

Seneca Falls First Woman's Rights Convention of 1848* The Sacred Rites of the Nation

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[T]he problem is nothing if not that of rendering the modern world spiritually significant—or rather ... nothing if not that of making it possible for men and women to come to full human maturity through the conditions of contemporary life.

—Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

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Abstract

This article explores parallels between the Seneca Falls First Woman's Rights Convention of July, 1848, and the Badasht Conference, held in Persia that same month. In the former event, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was to become a leader in the women's suffrage movement for the remainder of the century, was supported by Frederick Douglass, a noted abolitionist and radical newspaper publisher. In the latter event, a conference of the emerging Bábí Faith. Táhirih, an enlightened woman, also introduced the revolutionary feminine in collaboration with a significant man, Quddús. The independence and equality of women is a fundamental precept of the Bahá'í Faith, which is the culmination of the Bábí movement. The comparison is set in a broad frame of reference in which individuals today might face their own coming of age in social, sexual, and racial terms.

Résumé

Le present article dresse un parallèle entre le premier congrès des droits de la femme, tenu à Seneca Falls en 1848, et la conférence de Badasht, tenue en Perse au cours du même mois. Dans le premier cas, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, qui allait devenir une figure marquante du mouvement suffragiste pendant le reste du siècle, avait l'appui de Frederick Douglass, un abolitionniste notoire et l'éditeur d'un journal radical. Dans le second, une conférence tenue par une foi bábíe naissante, Táhirih, une femme éclairée, inaugura elle aussi une féminité révolutionnaire avec la collaboration d'un important homme, Quddús. L'indépendance et l'égalité de statut de la femme est un précepte fondamental de la Foi bahá'íe, qui est elle-même la culmination du mouvement bábí. La comparaison entre les deux événements est établie dans un contexte global qui n'est pas sans rapport avec l'émancipation que les personnes aujourd'hui peuvent vivre aux plans social, sexuel et racial.

Resumen

Este artículo examina semejanzas entre la Primera Convención de los Derechos de la Mujer ocurrido en Seneca Falls en julio de 1848 y la conferencia de Badasht celebrada en Persia ese mismo mes. Durante el primer acontecimiento, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, quien posteriormente encabezaría el movimiento del sufragio de la mujer durante el remanente del siglo, fue apoyada por Frederick Douglass, abolicionista insigne y periodista radical. En el segundo acontecimiento, una conferencia de la Fe Bábí emergente, Táhirih, mujer esclarecida, también presentó la feminidad revolucionaria en colaboración con un hombre, Quddús. La independencia e igualdad de la mujer es un precepto fundamental de la Fe Bahá'í, que en sí es la culminación del movimiento Bábí. La comparación se efectúa dentro de un amplio marco de referencia mediante el cual los individuos pueden encarar su propia mayoría de edad en términos sociales, sexuales, y raciales.

It is the First Woman's Rights Convention, held July, 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York, on which I choose to focus in the hope that this seemingly secular and local event will yield its symbolic and spiritual significance, even helping to redeem the contemporary life of the American nation, and the world, in sacred Bahá'í terms. Historian of religions Mircea Eliade, in speaking of the attitude of early Christian historians, states, "It is not for its own sake that an event is valued, but only for the sake of the revelation it embodies—a revelation that precedes and transcends it"

(Eliade, *Images and Symbols* 170). He says that Christianity, or any other major intervening religious vehicle, when its time comes, tends to “revalorize” historical events, not denying them, but reinterpreting and often reinvigorating them. In this way, a merely local and even seemingly secular event can be made to reveal a broad, symbolic, universal significance.

The Badasht Conference, held in Iran, also in July, 1848, embodied the same clash of elemental themes that were characteristic of the Seneca Falls Convention and which were soon to come to full flower in the Bahá’í Revelation. It is the synchronicity of the Badasht Conference and the Seneca Falls Convention that authorizes this effort to discern the initial shudders of the Bahá’í Revelation in the Seneca Falls Convention. Indeed, I am attempting to show the convention’s core structure as a symbolic, national rite of passage which, like a dramatic religious sacrament, and like the Bahá’í Faith on a world scale, holds for those who come to understand its significance, a transformative, spiritual coming of age.

The Seneca Falls Convention

In the Wesleyan Chapel at the corner of Fall and Mynderse Streets, the site of the July, 1848, Seneca Falls Woman’s Rights Convention, at least two important events occurred: for the first time ever recorded in American history, a woman (Elizabeth Cady Stanton) publicly demanded the vote, and an African-American man (Frederick Douglass) legally free only since December, 1846, was the only man to support her publicly. The convention’s personification of complex, embedded gender and racial relationships recommends it as a broad frame of reference by which citizens might today face the usually recalcitrant forces of their own identity acquisition, their own coming of age in social, sexual, racial, and spiritual terms.

Frederick Douglass, a self-educated, relatively young man of thirty-two, was then emerging as an important figure in the United States abolitionist movement as a lecturer and writer. His very presence at the Seneca Falls Convention embodied a promise of fulfillment for all African-American men, women, and children living at the time under the cruel restraints of the institution of slavery. Elizabeth Cady Stanton likewise embodied a promise of social and personal transformation: the potential emergence of the female half of the population of the United States as self-determining citizens. Although Stanton was more closely associated with the political emancipation of white women, in tandem the two represented the liberation of all human beings from any shackles or prejudices.

To put into perspective the degree of the educational and social restraints inherent in society during Stanton’s time, consider that only in 1848 did the first female physician in America graduate from the Geneva Medical College in Geneva, New York, approximately ten miles from Seneca Falls. Not until 1869 would a woman be licensed to practice law in the United States. The writers of the day characterized activist women as frustrated spinsters, Amazons, and a threat to the unity and decorum of the institution of marriage, the family, and the entire social order of the nation (Banner, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Radical for Woman’s Rights* 46).

One writer, Grace Greenwood, described Stanton as having “a comfortable look of motherliness and a sly benignancy in her smiling eyes, even though her arguments have been bayonet thrusts and her words germ shots” (qtd. in Banner, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* 123). This is a particularly violent image to describe a woman who was reared to be a model of female decorum in an age of strictly defined sex roles. Certainly neither Stanton nor any of her female colleagues advocated violence. But her writing and speaking were so powerful that they were considered forceful enough to rip and tear, if not destroy, the country’s social, religious, and legal fabric.

Wednesday, July 19, 1848, the first day of the convention, was devoted to the reading and discussion of its defining document, the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments and its fifteen grievances; the presentation of eleven related resolutions, including the ninth, authored by Stanton, which demanded for women the right to vote; and the delivery of speeches by Stanton and other women’s rights advocates. The convention approved the Declaration unanimously. Ten resolutions, including the demands for the right of women to personal and religious freedom, the right to testify in court, the right to own property and to claim their own wages, the right to education and equality in trades and professions, equality in marriage and the right to custody of their own children, were also approved without difficulty.

The resolution demanding women’s right to vote, however, met fierce resistance. By calling for women’s right to vote, Elizabeth Cady Stanton had struck at the very heart of the oppression of women, making the women’s movement from that point on inexorably political, no longer able to fit neatly under the banner of religious tradition. Even Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s own mentor, Lucretia Mott, had counseled beforehand, “This will make us ridiculous. We must go slowly” (qtd. in Douglass, *Frederick Douglass on Women’s Rights* 13).

Stanton had consulted with Douglass before the resolution was read, asking for his support. When the resolution demanding women’s suffrage seemed headed for defeat, Douglass’s speech on its behalf stirred the audience and swung the vote. Years later, in a statement on the occasion of Douglass’s death, Stanton said:

He was the only man I ever saw who understood the degradation of the disenfranchisement of women. Through all the long years of our struggle he has been a familiar figure on our platform with always an inspiring word to say. In the very first convention, he helped me to carry the resolution I had penned demanding woman suffrage. Frederick Douglass is not dead. His grand character will long be an object lesson in our National history. His lofty sentiments of liberty, justice, and equality, echoed on every platform over our broad land, must influence and inspire many coming generations. (*Rights* 41)

As editor of the Rochester antislavery publication *The North Star*, Douglass ran a long editorial concerning the Seneca Falls Convention on July 28, 1848. In part, it read:

[W]e are not insensible that the bare mention of this truly important subject in any other than terms of contemptuous ridicule and scornful disfavor, is likely to excite against us the fury of bigotry and the folly of prejudice. A discussion of the rights of animals would be regarded with far more complacency by many of what are called the “wise” and the “good” of our land, than would a discussion of the rights of women. (Qtd. in *Rights* 50)

While Douglass is far better known for his advocacy of the rights of African-Americans, he also worked assiduously for women’s rights. Indeed, *The North Star*, first published in December, 1847, carried the slogan, “Right is of no sex.”

Two weeks after the convention, Douglass attended meetings in Rochester to help ratify the program of the Seneca Falls Convention and spoke again in favor of the Declaration and its resolutions. There were few women’s rights conventions during the next decade at which he was not present as an influential speaker. In one of the many statements he made extolling the civilizing effect women’s participation would have in national and international affairs, he observed:

Nations have been and still are but armed camps, expending their wealth and strength and ingenuity in forging weapons of destruction against each other; and while it may not be contended that the introduction of the feminine element in government would entirely cure this tendency to exalt might over right, many reasons can be given to show that woman’s influence would greatly tend to check and modify this barbarous and destructive tendency.

At any rate, seeing that the male governments of the world have failed, it can do no harm to try the experiment of a government by man and woman united. . . . I have never yet been able to find one consideration, one argument, or suggestion in favor of man’s right to participate in civil government which did not equally apply to the right of woman. (Douglass, *Selections from the Writings of Frederick Douglass* 88–89)

In his speaking and writing on behalf of women’s suffrage and the abolition of slavery, Douglass repeatedly grounded himself at the spiritual center of what human beings have valued since the Enlightenment as being just and noble with regard to human rights. Each in their own way, a white woman and a black man became champions of two separate but deeply linked struggles that would revolutionize life in America. Like that of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the life and work of Frederick Douglass finally pivots on a principle of “inner” revolution. If justice, equality, and an end to prejudice are to manifest themselves in the American nation, then things must change on a political level and a personal level. In an undated speech on women’s suffrage, Douglass spoke of the revolution that would follow from the granting of full rights to women: “There is no question that if the demands of woman are complied with to the full extent to which she has been pleased to make them, we shall see a revolution, the most strange, radical and stupendous that the world has ever witnessed. It would equal and surpass that great struggle under Martin Luther for religious liberty” (*Rights* 134).

The American Historical Moment

The historic collaboration between Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, its Declaration of Rights and Sentiments and its accompanying resolutions, can be seen as equivalent to Martin Luther’s 1517 posting of his ninety-five theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany. It earns for Stanton and Douglass and their heirs the right to initiate the young in the name of (in the words of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson) a new “ideological promise,” his term for a society-anchoring set of beliefs and laws.

In his complaint, Luther questioned the Pope's right to absolve sins on the basis of money payments known as indulgences. By the same token, Stanton and Douglass attempted in their careers of moral reform to dismantle the hegemony of males over females as it was rooted in Christian tradition, as well as to abolish slavery, which also had considerable ecclesiastical support.

Erik Erikson studied Martin Luther's challenge to papal authority psychoanalytically in *Young Man Luther*. Erikson used the example of this erstwhile Catholic monk to demonstrate the fullest resolution possible of his identity crisis formulation. Luther's crisis comes to resolution in history itself, in what is known as the Reformation, which he inaugurated.

Luther's fight in the Church served to topple, or at least radically redefine, the unspoken spiritual authority to which he and the rest of Europe had been conforming until that point, and helped to establish a new spiritual locus, or "rock bottom," Erikson's term for the ultimate, stark point of genesis for the crash of the old and the start of a revolutionary, ideological promise.

Importantly, Erikson's speculations as to the nature of a new ideological promise appropriate for modern times are spiritual, if not strictly religious, as well as being psychological. His understanding of that new promise is of the unity of the human race. Erikson writes, "The question is: Will mankind realize that it is one species—or is it destined to remain divided into 'pseudo-species' forever playing out one (necessarily incomplete) version of mankind against all others" (Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* 47).

Moreover, he states, "[O]nly a new biocultural history (created by women and men articulately self-observing and communicative) could clarify the evolution of the masochistic potential in our man-made world, and of our overadjustment to it" (Erikson, *Life History* 241–42). And finally, "[F]or the first time, one human species can be envisaged, with one common technology on one globe. . . . The nature of history is about to change" (Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* 156–57).

Erikson therefore chooses as that necessary new ideology one "specieshood"—that is, global unity, cooperation between women and men. That ideology of one "specieshood" is especially important in the United States, according to Erikson, because it informs the rock bottom of individual American, psychological identity, achieved as it must be within a plurality of other "competing" American identities, including those of men and women, blacks and whites. Of America and specifically American identity, Erikson writes:

What now demanded to be conceptualized . . . called for a whole new orientation which fused a new world image (and, in fact, a New World image) with theoretical assumptions. The question was what world image they were sharing, where they were going from where they were, and who was going with them. And if something like an identity crisis gradually appeared to be a normative problem in adolescence and youth, there also seemed to be enough of an adolescent in every American to suggest that in this country's history fate had chosen to highlight identity questions together with a strangely adolescent style of adulthood. . . . (*Life History* 445)

In other words, the question of American identity is of the same fabric from which our historical significance is cut. The "historical moment," Erikson's term for the convergence of crisis, rock bottom, and destiny of the American nation, is rooted in the question of acquiring identity in a diverse society, just as the historical moment of Germany in the early 1500s was centered on economic, class, and theological matters. It is as though Americans await that coming of age, that reforming fight in a church, equal in import to that of Martin Luther's, so that the way might be illumined through a fractured national experience, divided as it is over race, gender, and religion as well.

It is in this way that Douglass and Stanton, in the Seneca Falls Wesleyan Chapel, destabilized America's theretofore spiritual locus in fundamental terms, to become the twin moral equivalents of Martin Luther. The two stood at rock bottom and entered history at its most difficult, yet necessary, point. They posted their challenge right on the door of the American Christian establishment, much of which prohibited (the ascension of women and winked at the institution of slavery). They earned the authority and the symbolic tools, as did Luther, with which to educate the soul and initiate the young in the name of a reconstituted spiritual center, a new "ideological promise," a new American paradigm.

Erikson stipulates that for an individual to search for identity requires that the person "give in to some of his most regressed or repressed tendencies in order, as it were, to test rock bottom and to recover some of his as yet undeveloped childhood strengths. This, however, is safe only where a relatively stable society provides collective experiences of a ceremonial character, or where revolutionary leaders (such as Luther) provide new identity guidelines which permit the adolescent individual to take chances with himself" (Erikson, *Life History* 22). In their collaboration, then, Stanton and Douglass provide that revolutionized and redefined paradigmatic center from which the work of identity achievement, that is, true personhood, in America, can now proceed. To explore further the

“rock bottom” of an American, ritual initiation into adulthood, it is necessary to dig even deeper in time, and to refer to anthropologists E. I. Eisenstadt and Arnold van Gennep, who treat ancient rites of passage.

An American Rite of Passage

Eisenstadt explains industrial society as a dislocation between history and myth, between linear and cosmic time, which he says has been especially harmful to children. He writes, “The close linkage between the growth of personality, psychological maturation, and definite role models derived from the adult world has become greatly weakened” (Eisenstadt, “Archetypal Patterns of Youth” 33). Eisenstadt explores the ancient ceremonies of transition by which pre-adults become full members of a tribe by ritually crossing sacred thresholds at the behest of initiating elders, effected always within a religious or magical framework. The importance of his work in reaching back into the pre-industrial past is to identify those fragments that once provided a link to the cosmos but which, although they fill the museums of the world, are now missing in living, formalized rites of passage in industrial society. To make use of such fragments involved recombining them in an effort to build again, even in the religious imagination, a sacred, initiatory context in the name of a newly ordained ideological promise.

One of those elements, it should be no surprise, is a “fight” in sacred precincts—the “dramatization of the encounter between several generations, a dramatization that may take the form of a fight or a competition quite often the discontinuity between adolescence and adulthood is symbolically expressed, as in the symbolic death of the adolescents as children and their rebirth as adults” (Eisenstadt, “Archetypal Patterns of Youth” 28). Such ritual fights, of course, traditionally mark the process of a boy becoming a man under the auspices of a system already in place. Martin Luther’s challenge to the Pope in the sixteenth century resulted, rather, in the symbolic death of that system, the overthrow of the old order itself. The leaders and ideologues of the Reformation, in turn, were then at liberty to initiate their young in accordance with their own revolutionary tenets. Likewise, in the light of Seneca Falls, it is Stanton and Douglass who now wield the authority to initiate young Americans along new identity guidelines.

Van Gennep’s study of rites of passage suggests that even the territorial frontier between two communities or two peoples becomes a threshold, so to speak, and also the occasion for a sacred rite of passage (van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* 9). The frontiers between men and women, between black and white, between one ideological or psychosocial promise and another, are, in other words, also very much thresholds. Our modern age, without reference to the fight in the church in Seneca Falls, is also without reference to the sacred and paradoxical frontiers and thresholds inherent in that meeting. Van Gennep writes, “[T]o cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world” (*The Rites of Passage* 20). Furthermore, van Gennep states, “It seems ... likely that one dimension of mental illness may arise because an increasing number of individuals are forced to accomplish their transition alone and with private symbols” (*The Rites of Passage* xvi). Understanding mental illness, as well as the achievement of normative identity, pivots on the spiritual and cultural reorientation to the new ideological promise of one “specieshood,” which Erikson foresees and which Douglass and Stanton together personify so dynamically.

“Personifying” is Jungian analyst James Hillman’s word for attributing feelings and experiences to the actions of mythic figures. He says this is exactly what Freud did by imagining the primal horde and by calling attention to the Oedipal situation as a mythic vehicle for understanding what are essentially hidden processes of the soul. Moreover, Hillman specifically draws attention to the feminine—that is, the repository of feeling, love, and imagination, which it has been the tradition in Western civilization to push aside. He says that traditional psychology has lost its feminine soul, its “psyche,” once educated by religion and myth, and warns that we are now stranded amidst the sterile instrumentalities of science without a clue as to how to see through the names of sickness to the faces of healing gods. He writes: “Rather than a field of forces, we are each a field of internal personal relationships, an interior commune, a body politic. Psychodynamics becomes psychodramatics; our life is less the resultant of pressures and forces than the enactment: of mythical scenarios” (Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology* 22).

Hillman seeks those images and symbols that carry the imagination of our age and that cannot be carried by modern psychology alone. “What we have come to call ‘Western’ consciousness is in truth northern consciousness” (Hillman, *Revisioning* 223). He says our important work lies on a “vertical dimension between what is above and what is below, a reflection in imaginal geography of our cultural history” (Hillman, *Revisioning* 223). Hillman thus points us south and down, toward the feminine soul. We must first look for that needful psychological and spiritual ceremony of initiation, there, in its depths.

Consciousness of the events of Seneca Falls, then, helps effect the psychosocial maturation process of boys and girls in the name of Erikson’s one “specieshood.” It ceremonializes the inevitable fight in initiatory, sacred space to which Eisenstadt refers. It embodies public symbols of transition that serve to carry us across dangerous thresholds between race and gender, and it personifies Hillman’s notion of a transformative “mythical scenario” anchored in the deep feminine. It is the symbolic and mythic potential of the Woman’s Rights Convention as a

national rite of passage, pivoting as it does on Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass, that gains a moral, spiritual, and cultural redemption for both males and females who understand its significance.

The Seneca Falls story suggests, at the very least, that boys, in order to become men, and girls in order to become women, must learn to borrow from the opposite sex female and male attributes respectively so as to come into their full personhood. In other words, boys, on the one hand, would have to go south, that is, into their depth, where the feminine soul resides. Girls, on the other hand, have to go north, where the traditionally masculine intellect lives. Erikson himself, for example, says it is humankind's predilection to "make use of, to share, and at times to imitate the spatial mode of the other sex" (Erikson, *Life History* 233). He speculates:

But it is clear that where in girls a certain "inner-directedness," and, indeed, a certain self-contained strength and peace, was cultivated, they were also forced to abandon (and sometimes later to overdo) much of the early locomotor vigor and the social and intellectual initiative and intrusiveness which, potentially, girls share with boys; while most boys, in pursuing the male role beyond what came naturally, had to dissimulate and to disavow what receptivity and intuitiveness they shared with girls. How each sex overdeveloped what was given; how each compensated for what it had to deny; how, thus, each managed to get special approbation for a divided self image; and to what extent "oppressor" and "oppressed" (beyond and behind the overt scenes of blatant political and economic exploitation) collided with each other in both flattering and enslaving each other and themselves—that is what I mean by the deals which men and women must learn to study and discern. (Erikson, *Life History* 242)

When to such "deals" between men and women is added the possibility of similar interracial "deals," we have the threshold to one specieshood. These are not new ideas. They have just not been psychologized, or ceremonialized—that is, sacralized in ritual space, which the events of Seneca Falls now authorize. Seneca Falls is where the "conversion" ceremony symbolically takes place, where the ideal of fully realized men and women is ritually and dramatically enacted within a matrix of interconnected relationships, before the altar of one specieshood. Seneca Falls is both north and south and east and west, and at the same crossroads where Carol Gilligan quotes Virginia Woolf as saying Oedipus once killed his father (Gilligan, "Making Connections" 8) but which is now a post-Oedipal, duly revolutionized and feminized place, a sacred juncture that centers the soul.

Behind the Veil of American History: Badasht and the Seneca Falls Convention

To understand the convention in this way, as more than a fact of history but as a symbolic national rite of passage, invites Americans to their own conversion, their own redemption in terms of race and gender. It points toward the dizzying, ecstatic ritual moment where they might all be initiated at the hands of heroic, magical elders, Stanton and Douglass, somewhere off the page, behind the veil of traditional American history, in the imagination, at the end of history (and psychology as we know it), at the beginning of a new era, and upon a Bahá'í foundation.

The Bahá'í Faith constructs a fulminating spiritual and social ceremony to which the deeds of Douglass and Stanton are intrinsic. The Bahá'í Faith can be understood as a global expression of Erikson's notion of an ideological promise in which men and women, black and white, can learn to "borrow" from each other. It teaches the unity of all peoples, all races, and the equality of men and women. It embodies a transformative, moral, and spiritual rite of passage for the individual, anchored in a kind of "global Wesleyan Chapel," its major figures divine initiators, not just moral reformers.

In a thought-provoking parallel to the events in Seneca Falls, in fact, it was another initiatory fight in sacred precincts, also in July, 1848, that dramatically defined the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith, although in this case the struggle took place in a tent, not a church. The Herald of the Bahá'í Faith, known as the Báb, or Gate, claimed to be the Primal Point between the Adamic Cycle then ending and the newly inaugurated Bahá'í Cycle. During the tumult that followed such a spectacular claim in a country that understands Muhammad to be the Seal of the Prophets, the followers of the Báb, known as Bábís, were much persecuted. The Báb himself was imprisoned several times and finally executed. To declare their independence from Islam, certain of the Báb's followers called a conference in July, 1848, on the plains of Badasht, in the Iranian province of Khurásán. One Bahá'í historian states, "On every day of that memorable gathering a law or a tradition of Islam was abrogated, followed by lively discussion among these able and articulate men and the few women..." (Ruhe, *Robe of Light: The Persian Years of the Supreme Prophet Bahá'u'lláh 1817–1853* 86). Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith Shoghi Effendi writes of Badasht:

No pomp, no pageantry marked so great a turning-point in the world's religions history. Nor was its modest setting commensurate with such a sudden, startling, complete emancipation from the dark and embattled forces of fanaticism, of priestcraft, of religious orthodoxy and superstition. The assembled host consisted of

no more than a single woman and a handful of men, mostly recruited from the very ranks they were attacking, and devoid, with few exceptions, of wealth, prestige and power. . . . The arena was a tiny hamlet. . . . (Shoghi Effendi, *God Posses By* 33)

Present at *Badasht* was one of the Báb's most influential followers, a woman known as Táhirih, a poet, whom Bahá'í scholar Ross Woodman calls "the paradigm of the conscious Feminine ("The Role of the Feminine in the Bahá'í Faith" 94). In a large tent set up for the conference, Táhirih, in a breathtaking act very similar to Stanton's, stood before a group of men who, while attracted to the Bábí movement, were also still steeped in traditional Islam. To the horrified gasps of most of those present, Táhirih unveiled herself and exclaimed, "This day is the day of festivity and universal rejoicing, the day on which the fetters of the past are burst asunder. Let those who have shared in this great achievement arise and embrace each other" (qtd. in Ruhe, *Robe* 88).

Speaking of Táhirih's central role, Bahá'í scholar Bahíyyih Nakhjavání uses the word *liminal*, a word used by anthropologists to refer to the period of time immediately preceding the initiatory phase of a coming of age ceremony, to describe the meta-rite of passage at the core of *Badasht*:

. . . we find—as the result of the active participation of one woman—the meeting of archetypes, the clash of elementals, a confrontation of vast proportions whose psychological as well as spiritual significance has rocked us for generations since. The question to ask might be, could the same liminal experience have occurred, alerting all those present to the transformation required in attitudes to leadership and authority, if no woman had been present, or if the protagonists had been of one sex only? (Nakhjavání, *Asking Questions* 57–58)

Táhirih was arrested in 1852 by the cleric-driven Iranian government for her inexorable involvement in the Bábí movement. She was soon killed by military guards and thrown down an abandoned well. Her words to her executioner before he strangled her were, "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women" (qtd. in Ruhe, *Robe* 151).

Táhirih's daring presentation at *Badasht*, paralleling Stanton's at Seneca Falls perhaps to the day, was the decisive deed of that conference. She was assisted by at least one significant man, Quddús, who, Nakhjavání believes, coordinated his efforts to support and enhance hers, following a prior arrangement with Bahá'u'lláh, also present at *Badasht*. It was the dramatic emergence of a powerful woman against a backdrop of male authority and unquestioned religious tradition, amid outrage and horror, that tore apart the social and spiritual fabric of that gathering of mostly men and, symbolically, of Islam itself. The *Badasht* Conference is, like the Seneca Falls Convention, the portrayal of the coming of age of humanity in microcosm, a representative drama in which the male and female elements are brought into balance. One man in the audience slit his throat in a gesture of horror (although it is said that he eventually recovered). In a sense, *Badasht* represents the inauguration of the revolutionary code of the Bahá'í Faith in deed, at least in terms of the equality of men and women.

Although there was no apparent racial opposition contained in the drama of *Badasht* that might automatically make it significant in American terms, the clash it portrayed between a woman and many men within an exploding religious framework is enough to recommend it as a divine, authorizing parallel to the Seneca Falls Convention. Táhirih not only unveiled herself, she unveiled the eternal feminine on divine, revelatory ground in order to release its disturbing influence on the uninitiated, unspiritualized, and often violent, male-dominated, old order polity. It is as though spiritual shock waves from *Badasht* put in motion the events of Seneca Falls, *Badasht* the divine word and Seneca Falls its divine creation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "The continent of America is, in the eyes of the one true God, the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled . . ." (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* 6).

At the center of the Bahá'í Faith is the recognition of the equality of women and men and the belief that human beings of all races and religions are "leaves of one tree" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 27, 129). 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "God maketh no distinction between the white and the black, If the hearts are pure both are acceptable unto Him. God is no respecter of persons on account of either color or race. . . . Inasmuch as all were created in the image of God, we must bring ourselves to realize that all embody divine possibilities" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 37). Likewise, "Divine Justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other in the eyes of Heaven. Dignity before God depends, not on sex, but on purity and luminosity of heart. Human virtues belong equally to all!" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 162). Furthermore, continues 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Among the miracles which distinguish this sacred Dispensation is this, that women have evinced a greater boldness than men when enlisted in the ranks of the Faith" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 69).

To hold such commitments in America today, where the white and black elements of the population are so seemingly divergent, and where feminism still fights for its life, is to be a modern initiate of the 1848 “ceremony” of Seneca Falls, and of Badašht, if not literally to be a Bahá’í. In this way, Americans in particular are called upon to become confirmed, or initiated, in a psychospiritual sense, from within sacred precincts, into a new adult identity that explicitly acknowledges an ascendant feminine and a racial and gender partnership. Thus, to discover the Bahá’í significance of the Seneca Falls Convention is to enter the memorializable foundation of the American soul. It is here, beneath the veil of American history, within the compass of holy combat, that we find the sacred rites of the American nation, its psychological and spiritual reformation.

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