

The Bahā'ī Faith

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1 Introduction

The modern Bahā'ī Faith claims over five million adherents (Langness 2013) and has a global presence with National Spiritual Assemblies in almost every country in the world. It is an independent religious tradition accepting financial support from none but members and eschewing political involvement. The Bahā'ī Faith is, however, rooted in the millennialism of the nineteenth century Shī'a Islam of Iran, although most Bahā'īs today are not of Muslim heritage and may even be unaware of its Islamic roots. The relationship of the Bahā'ī Faith to Shī'a Islam is comparable to that of the historic link between Judaism and Christianity, in so far as the founders of the related Bābī and Bahā'ī Faiths were born into an Islamic society, and most of their early followers were born Muslims, but their religion superseded Islam. Unlike Jesus, however, Bahā'u'llāh, founder of Bahā'ī, was clear that he was founding a new religion, one which replaced that of the Bāb, which in turn had abrogated Islam.

2 Origins of the Bahā'ī Faith

The earliest stirring of what would become the Bahā'ī Faith can be traced back to the Shaykhi School of Shī'a Islam in Iran and Iraq, named after its founder Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Zayn al-Dīn al-Aḥsā'ī (1753–1826). This was a religiously conservative movement with an emphasis on eschatology and an allegorical interpretation of Quranic descriptions of the end of days. The second leader of the Shaykhi School, Sayyid Kāzīm al-Rashtī, did not appoint a successor, arguing the time was too short and that his followers should instead seek out the prophesied *Mahdī*, who was already in the world. Consequently, on his death his followers dispersed to find the promised *Mahdī*. One of these questing Shaykis was Mullā Husayn (1813–1849). He took his search to Shiraz where he encountered 'Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī (20 October 1819–9 July 1850).

'Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī had been in contact with Rashtī and shared his belief that the eschatological prophesies of Shī'a Islam were soon to be fulfilled, on the night of 22 May 1844, he declared his mission to Mullā Husayn and revealed

himself to be the Bāb ('the Gate'), the promised Qā'im of Shī'ra Islam. The Bāb and his short-lived Bābī movement are regarded by Bahā'īs to be an independent prophet and an independent religion; however, they acknowledge the Bāb's central function was that of a herald of a future prophet, referred to as 'He whom God will Make Manifest'. The Bāb began by declaring the imminent return of the Twelfth Imām and sending out his followers to proclaim the news. In 1848, a conclave of the Bāb's followers met at Badasht to abrogate the laws of Islam. Many of the laws revealed by the Bāb in his central book the *Bayān*, have been argued (Saiedi 2008) to be impossible to implement, because they are dependent upon the appearance of 'He whom God will Make Manifest', who would be able to affirm or abrogate them. Thus, it follows that the purpose of the Bābī laws was simply to break with Islamic tradition and create a context for a further Revelation. The Bābī movement was put down brutally and the Bāb executed by firing squad. After his death, the nominal headship of the movement fell to Mīrzā Yaḥyā Nūrī (1831–1912) whose leadership proved ineffective and ultimately caused the community to disintegrate into factions.

3 Bahā'u'llāh

Mīrzā Ḥusayn-'Alī Nūrī (12 November 1817–29 May 1892) known as Bahā'u'llāh was the older half-brother of Mīrzā Yaḥyā Nūrī, he had accepted the claims of the Bāb in the late summer of 1844 (Momen 2007), and attended the Conference of Badasht. He was a prominent and respected member of the Bābī community. After the death of the Bāb in 1850, Mīrzā Yaḥyā, known as Azal, became the publicly acknowledged leader of the Bābīs. It has been suggested by Juan Cole in his piece on Bahā'u'llāh in the *Bahā'ī Encyclopaedia* (Cole 1995) that Bahā'u'llāh, who had been corresponding with the Bāb through his younger half-brother, may have been the real leader of the group. Cole goes on to say, "Azal was acknowledged by many prominent Bābīs as a 'Mirror' and a first among equals. There is no evidence that the Bāb appointed him as a legate or vicar, and there were many Mirrors" (Cole 1995). After a brief sojourn in Karbalā', Iraq, Bahā'u'llāh returned to Iran in 1852, in his absence some fanatical Bābīs had plotted an attempt on the life of the Shah and despite Bahā'u'llāh's condemnation of the plot and innocence of involvement, he was arrested and imprisoned in the Siyah-Chal, the Black Pit dungeon. It was in this prison he underwent an intense mystical experience. On his release from prison and after a period in Baghdad, Bahā'u'llāh spent several years as a Ṣūfī in Kurdistan.

In response to the pleas of Bābīs concerning the shambolic leadership of his increasingly reclusive half-brother, Bahā'u'llāh returned to Baghdad in 1856 and

took on much of the administrative leadership of the community. The positive impact of his work led to a resurgence of the Bābī movement, and ultimately a demand from the Persian government for the extradition of Bahā'u'llāh to Persia. The Ottoman authorities refused but instead, for reasons which are not clear, removed Bahā'u'llāh to Constantinople. Before he left Baghdad on 21 April 1863, Bahā'u'llāh and his entourage stayed for twelve days in the Najibiyyih gardens, it was there that Bahā'u'llāh declared to a small group of his companions that he was He whom God will Make Manifest, the messenger promised by the Bāb. Bahā'u'llāh travelled from Baghdad to Constantinople between 3 May and 17 August 1863, accompanied by a large group including family members and followers. After three and a half months in Constantinople, he was ordered to depart for Adrianople. It was while he was in Adrianople that the schism with his brother Azal became absolute after several attempts by Azal's supporters to kill Bahā'u'llāh.

In 1866, Bahā'u'llāh made his claim to be Him whom God will Make Manifest public (MacEoin 1989), as well as making a formal written announcement to Azal referring to his followers for the first time as the "people of Bahā" (Smith 2008). Whilst in Adrianople Bahā'u'llāh wrote extensively, including letters to political and religious rulers, announcing his station and mission, demonstrating the intended universality of his message outside the Muslim world. The discord between Bahā'u'llāh and his followers and the rump of the Bābī movement loyal to Azal caused the Ottoman authorities in July 1868 to exile both factions, Bahā'u'llāh to the prison city of 'Akkā (Acre) and Azal to Famagusta in Cyprus. Bahā'u'llāh and his family arrived in 'Akkā at the end of August 1868, the first years there were very hard and marred by the tragic death in 1870 of Bahā'u'llāh's son, Mīrzā Mehdī, at the age of twenty-two when he fell through a skylight. After some time, relations between the prisoners and officials and the local community improved, so that the conditions of the imprisonment were eased and eventually, Bahā'u'llāh was allowed to leave the city and visit nearby places. From 1877 until 1879 Bahā'u'llāh lived in the house of Mazra'ih (Smith 2008). In 1899 Bahā'u'llāh moved to his final home a small mansion at Bahjī. He had fourteen children by his three wives including four daughters, five of his sons predeceased him. Bahā'u'llāh died of a fever in 'Akkā on 29 May 1892, at the age of seventy-four.

4 'Abdu'l-Bahā and Shoghī Effendī

Before his death, Bahā'u'llāh appointed 'Abbās Efendī (23 May 1844–28 November 1921), his eldest son, as leader of the community and inspired

interpreter of His Revelation. Known as ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, he communicated with the community he led through letters, referred to as tablets and through lectures. He visited the West to two occasions, the first time from August to December 1911, when he visited the United Kingdom, France, and Switzerland, and the second time between April 1912 and June 1913, when he visited Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, and Hungary, meeting his growing number of Occidental supporters and answering their questions and concerns. This meant that issues such as the role of women were pushed to the fore and the Bahā’ī message took on aspects of Western social thought (Osborn 2014: 22). Several younger members of (‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s family were sent to England to complete their educations and acquire linguistic skills. Between March 1916 and March 1917, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā wrote fourteen letters to the Bahā’īs of Canada and the United States known collectively as *The Tablets of the Divine Plan* (‘Abdu’l-Bahā 1991 [1916–1917]). These instructed his North American followers to spread the Bahā’ī teachings around the world, an indication of how important he understood his Western followers to be. With no surviving son, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā passed the leadership of the community to his grandson and amanuensis Shoghí Effendí Rabbání.

Shoghí Effendí Rabbání (1 March 1897–4 November 1957) was born in ‘Akkā and educated at the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut) and Balliol College, Oxford (Khadem 1999). He learned of the death of his grandfather in London and returned to Palestine to discover that his grandfather’s will instructed the Bahā’ī community to “turn unto Shoghí Effendí ... he is the sign of God, the chosen branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God ... He is the expounder of the words of God and after him will succeed the first-born of his lineal descendants” (‘Abdu’l-Bahā 1990). Under the Guardianship of Shoghí Effendí the unique Bahā’ī Administration was set up, this included the establishment of local and national bodies, the regulation of published material and large scale coordinated missionary activity. Throughout the period of the Guardianship the Bahā’ī Faith evolved into fast growing international community, stressing modernity and social reconstruction, books with titles such as *Bahā’u’llāh and the New Era* (Esslemont 1923) and *Baháism: the Modern Social Religion* (Holley 1913) being used to teach the new religion across the globe.

The death of Shoghí Effendí in 1957 caused some tensions, as the will of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā had clearly stated the Guardianship was a hereditary office whose incumbent would lead the community alongside an elected legislative body, the Universal House of Justice, an institution described by Bahā’u’llāh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. When Shoghí Effendí died without an heir there was potential for discord. However, in 1951 Shoghí Effendí had appointed a number of men

and women to the International Bahā'ī Council, a body which existed to assist him in specific tasks and to be the forerunner of the Universal House of Justice. In 1961, the appointed International Bahā'ī Council was reconstituted as an elected body and their final task was to set up the election of the Universal House of Justice which took place in 1963.

5 A 'World Religion' from 1957

The Universal House of Justice (henceforth UHJ) is elected every five years by the National Spiritual Assemblies (henceforth NSAs) which are in turn elected annually by unit conventions of grass roots members. Where more than nine Bahā'īs are resident in a locality a Local Spiritual Assembly (henceforth LSA) of nine members is elected; unit conventions, local and national assemblies are open to all members, only the UHJ is restricted to males. As well as the elected institutions, there is an appointed stratum of administration which also functions under the guidance of the UHJ, this comprises of Counsellors and their appointees at local level, there is no clergy and apart from the members of the UHJ all functionaries are expected to be self-financing and in employment.

After the death of its last hereditary leader a period of significant expansion and development took place. The community had been rooted in Iran and spread into Iranian expatriate communities, gradually including Jews, Zoroastrians, Sunni Muslims, and others. From the 1890s small groups of Bahā'īs developed in the West, the most significant of these was that of the USA. In response to the expansion plans of Shoghí Effendí Bahā'īs from both the Middle East and the West undertook 'pioneering'; moving to places hitherto without a Bahā'ī community and striving to set up groups. By the 1950s the two cultural contexts of the Bahā'ī community came together in missionary activity, the post Islamic Iranian Bahā'īs and the occidental Bahā'īs seeped in the alternative religious milieu of Europe and the USA began to establish Bahā'ī communities in several parts of the non-Muslim 'developing world', initially among the Western-oriented urban minority (Smith and Momen 1989: 68). Throughout the 1960s the Bahā'ī Faith gained adherents throughout the developing world and beyond. Bahā'ī teachers learned to adapt their message and missionary techniques to largely uneducated workers, transforming the social base of the community. In the well-established and largely white American community, converts began to be drawn from Native American and African American demographics.

The mission work was exceptionally successful in some areas, bringing about massive cultural change in the worldwide community, however, this change

was not without problems. The infrastructure was not in place to enable retention of such an influx of new believers, many of whom “were poorly educated, and many lived in rural and tribal areas with which effective communication was difficult to sustain” (Smith and Momen 1989: 72). Around the same time the revolution in Iran also effected the spread of the Bahā’ī Faith. The revolution brought about significant persecution of Bahā’īs in the homeland of the Faith and furthermore curtailed the sending of funds abroad. This was a significant blow as the Iranian community had funded much missionary work and supported communities in poorer countries. The Iranian government, rather strangely for Shī’a Muslims, seemed oblivious of the positive impact of persecution and martyrdom, and Iranians fleeing the revolution bolstered numbers across the worldwide community with emotive stories of persecution gaining much publicity.

To address the ability to attract people to the Faith but the failure to retain them a new strategy was implemented, the concept of the ‘training institute’ was introduced by the Universal House of Justice in the mid-1990s. Its purpose is to assist individuals to deepen their understanding of the Bahā’ī teachings, and to gain the spiritual insights and practical skills they need to carry out the work of the community. The Institute process is based on the use of materials developed in Columbia by The Ruhi Institute, which is directed by the Columbian NSA. The Institute produces a sequence of books, referred to as the ‘Ruhi Books’ which are studied in small groups led by a facilitator who has completed the sequence. There are training materials for different age groups and a range of support resources including songbooks and colouring sheets. As well as the Ruhi Book, in study circles Bahā’īs are encouraged to participate in ‘core activities’, including children’s classes and devotional meetings. It must be stressed that these activities are neither compulsory nor restrictive and individuals are encouraged to continue and develop other activities, though there is anecdotal evidence that the study circles have come to dominate the community at the expense of other activities. At the present time, the Institute process does not appear to have been subjected to academic scrutiny, making it impossible to assess the effectiveness of the strategy.

6 Bahā’ī Beliefs and Practices

In common with Muslims, Bahā’īs have a linear view of history, throughout which prophets, or Manifestations of God, bring books and laws to found and govern divinely inspired communities, each revelation building upon the last in a process described as ‘Progressive Revelation’. Bahā’u’llāh is held to be the

'promised one of all ages', the universal manifestation of the unknowable deity and the founder of a new cycle of revelation. Some of the basic beliefs of the Bahā'ī Faith can be summarised as a list of principles extrapolated from the writings of the founder that concern the nature of religion. All religions, according to the Faith, are ultimately one: "It is the outward practices of religion that are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity—while the reality is always the same, and one" ('Abdu'l-Bahā 1969: 120). Thus, religion must be a source of unity: "religion must be the cause of unity, harmony and agreement among mankind. If it be the cause of discord and hostility, if it leads to separation and creates conflict, the absence of religion would be preferable in the world" ('Abdu'l-Bahā 1976 [1956]: 247). Furthermore, religion is evolutionary, revealed to suit the place and time but receptacles on a single universal truth: "There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message. They all have but one purpose; their secret is the same secret" (Bahā'u'llāh 1983: 78).

The understanding of this universality must be made through the independent investigation of truth, which Moojan Momen postulates in an article intended for the *Bahā'ī Encyclopaedia* (Momen n.d.) "is to be found in embryonic form in the Shī'ī prohibition of *taqlīd*, blind imitation, in matters of the principles of religion." As 'Abdu'l-Bahā phrases it, "God has created in man the power of reason, whereby man is enabled to investigate reality. God has not intended man to imitate blindly his fathers and ancestors" ('Abdu'l-Bahā 1982: 291). This emphasis on reason is further enhanced by the insistence of the harmony between religion and science, which are described by 'Abdu'l-Bahā as "two wings" which will facilitate the development of the intellect and spirit ('Abdu'l-Bahā 1969: 143).

Other principles deal with the nature of humankind, stressing the oneness of religion reflected in the oneness of humanity. This is the basis for the emphasis on equality: "as to religious, racial, national and political bias: all these prejudices strike at the very root of human life; one and all they beget bloodshed, and the ruination of the world. So long as these prejudices survive, there will be continuous and fearsome wars" ('Abdu'l-Bahā 1978: 249). Sex equality and equal opportunities for women and men in education and training are also stressed: "Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible" ('Abdu'l-Bahā 1982: 76). The abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty is also desirable, "O Ye Rich Ones on Earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust and be not intent only on your own ease" (Bahā'u'llāh 1990: 41). World unity is promoted, with peaceful consultation as a means for resolving differences: "The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions" ('Abdu'l-Bahā 1978: 87). The ideal is for

universal peace and the establishment of a world parliament, where all world leaders will come together to “consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world’s Great Peace amongst men” (Bahā’u’llāh 1983: 249).

To facilitate unity great emphasis is put on universal education, “Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing and in all that hath been laid down in the Holy Tablet” (Bahā’u’llāh 1993: 38). In the interests of universal communication the need for an international auxiliary language is highlighted: “It behoveth the sovereigns of the world ... or the ministers of the earth to take counsel together and to adopt one of the existing languages or a new one to be taught to children in schools throughout the world, and likewise one script” (Bahā’u’llāh 1978: 22).

It is in the daily practices of Bahā’īs that the origins of the Faith in an Islamic context are most clearly preserved. Bahā’īs are required to declare their faith, pray in a specified manner at specific times, give alms based on property held, fast, and make a pilgrimage to sacred sites. It is widespread practice in some Bahā’ī communities to issue cards to new believers, which outline the beliefs being accepted, the following statement is on the card issued by the NSA of Australia:

I wish to become a member of the Bahā’ī community. I accept Bahā’u’llāh as the Bearer of God’s Message for this Day and will endeavour to follow His teachings and the Bahā’ī way of life. I also accept the authority of the institutions which administer the affairs of the Bahā’ī community.

There are three daily obligatory prayers, any one of the three may be used but must be done so in accordance with any specific directions with which they may be accompanied, for example facing the *qibla* and prostrations. Bahā’īs are required to fast by refraining from food and drink between the hours of sunrise and sunset during the Bahā’ī month of Alá, (Loftiness). The Bahā’ī fast, therefore, takes place over nineteen days, from 2 March to 20 March inclusive. Bahā’īs are subject to the law of *Huququ’llāh* (the Portion of God): “Should anyone acquire one hundred *mithqáls* of gold, nineteen *mithqáls* thereof are God’s and to be rendered unto Him” (Bahā’u’llāh 1993: 55) That is, 19% of that portion of income which is not essential for living expenses is to be paid, similar to a tithe, to support philanthropic causes.

7 Controversies

The teachings of the Bahā’ī Faith might generally be described as progressive, egalitarian, and inclusive, however, in recent years there has been some

discussion, particularly in Europe and North America, around the issues of the role of women and LGBT rights. The equality of men and women is a basic principle of the Bahā'ī Faith and has been expounded as such since its inception, however, the Universal House of Justice is an exclusively male institution and that has raised questions as to how that can be rationalised in a context of gender equality (Lee et al 1999).

Despite non-involvement in politics the Bahā'ī Faith has a history of inclusivity of races and opposition to racism. This is particularly true in the US where prominent African Americans in such diverse fields as philosophy, for example, Alain Locke (1885–1954) (Buck 2005), and jazz music, for example Dizzy Gillespie (Shipton 2001), have embraced the Bahā'ī Faith. The inclusivity in regard to race, sex, and gender has led to some tension over issues such as same-sex marriage (Snow 2016). The Bahā'ī Faith has teachings similar to those of other Abrahamic faiths around chastity before marriage, faithfulness in marriage, and a dislike of divorce and non-heterosexual relations. Whilst strongly opposing any form of discrimination on the grounds of sexuality the admonishment of Bahā'u'llāh—“We shrink, for very shame, from treating of the subject of boys ... Commit not that which is forbidden you in Our Holy Tablet, and be not of those who rove distractedly in the wilderness of their desires” (Bahā'u'llāh 1993: 59)—was further reinforced by both Shoghí Effendí and 'Abdu'l-Bahā to clarify the term 'boys' did not refer to pederasty or paedophilia but is inclusive of adult homosexual acts. More latterly the UHJ has stated:

The Universal House of Justice is authorized to change or repeal its own legislation as conditions change ... but it cannot abrogate or change any of the laws which are explicitly laid down in the sacred Texts. It follows, then, that the House of Justice has no authority to change this clear teaching on homosexual practice.

Universal House of Justice 1995

The increasing numerical dominance of Bahā'īs in the developing world may render concerns around scholarship and gender politics marginal to the wider Bahā'ī community.

8 Persecution

Bahā'īs have suffered persecution for their beliefs, particularly in Muslim majority countries where their understanding of the ministries of The Bāb and Bahā'u'llāh as fulfilments Shī'a Islam and consequently 'prophets after

Mohammed' have led to charges of apostasy. The presence of the Bahā'ī World Centre in Israel has led to accusations of complicity with Zionism, despite the obvious objection that the Centre predated the foundation of the state of Israel.

The tragic situation for Bahā'īs in Iran is well documented, as since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran Bahā'īs have been systematically persecuted as a matter of government policy. During the first decade of this persecution, more than two hundred Bahā'īs were killed or executed; hundreds more were tortured or imprisoned, and tens of thousands lost jobs, access to education, and other rights solely because of their religious belief. According to Roger Cooper in *The Bahā'īs of Iran: The Minority Rights Group Report 51*, Bahā'īs are classified as “unprotected infidels”, “heretics” and “those whose blood may be shed with impunity” making it impossible to seek justice, redress or protection. The reaction of the Bahā'īs to oppression derives directly from the teachings of Bahā'u'llāh:

Bahā'īs therefore believe that strategies for achieving lasting social change—including strategies for overcoming violent oppression—must pay attention to both the material and spiritual dimensions of change, including the transformation of hearts among both the oppressors and the oppressed. In this regard, oppositional strategies that pit one group against another, whether violently or non-violently, are not considered conducive to spiritual transformation and lasting change. Bahā'īs thus refrain from all divisive form of social action, including involvement in partisan political organising and opposition.

KARLBERG 2010: 222

There are currently more than ninety Bahā'īs imprisoned in Iran, including all seven members of the Yaran, a now disbanded leadership group which tended to the spiritual and social needs of the Bahā'ī community in the absence of an NSA.

Economic pressure on Iran's Bahā'ī community is acute, with both jobs and business licenses being denied to Bahā'īs. Government jobs, including not only in the civil service but also in such fields as education and law, have been denied to Bahā'īs since the years immediately following the Revolution. Education has been denied, both to in schools and more significantly in universities, which are effectively closed to Bahā'īs. Other forms of persecution faced by Iranian Bahā'īs include the monitoring of their bank accounts, movements, and activities; the denial of pensions or rightful inheritances; the intimidation of Muslims who associate with Bahā'īs; the denial of access to publishing

or copying facilities for Bahā'ī literature; and the unlawful confiscation or destruction of Bahā'ī properties, including Bahā'ī holy places and graveyards.

In Egypt, there has been spasmodic persecution of the Bahā'īs, since the Faith first arrived in Egypt in 1867 and developed through the work of Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl-i-Gulpáygání (Mirza Abu'l-Fada'il 1844–1914) at the Al-Azhar University, where he taught from 1894, and brought as many as thirty (Momen 1995) teachers and students to accept the Bahā'ī Teachings. By 1900 there were small groups of Bahā'īs, mainly of Persian heritage, scattered throughout Egypt and Bahā'ī texts in Arabic were being published in Cairo. In 1924, the first National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt was elected and a year later a provisional court in Upper Egypt attempted to divorce three women from their husbands because they argued the men were not Muslims and could, therefore, not be married to Muslim women (Scharbrodt 200848). This case effectively created a legal precedent which separated the Bahā'ī Faith from Islam, particularly as the women chose to remain with their husbands. The Bahā'ī community grew modestly over the next few decades with some outbreaks of hostility, however, in 1960 the passage of Law No. 263 under Gamal 'Abdel Nasser, which granted official government recognition only to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, effectively stripped organisational rights from all who would identify otherwise. Bahā'ī rights were further complicated with the inclusion of Article 2 of the constitution in 1971, declaring Islamic law to be the source of Egyptian legislation. As such, any religion not recognised as legitimate by Islamic scholars cannot be recognised by the state.

There were periodic arrests of Bahā'īs in the mid-1960s, 1972, and 1985, and in early 1987 forty-eight Bahā'īs had sentences pronounced against them for religious activities. The restrictions on Bahā'īs came to a head in 2006, over the matter of identity cards, all Egyptians are required to carry an identity card, which states among other things their religious affiliation. Life without an identity card is almost impossible. Bahā'īs are forbidden to misrepresent their faith, and this had led to the custom of leaving the field blank, until the system was computerised which made inserting anything but one of the 'three heavenly religions' (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) impossible. In 2008, the Court of Administrative Justice ruled that the Ministry of Interior must issue identification cards to Bahā'īs with the caveat that 'religion' is left blank, justified by Egyptian constitutional protections for freedom of religion.

While Iran and Egypt have been the particularly harsh in response to the Bahā'īs, there have been instances of persecution in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, and in several other predominantly Muslim nations. Some of the assertions made to discredit the Bahā'īs by the more imaginative of their opponents go beyond the spiteful to the bizarre: for example, "They forbid

their women to wear *ḥijāb*, and they regard *mut'ah* (temporary marriage) as permissible, and they promote the sharing of women and wealth," claims an unnamed author answering the question "Q: What is the ruling on the Baha'i ideas and beliefs? What is the difference between them and other Muslims?" on Islamway.net (Anon. 2008).

9 Conclusion

In a century and half or so, since its inception in Iran, the Bahā'ī Faith has spread throughout the globe, it has been embraced by a diverse community, comprising of urban workers, royalty, artists, and the lower classes, all of whom have found solace in the teachings of Bahā'u'llāh. It is now possibly the eighth largest religion in the world. How the role of this latest of the Abrahamic religions will unfold is not yet clear but its emphasis on unity in diversity makes it likely to be of major significance in an ever more globally defined civilisation.

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