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BAHAISM AND ECUMENISM IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT SOCIOCULTURAL TRENDS

A b s t r a c t

The author analyzes some of the current sociocultural specifics of Bahaism and ecumenism and their place in the republic's public and religious life.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Globalization as a sociocultural, political, and economic phenomenon that has enveloped all spheres of life has also affected its spiritual and religious component. As a product of Western civili-

zation, globalization manifests itself in the worldwide cultural-religious process as a Western post-secular, post-modernist, and even post-Christian phenomenon. Much has been written about this state of Western consciousness.¹ This trend testifies that the West might be aspiring to spread its religious experience across the world—in fact global interpenetration has already permitted this. My choice of Bahaism and ecumenism is not accidental: being very close in many respects they serve as the best illustration of the worldwide tendencies described above.

“Unity in Diversity”— the Latest Conception of the Universe for All of Humanity

Ecumenism (Gr. *Oikoumene*—inhabited world) as a conception is a generic term used to describe all sorts of initiatives, actions, organizations, and movements striving to achieve worldwide unity. Technically it faithfully reflects what globalization strives to achieve in practical terms as an element, albeit secondary, of religious globalization. The primitive discrepancy between the aims and the means, however, pushed religion to the backburner, while a banal quasi-religious process moved to the forefront to embrace a huge variety of contemporary cultural-religious ideas and notions.

Bahaism can be placed among the phenomena called upon to help mass consciousness adjust to the idea that all social, economic, and political formations and structures will be inevitably brought together under stringent world governance. The statements coming from the Universal House of Justice, the supreme Bahai structure in Haifa (Israel), add specific meaning and nuance to all the worldwide developments. Here are the bedrock principles designed to bring people together in a new social formation Bahais call the New World Order:

- recognition of the pivotal principles and fundamental doctrine of the Faith and the basic unity of religions;
- independent search for truth;
- condemnation of all forms of prejudice, harmony between religion and science;
- introduction of compulsory education;
- abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty;
- equality between men and women;
- adoption of a universal auxiliary language;
- institution of a world tribunal for settling disputes between nations.

The Bahais are working toward a world status for their religion. According to various sources, there are about 6 million Bahais around the world organized into a strictly hierarchical structure with branches in more than 200 countries; its members belong to over 2,100 nations and peoples living in 116 thousand regions all over the world. The works of Baha' Ullah, founder of Bahaism (Mirza Hos-eyn 'Ali Nuri, 1817-1892), have been translated into 800 languages. In 1948 the Bahai International Community was registered at the U.N. Public Information Department as an international non-governmental organization. Today it is officially represented at the international level and cooperates with the U.N. In 1970 the Bahai International Community acquired a consultative status in the

¹ See: A. Kyrlezhev, “Postsekuliarnaia epokha;” A. Zhuravskiy, “Religioznaia traditsia v usloviakh krizisa sekularizma,” *Kontinent*, No. 120, 2004.

Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and, in 1976, in the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF).²

Ecumenism as an organized international movement is barely one hundred years old. Started as a bridge to span the gaps that separated Christian communities, it was expected to draw them into harmonious cooperation and to achieve unification of the Christian churches in the future. The first ecumenical missionary conferences met in Edinburgh (Scotland) in 1910, Geneva (Switzerland) in 1920, and Lausanne (Switzerland) in 1927. The movement took its final shape in 1945 at a conference in Stockholm (Sweden). The first general assembly convened in Amsterdam (the Netherlands) in 1948 set up the World Council of Churches as the guiding ecumenical structure that united three Protestant movements (Faith and Order, Life and Work, and the International Missionary Council). Today the Council unites 306 organizations from over 100 countries (440 million followers) and 33 associated members. The Assembly, convened once in seven years, is the supreme governing body; between assemblies the Council is administered by the Central Committee of 150 members. They do not limit themselves to religious issues: social problems, peace and disarmament, and scientific and technical progress are also discussed. In recent times the World Council of Churches has been paying much more attention to new international economics and the free dissemination of information.

The ecumenical organization has not yet achieved all-Christian unity, however its followers have come forward with conceptions that go far beyond Christian integration to embrace ideas closely connected with the religion of the so-called "global society." According to F. Potter, one of the general secretaries of the WCC, church unity is closely connected with the "unity of mankind."³ This means that ecumenism has shifted the principles of Christian cooperation to the sphere of relations between Christianity and other religions; as such it can be regarded as a globalization instrument and a fairly powerful ideological tool of the "new world order," a term that the Bahai ideologists have been actively exploiting since the late 1920s. This means that the ecumenical process was conditioned "by a situation in which Christianity is once more offering itself to the non-Christian world; man who in the act of personal choice becomes a Christian less frequently inherits the confessional culture of his ancestors while the mutual claims of different confessions rooted in hoary antiquity are losing their urgency in his eyes."⁴ Logic suggests that ecumenism has formally entered into competition with those religious doctrines that have already positioned themselves as spiritual consolidators of mankind on a global scale. It is probably not by chance that one of the latest ecumenical slogans—Unity in Diversity—repeats, practically word for word, the Bahai conception of human universum. In fact, universalism was the most typical feature of the Bahai teaching. Baha' Ullah called on his followers to be like the fingers of one hand or like the parts of one body. "So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth," said he and continued: "you are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch."⁵ "The Faith of Bahai that preaches unity of humankind is harsh about all types of fanaticism and intolerance—religious, national, patriotic, racial and political—the Bahais never tire of saying."⁶

Researchers have pointed out that ecumenists today are fully aware that "the desire to achieve a compromise in the realm of spiritual values leads to religious syncretism, the desire to seek unity for the sake of secular aims and short-term interests creates, more likely than not, a m el e of 'religious' and 'secular' values and may develop into new forms of 'integrist' and 'triumphalism' as variants of

² [www.bahai.ru].

³ T. Papuashvili, "K voprosu ob uchastii pravoslavnykh tserkvey v ekumenicheskom dvizhenii," *Tsentral'naia Azia i Kavkaz*, No. 4 (5), 1999.

⁴ A.A. Averintsev, *Khristianstvo v XX v. Slovar*, Sophia-Logos, Kiev, 2006, p. 655.

⁵ *Rosy liubvi. Teksty dlia razmyshleniia (Izbrannye tsitaty iz bakhaistskikh pisaniy)*, Transl. from the German, Hofheim-Langerheyn, 1990, p. 19.

⁶ K. Kazem-sade, *Korotko o vere bahai*, Baha'i-Verlag, 1992, p. 4.

the theory of ‘interreligion’ that has recently gained popularity.”⁷ This warning does not mean that the ecumenists avoided these pitfalls or have won the competition with their ideological rivals. Today an ecumenical approach to unification of mankind presupposes a politically correct dialog among all religions and religious pluralism, which means that all sorts of spiritual values can be freely promoted. Peter Berger offered a highly apt description when talking about bureaucratization of religious institutions and using the term “ecumenism.” He used inverted commas to demonstrate that it does not necessarily a priori correspond to certain theological ideas about the religious interpretations of the term. Something that looks very much like the present ecumenical movement, he goes on to say, could have been born by pluralism outside its theological underpinnings. He comes to the conclusion that no matter which road religious structures would have selected in the face of pluralism they would have been confronted by the sum-total of problems which today are described as a “crisis of theology” or “crisis of the church.”⁸ There is no doubt that unification of religious values in these conditions would lead to syncretism and eclectics. In this context contemporary ecumenism and Bahaim become practically undistinguishable.

Bahaim looks like a graphic example of Peter Berger’s bureaucratization of religious institutions. The governing Bahai structure has the right to publish, in full compliance with the demands of the times, the laws that Baha’ Ullah never mentioned in his works. This is an important development: the mechanism of self-regulation dated to 1963 allowed Bahaim to choose the paths of subsequent development and to easily adjust to the changing historical and geographic contexts. On the other hand, flexibility robbed Bahaim of its specific features and made the movement more formalized.

New Western Universalism with Oriental Roots: an Invitation to Unity or an Attempt at Expansion?

Early in the 20th century Abd-ol-Baha⁹ regarded a Universal Bahai Community as his final aim achieved through gradual proliferation of his teaching in Western Europe and Northern America where the ideas of “Oriental ecumenism” were hailed by the precursors of contemporary globalists as the ideological underpinnings of a platform still resting on Western financial and economic interests. I am convinced that by embracing Bahaim the West adjusted, albeit without much success, the Oriental ideas to its own in the hope of infiltrating the East using the Islamic origins of Bahaim as a latchkey.

It should be pointed out that from the very first days, Bahaim, which was born in the fold of Shia Islam, entered into a bitter confrontation with it and at all times ignited active resistance among the Muslim clergy. This means that Bahaim, and ecumenism for that matter, should be discussed in the context of Protestant ethics. Bahaim was born in Iran in 1844; by 1863 it had developed into a consistent religious doctrine through the efforts of Baha’ Ullah, its founding father. In 1927 Bahaim

⁷ A.V. Zhuravskiy, *Khristianstvo i islam. Sotsiokul’turnye problemy dialoga*, Nauka Publishers, Main Oriental Literature Editorial Department, Moscow, 1990, p. 78.

⁸ “Secularization and the Problem of Plausibility,” in: P. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, Faber, London, 1967, pp. 127-154. In the United States the book appeared under the title *The Sacred Canopy*, available at [<http://www.nuntiare.org/index1.htm>].

⁹ Abd-ol-Baha—son of Baba’ Ullah, the founder of Bahaim, who did a lot to promote the teaching in the West.

acquired the official status of a religious community after the Appellate Religious Court of Beba (Egypt) ruled in 1925 that the Bahais were not Muslims.¹⁰

The confrontation between Islam and Bahaism, which ended in a split, was to have been expected. Early in the 20th century some of the authors were aware of this: “While extracting national ideas from the earliest sources and borrowing on a grand scale from abroad, Bab¹¹ grafted onto Islam the ecstatic conceptions of India, the mystical compassion of Christianity, and a random collection of theories or hypotheses of contemporary Europe.”¹² The question is: Does Islam need this? The “relationship went askew” because Islam as a self-sufficient and genuinely universal religion rejected the “alien body” of the Bahai religious philosophy: it rejected the eclectic nature and syncretism of the new teaching rather than any other of its aspects.

It should be said that in the context of unfolding globalization the Muslim world rejected the post-secular Western religious-cultural conscience: the Islamic religious doctrines proved immune to secularization. Azerbaijan, as part of the post-Soviet expanse where the religious-cultural continuity was disrupted or at least pushed to the background by communist totalitarianism and where Islam is basically a secular phenomenon, might serve as an adequate testing ground for the latest sociocultural trends.

The low level of religious knowledge among the youth and the middle-aged and the republic’s confessional diversity create a perfect breeding ground. There is a frequently voiced opinion that “Islam in Azerbaijan is a purely ethnic phenomenon or a strange secular religion,” even though it is admitted that “Islam is accepted as an inalienable part of the national identity.”¹³ The religious and ethnic homogeneity of the Azeris as the region’s numerically largest nation makes large-scale infatuation with any Universalist quasi-religious conception improbable. What the Bahai religious community is trying to accomplish in the republic can be described as ecumenical ideas in action or a touchstone of sorts of the sociocultural trends of globalism—a product of the neo-liberal West. It is still very hard to predict the outcome of these efforts and the role Azerbaijan might play in the process: as distinct from the other Soviet-successor states,¹⁴ Bahaism has been and remains one of the traditional religions in a country which borders on Iran.

Bahaism supplies us with one of the variants of the inter-civilizational dialog that plays an important role in shaping the world outlook of the new times and shows its prospects. Some of the contemporary philosopher-experts on religion agree with this. G. Seyfi, for example, is out to prove that all religions display breakthroughs to humanism that intensify in the course of the historical process and make it easier to seek, and achieve, harmony among people in order to move out into the vast expanses of civilizational harmony instead of remaining “in the shell of the traditional world religions.” This will create “a dialog through which the healthy tree of a new world outlook with a new scale of spiritual values can grow.”¹⁵

His approach to the possibility of rapprochement between Islam and Christianity on the basis of their anthropomorphic features is much more specific, which makes his approach to Bahaism very

¹⁰ I.V. Bazilenko, *Kratkiy ocherk istorii i ideologii bahaistskoy mezhdunarodnoy obshchiny (XIX-XX vv.)*, St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg University Press, 1998, available at [<http://www.abc-globe.com/bahaizm.htm>].

¹¹ Bab (Siyid Ali-Muhammad), spiritual precursor of Baba’ Ullah, founder of the Babid movement in Iran in the mid-19th century.

¹² V. Berar, *Persia i persidskaia smuta*, St. Petersburg, 1912, p. 274.

¹³ T. Swietochowski, “Russkoe pravlenie, modernizatorskie elity i stanovlenie natsionalnoy identichnosti v Azerbaidzhane,” *Azerbaidzhan i Rossia: obshchestva i gosudarstva*, Edited and compiled by D.E. Furman, Letniy sad Publishers, Moscow, 2001, 496 pp., available at [http://www.sakharov-center.ru/publications/azrus/az_003.htm].

¹⁴ Turkmenistan is an exception, even though it is a country of Sunni Islam. Bahais settled in the Russian part of Turkestan in the late 19th century. The Ashghabad Bahai community was larger and more influential than the one in Baku. The first Bahai temple—Mashrik al-azkar—was opened in Ashghabad in 1907.

¹⁵ G. Seyfi, *Chelovek v religiozno-filosofskom izmerenii. Vostok-Zapad: Dialog kultur (opyt comparativistskogo analiza)*, ed. by V.A. Kuvakin, Rossiiskoe gumanisticheskoe obshchestvo, Moscow, 2002, p. 104.

interesting.¹⁶ He has highly assessed the significance of the anthropological and rationalist revolution Bahaiism accomplished in Islamic ideology and insists that similar trends may play a positive political role. The revival of Bahaiism, he argues, is promising, at least in some parts of the post-Soviet expanse.

Bahaiism tried, and partly succeeded, to bring Islam and Christianity somewhat closer together by combining, unconsciously, elements of Muslim and Christian ethics and morals on both the economic and the spiritual plane. From the point of view of Bahaiism, which claims originality and self-sufficiency, this experience can be described as a doubtful advantage, but any experience should be carefully studied.

Ecumenism with “Bahai Makeup” in Azerbaijan

For obvious reasons Bahaiism could not be developed and promoted in Soviet Azerbaijan; it was late in the 1980s that the Administration for Religious Affairs of Azerbaijan contacted the local Bahais; out of the 20 Bahais who lived in Baku at that time only three were bold enough to scorn the potential repression and attend a meeting to announce that they intended to set up the Bahai Spiritual Conference of Baku.¹⁷

In the post-Soviet period Bahaiism successfully resumed its activities: on 22 May, 1992 the local Bahais convened the Constituent Congress in Baku, thus officially reviving their pre-revolutionary community. In 1993 they were registered at the Ministry of Justice, which supplied them with all necessary legal rights.¹⁸ This was not plain sailing, however: in 1992 the annual Bahai conference attended by the leading Bahai dignitary, Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Rabbáni (née Mary Sutherland Maxwell), widow of Guardian of the Cause of God Shoghi Effendi, as well as guests from the Netherlands, Germany, France, the U.S., and other countries, was attacked by an aggressive crowd that staged havoc.¹⁹

Despite this and other similar cases in the early 1990s, Bahaiism was successfully revived in the republic and attracted at least 500 followers.²⁰ In 2002 the Bahai community was officially registered by the State Committee for Religious Organizations of Azerbaijan together with another 150 religious communities that had submitted all the relevant documents on time.²¹

Under the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Freedom of Religion passed in 1992, each citizen is free to determine his or her attitude to religion; they have the right to profess any religion either individually or collectively and express their religious views and attitudes. This allows the Bahai community to go on functioning; in fact it is one of the best organized, active, and lavishly funded religious organizations. Bahais are scattered across the republic while in Baku, Sumgayit, and Balakhany (in the outskirts of Baku) there are spiritual assemblies. This means that it is highly important to identify the place and role of Bahaiism in the republic's society and look at its future role in the state-religion-society construct.

Today Bahaiism has mainly attracted the intelligentsia (school and pre-school teachers and doctors) and to a lesser extent academics and creative workers, who make up a smaller percentage of the

¹⁶ See: *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁷ [www.bahai.ru].

¹⁸ See: A. Iunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, Zaman Publishers, Baku, 2004, p. 205 (in Azeri).

¹⁹ [www.bahai.az].

²⁰ See: “Bahaiity v Azerbaidzhane zhivut polnokrovnoy zhizniu,” *NPO “Prozrachnye vybory”* newspaper (Baku), No. 2, February 2004, p. 6.

²¹ See: *Bulletin of the State Committee for the Affairs of Religious Organizations* (Baku), No. 1 (3), 2002, p. 20 (in Azeri).

community members consisting mostly of young people and students. The Baku community is an international structure; it is involved in public life as part of the conception of Azerbaijan's political and ideological development. The Bahais never miss their meetings and are active in all sorts of public and cultural events intended for children and adults alike. From time to time the spiritual assemblies offer all sorts of educational circles and courses and organize the members' leisure. Regular prayer sessions held under the aegis of spiritual closeness and unification and according to a timetable are open to all. Azeri Bahais alternate Bahai texts with extracts from the holy Islamic, Christian, Judaist, Hindu, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist texts. Recently, on instructions from Haifa, the Bahai community started the so-called fire-side meetings in private homes practiced all over the world where Bahai ideas are actively promoted.

Today a council of the leaders of the three traditional religions (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) is successfully functioning in the republic albeit without a legal status. Other countries should take a closer look at this highly useful practical experience; there is also the Forum of Religious Communities of Azerbaijan that brought together members of the three confessions and of other faiths represented in the republic. Bahais are involved along with Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, and Protestants, Krishnaites, and the restored Albanian-Udin Christian community. In short, the Forum unites nearly all the confessions present in the republic.²² In 2004, out of the 260 religious communities registered in the country, Bahaism and 23 other communities are officially registered as non-Islamic.²³

In October 2002 Baku hosted the OSCE Conference on "The Role of Religion and Belief in a Democratic Society: Searching for Ways to Combat Terrorism and Extremism," which gathered about 400 people from over 50 countries: state delegations, members of international and non-governmental organizations, religious confessions, and the media. The Bahai International Community and the Bahai Community of Azerbaijan also attended.

Today, the Bahai community is freely developing in Azerbaijan, which is a democratic state; at the same time the state keeps religious organizations of a destructive nature under control to preserve the balance of healthy forces in society.²⁴

C o n c l u s i o n

Throughout its history mankind has been persistently seeking the key to religious interaction. The Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago in 1993 in commemoration of the first parliament held in this city 100 years before adopted an important document entitled *Toward a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*, the result of two years of consultations among about 200 academics and theologians from all corners of the world; it was signed by over 150 leaders of religious communities.²⁵

In fact, the unity of mankind and its ties with the superior forces were not discovered today. Plutarch in his time said that northern and southern peoples have the same gods; that there were no separate gods for the Barbarians and the Greeks. Gods, like the sun, the moon, the sky, the earth, and the sea are shared by all people. The Greek historian pointed out that, despite the multitude of names people use to describe them, only one Logos and only one Providence rule the world. The same forces are in play everywhere even though people use different names for them. This means that there is no novelty either in the ideas of Bahaism or of ecumenism.

²² See: "Traditsii veroterpimosti," 22 October, 2004, available at [http://www.addk.net/rus/index_r.html].

²³ See: R. Aliyev, *State and Religion (Articles and Statements)*, Baku, 2004, p. 49.

²⁴ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

²⁵ See: "Mezhreligiozny dialog i sovremennost," *Mir religiy*, 2001, Analitika section, available at [<http://religio.ru/>].

It should be said that I referred to ecumenism in its wide, inter-confessional, context. If scrutinized in the narrow, "inner-Christian," context, it can be concluded that its followers should have concentrated on removing the internal contradictions rather than playing the roles already claimed by the numerous new and non-traditional religions and movements acting out their parts on the globalization arena. So far it remains one of the many social utopias.
