

Debating Muslims

Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition



*Michael M. J. Fischer
and Mehdi Abedi*

The University of Wisconsin Press
1930 Monroe Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53711

www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress/

3 Henrietta Street
London WC2E 8LU, England

Copyright © 1990
The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System
All rights reserved

8 7 6 5 4 3

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Fischer, Michael M. J., 1946–

Debating Muslims: cultural dialogues in postmodernity and
tradition / Michael M. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi.

600 pp. cm. — (New directions in anthropological writing)

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Shī'ah—Iran. 2. Shiites—United States. 3. Iran—Social life
and customs. 4. Shī'ah—History—20th century. 5. Iranians—United
States—Social life and customs. I. Abedi, Mehdi. II. Title.

III. Series.

BP192.7.168F56 1990

297'.82'0904—dc20 89-40531

ISBN 0-299-12430-4

ISBN 0-299-12434-7 (pbk.)

Chapter 7 is reprinted by permission from *Cultural Anthropology*, volume 5, number 2

Contents

<u>Illustrations</u>	<u>/ ix</u>
<u>Note on Transcription</u>	<u>/ xiii</u>
<u>Calendars</u>	<u>/ xv</u>
<u>Chronology of Significant Dynasties</u>	<u>/ xvii</u>
<u>Preface: Notes Toward Anthropology as Cultural Critique</u>	<u>/ xix</u>

Part 1: Oral Life Worlds

<u>1. Shi'ite Socialization in Pahlavi Iran: Autobiographical Sondages in a Postmodern World</u>	<u>/ 3</u>
<u>Scenes of a Village Childhood</u>	<u>/ 5</u>
<u>Scenes of an Urban Childhood: Class Distinctions</u>	<u>/ 31</u>
<u>Secondary School, Sexual Purity, and Marriage</u>	<u>/ 37</u>
<u>Tehran: Ideological Crucible</u>	<u>/ 75</u>
<u>Lawrence, Kansas</u>	<u>/ 84</u>

Part 2: Texts, Con-texts, and Pre-texts

<u>2. Qur'anic Dialogics: Islamic Poetics and Politics for Muslims and for Us</u>	<u>/ 95</u>
<u>Con-texts to Dialogue</u>	<u>/ 95</u>
<u>Dialogue and Presence</u>	
<u><i>Iqra!</i> ("Recite!"): The Sounddance, the Oral, Performative Qur'an</u>	<u>/ 101</u>
<u>The Graphics of Absence</u>	
<u>Guides through the Void: Plain Meaning, Prolepsis, the Knowledgeable, the Hadīth Game</u>	<u>/ 112</u>
<u>The Politics of Interpretation</u>	
<u>Exposing the Unbewised: The Hadīth Game, [Blind] Followership, Rule by Faqih/Amir, and Islamic Economics</u>	<u>/ 122</u>
<u>Conclusion: Dialogue, Ethics, Politics</u>	<u>/ 147</u>
<u>3. Fear of <i>Différance</i>: The Hajj "Rodeo"</u>	<u>/ 150</u>
<u>Hajj Pretexts and Re(rites): Ethics and Politics in the Play of Nationalism, Class, and Gender</u>	<u>/ 150</u>
<u>Hajj as Primal Scene</u>	<u>/ 157</u>
<u>The 1968 Hajj, the Rise of Islamic Ideology, and Renewable Shi'ism</u>	<u>/ 172</u>
<u>Conclusion: Giving Hagar Voice</u>	<u>/ 220</u>

4. Social Change and the Mirrors of Tradition: Baha'is of Yazd / 222

Introduction / 222

Yazd: Mirrors of Diversity / 225

Nurullah Akhtar-Khavari / 245

Part 3: Shifting Ritual Grounds (To Houston)

5. Diasporas: Re-membering and Re-creating / 253

Exiles and Immigrants, Authenticity and Identity / 253

Prologue: Negotiating Death and Marriage in a Loose

Social Structure / 271

A Month among the Believers: Ramaḍān in Houston, 1984 / 287

Voices of Hagar: An African-American Muslim Woman Talks to an Iranian

Muslim Man / 314

Part 4: Visual Projections

6. Concluding Notes: Autographically Changing Iran – Minor Media and Bicultural Graphics / 335

Emergent Ethnographic Subjects / 335

Minor Media as Reminders of the Postmodern Condition: Posters,

Cartoons, Emblems / 338

Truth in Tulips: Emblems, Arabesque Design, Allusive Graphics / 341

Revolutionary Operatics and Cartoons for Export / 347

Revolutionary Posters and Cultural *Intereférences* / 352

Hypertextual Feints and Constraints / 379

7. Postscriptural Parergon: Bombay Talkies, the Word and the World: Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* / 383

They Shoot Novelists Don't They? / 385

Beyond the Text / 388

Qur'anic Sources and A-maze-ments / 403

Reading the Novel: Highjacked Souls / 419

Literature to Think With / 435

Appendix 1. Alternative Traditional Orderings of the Qur'an / 445

Appendix 2. The Ring, Octagon, or Eight Propositions of Political Wisdom / 448

Appendix 3. The Imām's Blasphemystic Ghazal / 451

Vaziri presided at the marriage, and in his benedictory speech, he recounted the marriages of the prophets and of the Imāms one by one, concluding, "And now is the time of the marriage of one whose name is the same as the twelfth Imām's." Then he announced that the groom had no house, and thank God, the father-in-law had a big one, and so the groom would live there. So I lived with my father-in-law for four years, when I left in a dispute over a piece of land. I had been paying my father-in-law for this land, but instead of paying the owner, he gave the owner IOUs and used the money himself in the meantime. When I went to collect the deed to the land, the owner showed me the IOUs. Shortly after, the owner went bankrupt and the land was lost. Later my father-in-law tried to give me another piece of land as a substitute, but I refused. More than a dozen years later he is still insisting, often with the threat that if I do not take it, the Islamic government will.

Anjoman-e Zedd-e Bahā'iyat (The Anti-Baha'i Society)

[The Anti-Baha'i organization was started with the permission of Āyatullāh S. Husain Borujerdi by Shaykh Maḥmūd Ḥalabi of Mashhad who became what in contemporary idiom might be called a "Mahdi freak." He started an annual celebration of the Mahdi's birthday in Mashhad, in which everyone who owned canaries would bring them in their cages to decorate a large ḥusainiyeh in which the celebration was held. He also started an organization to stop the spread of Baha'ism which claimed that Muhammad was not the last and final prophet, but that a new dispensation had begun with Baha'ullah. The organization was called *Anjoman-e Imām-e Zamān* to deny any claim that the Bab or Baha'ullah could be considered the Mahdi or messiah: *Imām-e Zamān* ("Imām of the age") is a title of the twelfth Imām who will return as the Mahdi. After the 1979 revolution, the organization Arabicized its name to *Hojjatiyya* after another title of the Imām-e Zamān: *Hujjat Allah 'Alā Khalqih* ("God's proof over his creation"). Ḥalabi moreover hinted that he was in daily contact with the Imām-e Zamān; and eventually he came out against Khomeini, denying that he was a legitimate representative of the Imām-e Zamān. The name *Hojjatiyya* thus now performed two denials: first, it denied the Babi-Bahā'ī claim that the Imām-e Zamān had come or that there was a new dispensation; second, it denied Khomeini's title *Nāyeb-e Imām* ("aide to the Imām") or *Imām*. Ḥalabi invoked the slogan "Should any flag be raised before the coming of the Mahdi, its carrier is an idolator [*tāghūt*] and is guilty of the heresy of *shirk* [worshipping something other than God]." Halabi advocated peace-

Muhammad was the seal that closes prophethood. He also prepared us for the Baha'i argument that *nabī* is only one of several kinds of prophets, and that *rasūl* and *ulu al-'azm* are other kinds. But one cannot be a *rasūl* without being a *nabī*, and one cannot be an *ulu al-'azm* without being both *nabī* and *rasūl*. And he dealt with the problem of the supernaturally long life of the Mahdi: born in 255/868 he had already lived eleven centuries, and would live to the end of time. Here he would tell us about others who had lived long lives, e.g., Noah; he told us there were contemporaries who had seen the Mahdi; and he said that modern biology had demonstrated that cells could live forever if properly nourished. The last fit nicely with the dogma that all the Imāms had been assassinated, for had their lives not been precipitously ended, they would have lived forever. He taught us the signs of the Mahdi's reappearance, and he had ready answers to objections such as, Why would the Mahdi return with a sword and only 313 followers; would not a few atomic bombs be more efficient? The answer was that in a sword there is discrimination, while atomic bombs kill guilty and innocent alike, leaving no opportunity for verbal persuasion, for people to recant and join the forces of the Mahdi. His forces will not be limited to 313, but many will join: may we all be his soldiers.

I did not know much about Baha'is before this time. Children in the alleys would sometimes chant, *Tū pīr-e bābi ridam* ("I shit on the Babi saint"), and my father had told me that "Babis" (he did not distinguish Babis and Baha'is) did not say their prayers, and were *najes* (impure). In the village, the first *Sepāh-e Dānesh* (literacy corpsman) had been taunted and run out with accusations that he was Baha'i (though that may have had to do mainly with his obvious disinterest in the village, and his always running off to town).

My father had already often spoken to me about the Mahdi. One of his few books, which he seemed never to tire of reading, was a volume called *Nūr al-Anwār* (The light of the lights). It described the Mahdi, gave vivid accounts of false messiahs, the signs of the true Mahdi's reappearance, the names, number, and place of origin of those destined to be among his special 313 soldiers. My father would sigh, "Alas, I am not one of those soldiers, since none of them come from Yazd." He also had a small book by a mullā named Khalisi, called *Crime in Abarghū*, the story of a Baha'i who had killed some Muslims with an ax. The book called on Muslims to rise up for justice. It inflamed people like my father and youths like myself to think of Baha'is as merciless killers; and I remember that after having read it, I had nightmares of a Baha'i trying to kill me with an ax. My father liked to tell me the stories of the year of Baha'i killing (*sāl-e bābi koshi*) [presumably 1905,

all my fellow Muslims. This ranged from glib adolescent nonsense to much more dangerous areas. To the slur, "Baha'ullah is your God," instead of insisting that he was a prophet of God, I counterattacked: "Suppose it is so, what then?" My opponents took the bait: "It says in your books that he had a hernia, how could God be so powerless as not to be able to cure his own hernia?" To this I glibly responded, "At the beginning of your Muslim prayer you say 'Allah o Akbar' ['God is the greatest']; if God is the greatest, then his testicles must be the greatest." Everyone laughed good-humoredly. But when I began to argue the case for pantheism and metaphor, and cited the Qur'anic verse where God says, "It was not you who shot the arrow, but Allah," things became tense, and Paknejad stopped the proceedings, saying, "Thank God, you are Muslim; were you really a Baha'i, not even Muhammad himself could convince you." Another said, "If someone were as hardheaded as you, it could never be the word of Muhammad that could change your mind, but only the sword of the Mahdi." Everyone laughed.

In these debates we were taught to be polite, to differentiate ourselves from the rabble who cursed the Baha'is. Baha'is were pacifist, so we had no fear of being beaten, and we wanted to show we also had a mission to be as peaceful as they, and to demonstrate that we had a higher logic. Our goal was not so much to win verbal duels, but to intervene with Muslims who were toying with Baha'i propaganda and bring them back into the fold of Islam. We infiltrated into Baha'i meetings under the guise of ourselves being potential converts. Often, of course, Baha'is we engaged in conversation would ask, "Do you know Dr. Paknejad?" We would say, "No, I have nothing to do with him." We were also taught to snatch rare Baha'i books where we could. Two or three incidents in which I participated will illustrate the tactics.

I befriended Kamran, a young Baha'i. We said to each other, "If I can show you the truth, will you accept it," and each of us said yes. He brought me a mimeographed book, which impressed me. I took it to the Anjoman-e Zedd-e Bahā'ī, where as soon as I began describing its arguments, it was identified and the counterarguments laid out. Nayeb Kabir told me it was not an important book and I should return it. Kamran then gave me a rare edition of the *Iqān* (Certitude), published in Cairo. Paknejad recognized it as the original unedited version, and appropriated it. Kamran tried mightily to persuade me to give it back, arguing that were he to have done the same to me, I would never accept his religion; that I was clearly not acting on my own conscience but was being manipulated by others; and that he had borrowed it to show me only with great difficulty, arguing that I was an educated and sincere

friend. I remained unmoved, and pointed out that the book was no longer in my hands, but that it now belonged to the library of the Imām-e Zamān.

Kamran also took me to the one Baha'i meeting I ever infiltrated. I remember that there was a Baha'i missionary from Tehran who answered questions of the local Baha'i, and there was one local very agitated man who asked how to respond to questions about the Baha'i calendar having an illogical nineteen months, while all other religions had twelve months aligned with the solar or lunar calendars. The missionary responded that were the questioner Muslim, one could cite the Qur'anic *bismillāh-i rrahman-i rrahīm*, which has nineteen letters, and several other phrases which were multiples of nineteen, i.e., to show that nineteen is a divine number.²⁶ The man in a crude Yazdi idiom retorted, *Kos cheh rabti be shaghigheh dareh?* ("what connection does the vagina have with the temples?"; the Tehran idiom is *Guz che rabti . . .*, "What connection does a fart have . . ."). So the missionary replied, "Nineteen times nineteen is 351 days, plus four days we celebrate the New Year, what's so bad about that?" Another item of discussion was that the Baha'i library in the village of Manshad did not have a copy of the Dekhoda encyclopedia, and money should be raised to supply one. This impressed me because at the time, the Vaziri Library was trying to find someone to donate volumes to complete its set of this encyclopedia, and I thought to myself this village library must be large to have things our library did not. Later I realized Baha'is had a special interest in this encyclopedia because it had a long entry on the Bab. The entries on the Imāms were short, understandably, since every Iranian knows about them, but it angered Muslim zealots like Dr. Paknejad.

The only other evil thing I did against individual Baha'is was when I was transferred to a second group of the Anjoman under Ahmad Fattahi. Fattahi was a registrar of births and deaths. It was he who registered most Baha'i marriages, births, and deaths, so he was a tremendous source of information in keeping tabs on Baha'is. (Baha'i marriages were not legally recognized in Iran; marriages could be registered only under the four recognized religions: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism.) One day Fattahi called me. I had a beard and a black suit, and he gave me a black attache case. He took me to an alley in the Zoroastrian quarter, and told me to knock on a particular door and ask for Abbas. Abbas would not be there. I was to pretend I was an anti-Baha'i activist from Tehran asked by Abbas to come and answer questions he was not capable of answering. Whether or not I was admitted into the house, I was to deliver the message that they should

not think what they were doing was secret, but that we knew everything that went on. When I knocked, a woman's voice with a Zoroastrian accent answered without opening the door, "Who is it?" "Engineer Imami," I said. Members of SAVAK were said to use the titles Engineer or Doctor. "What do you want (*che farmāyeshī dārīd?*)," she asked in polite formal language, adding "Our man is not here (*mardemūn khūneh nīst*)," i.e., please go away. "I'm looking for Abbas." "What Abbas? No Abbas lives here." "Abbas, you know, the painter." Silence. I repeated, "Abbas, the painter who comes here to learn from your husband." "He is not here." "He must be here; he sent for me to come all the way from Tehran to answer a few questions. Where shall I go? When will your husband or Abbas be here?" Surprisingly, at this point, the woman opened the door a little, and spoke loudly as if invoking the ears of neighbors, "I already told you, Abbas is not here, my husband is not here." I said, "Tell Abbas if he sends for someone from Tehran, he must be polite enough to meet them." And I turned and walked away. Fattahi was waiting around the corner with his bicycle and took me on it back to his office. There I reported the conversation and asked him what it was all about. Abbas, he said, was a poor painter who had been seen repeatedly in the shop of this Zoroastrian-Baha'i tailor. The ruse worked: when Abbas next went to the house, he was turned away despite his protestation that he did not know any Engineer Imami. A few days later Fattahi sent someone else to Abbas to hire him to paint a house. As the contract was being made, this emissary asked, "You are not a Baha'i or a Jew are you; paint after all is a liquid and conveys impurity, we cannot use a *najes* painter." "No, no," Abbas assured him. Then later while painting, the emissary said, "Sorry I asked you, but you know these Baha'is are such hypocrites and liars." And with such preparation, often an Abbas would spill his own story out of bitterness. So, Fattahi said, we turn potential enemies of the Mahdi into soldiers of the Mahdi.

That is what we called ourselves, *Sarbāz-e Imām-e Zamān* (soldiers of the Imām of the age). It was a kind of war. Perhaps that is why many of the leaders of the Anjoman were not married: Nayeb Kabir, Mir Ali, Fattahi. No one in the organization was a mullā, because clerical dress would warn off any Baha'is. The only one who wore a turban was Shaykh Mahmud Halabi of Mashhad who started the whole thing.

The Sage in the Library: Vaziri

Vaziri was like a second father to me: he gave me my first job in his library, attached to the Congregational Mosque; he helped arrange my