can't hire you. Sorry....We'd rather have someone who is white, speaks with the same accents...and has the qualifications...." That's what they think.

One person reported that he was asked if he had Canadian experience even when he applied for a job as a dishwasher. He informed his potential employer that people used dishes in Iran as well as in Canada and was hired. Prejudice can be subtle, but its effects are quite visible:

It was really hard to get a job. And everybody was fearful: "Is this guy a good guy to work for me and is he going to be able to talk in a [way] that I can understand? Is he going to drive my customers away?"

Getting a job was hard enough, but promotions and recognition were also hard to come by. One woman reported being passed over repeatedly for promotion to manager of her store even though she was the top salesperson. Another Bahá'í, who had risen to the position of Director of a Federal Government department, recounted the experience of being ignored by someone who had come from Ottawa to interview this supervisor about her job. The interviewer could not seem to grasp that it was the immigrant who was the supervisor and the Canadian, the assistant: "I was just the third person, just simply watching and I couldn't say anything. What could I say?...As far as I do my job and the Government is happy, I'm happy."

Skin colour, in the words of Everett C. Hughes, had become the master status in many of the refugees' relationships.

These Bahá'ís also found it challenging to be included socially:

You know, you're either white Canadian people or you were not part of them. So, it was kind of hard to break into. We are living here for almost about 14 years...when we are outside in

the summertime...they say "Hi." But for inviting or if we invite them, they don't come.

The Persian refugees dealt with prejudice in several ways, some of which were quite creative. For example, some interpreted their experiences of prejudice as individual problems rather than representative of the whole society: "You find odd people that are prejudiced, but you cannot really say that [about] the entire city or entire town."

Not personalizing the problem is the flip side of the coin. One Persian Bahá'í shared the following: "You know, it's very obvious, it's very obvious....I don't [take it] personally....Even after 100 years...I am immigrant. You know, I have to accept that."

One refugee neutralized his feelings by explaining that, given the circumstances in the world, no one should be blamed for being afraid of strangers, especially those with dark skins, and opining that fear results from ignorance.

In the same light, one person tactfully described Maritimers as "a very reserved community." Another Persian simply talks about the fact that Maritime culture is "different:" Persian culture requires one to be hospitable, and he analyzed the experience of not being invited into people's homes as simply a difference between cultures:

I love talking to the people [in the neighbourhood]...really nice people....Our neighbours [in Iran] we can talk, and we can go to their house, but here, no. Maybe you can talk on the street, just few minutes and say "hi" or "bye" like this. You know, maybe their culture is different.

The contrast between the openness of the Bahá'ís with the reserve of other Maritimers is striking:

Especially in a small places like P.E.I., they are [all] related....They all know each other. They don't see anybody outside the family. And that's why, seeing somebody outside the family, and especially different colour, different colour of hair, different colour the face....Maybe protecting themselves....Look at us, we're Bahá'ís, we never met each other but we, so lovingly, kindly, sitting and talking, and we came, they [had] never met us...and they sent [people] to airport to receive a stranger, a stranger from Iran....They came to receive us....But we have to start somewhere. The sooner we start, the sooner we reach that goal.

The Persian refugees took preventative measures to address prejudices they experienced. It is striking that they took responsibility for the way others reacted to them. Take the example of a professional photographer's decision not to carry a camera case on a city bus:

I had a problem about two, three days ago. I had my camera case in my hand, trying to catch a bus to go to work. And I felt that people were looking at me like, "is this bus going to blow up?"...You don't know what people are thinking. They're just nervous...with what's going on today....The world is not that safe a place right now, unfortunately, but being dark.

In addition to being more friendly than usual, he decided to go empty-handed when he takes the bus.

When a neighbour mentioned to an Iranian woman that "people think that you have a rifle in your basement," she decided to take the creative route. She invited her neighbour to visit and gave her a tour of the whole house including, "coincidentally," her basement. She commented, "...and now they are very, very friendly."

At other times, their strategy is more formal. The same woman said:

It was actually my suggestion to just send somebody to the schools and have a presentation about newcomers, about refugees and about colour and other societies. I went once myself to one school and spoke about the refugees because [the children] had some problems...and I use the example...that in the garden, if you have two different colours of roses, it's beautiful, and they loved it.

The interviews are remarkable for the lack of anger and even disappointment among the Persian Bahá'ís. One Bahá'í thought that the relentless persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran had somehow made the prejudice experienced in Canada a rather mild matter, resulting from a lack of education:

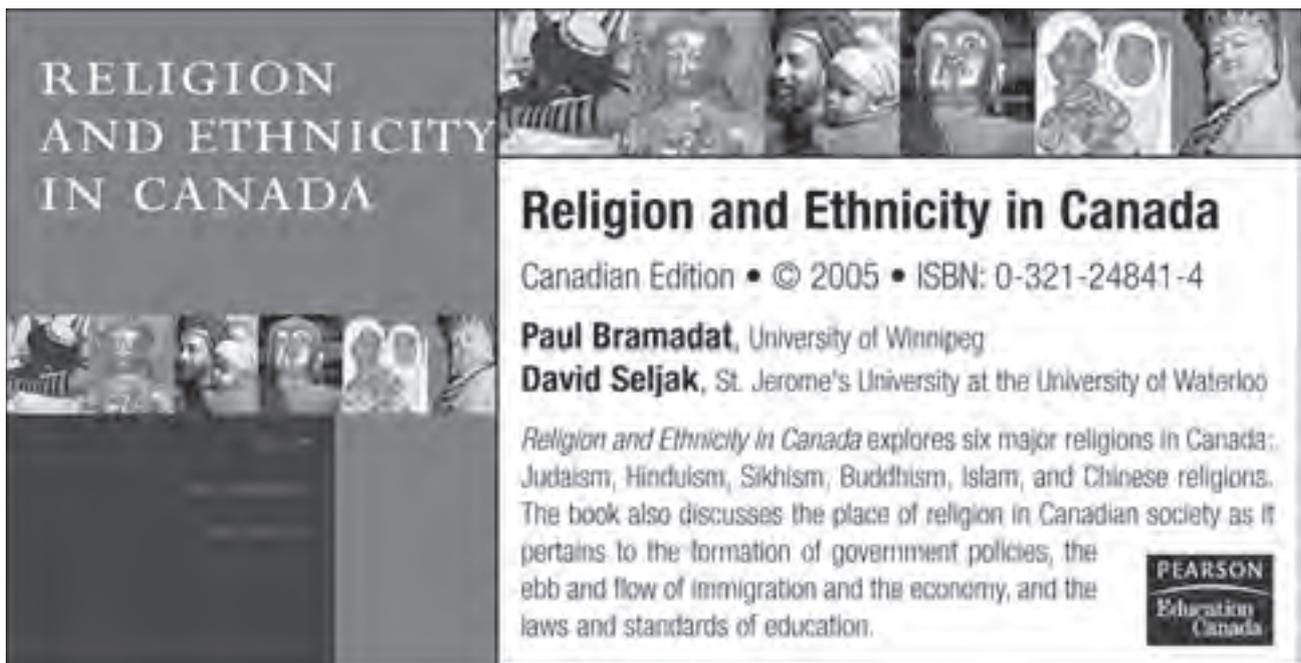
[I am] used to people being prejudiced. So, I mean, it's great that we came to Canada. We came to Canada, and you don't see as much prejudice [as] we used to see back home. And then [it's just] one or two people that we see. It's not that bad. You know, and obviously we really think they are not educated, obviously.

Conclusion

The contrast between the welcome the Bahá'í refugees received from local Bahá'ís and the wider community is striking. The warmth of the local Bahá'ís' greeting sheds a light on the social distance that the refugees experienced in the wider community. Most non-European immigrants do not have a significant community in the Maritimes to which they automatically belong – ethnic or otherwise. Thus, they are unlikely to remain in a region of the country where the local residents are unable or unwilling to integrate them into the mainstream of daily life. In addition, it is likely that Atlantic Canadians are often unaware of this problem. We often hear that we need more programs for newcomers to help them adapt to the way of life in Canada. However, it is clear that Atlantic Canadians will need to find a way to more authentically, warmly and helpfully welcome non-European immigrants in a more authentic, warm and helpful way, both to avoid a secondary migration from the Atlantic provinces by these immigrants and to avoid their social isolation if they do stay.

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RELIGION AND ETHNICITY IN CANADA

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