

Baha'ism: Some Uncertainties about its Role as a Globalizing Religion

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Towards a Definition (of sorts) of Globalization

I must assume that anyone reading this has a reasonably good idea of what Baha'ism stands for as a religion and as a social movement with as yet unrealized political ambitions. Globalization, on the other hand, is a widespread term with numerous interpretations. I hesitate to offer a definition of the latter to readers of this collection, many of whom are experts in that very topic. But I ought, at least, to clarify my personal views on the subject, and to specify some of the political and religious attitudes that seem to me to contradict it.

Globalization is a politico-economic process that has been gathering pace since the Second World War and the end of empires (America excepted). Conspiracy theorists apart, few would suggest that there is a centrally-organized 'globalization plan' or pre-conceived goals of any kind, even if globalization works towards such goals on a local or corporate scale. It proceeds through developments in technology, through free trade between nations, through the dissemination of science and information, through exercises in religious ecumenism, and through philosophical explorations of what encounters between nations, races, and religions may involve.

Its greatest expression to date must surely be the Internet, with its extraordinary ability to shrink distances and eliminate borders at the tap of a computer key. Ten years ago, searching for a rare book was a time-consuming activity that could take years. Now, however, one

can search for a volume in seconds through websites that provide access to bookshops around the planet. From my study in the UK, I regularly order books from France, America, and Australia, and I can now buy recordings of Portuguese *fado* music from a Portuguese shop in Frankfurt, or *sencha* tea from several places in Japan.

Spaces close, not always with the best result. On the downside, globalization tends to homogenize cultures or to impose a variety of Western culture on non-western people or American culture on everybody else, including the French. Trade is eased, often with serious consequences for local producers or those employed in sweatshops by multinational companies. Cheap air fuel (kept that way by low taxation) means that it's cheaper to fly cherries in from Chile instead of transporting them by road from the farm just outside town directly to the supermarket.

In the religious sphere, globalization sets an ideal of harmony and cooperation, at the price of blurring important distinctions between belief systems. Inter-religious harmony is, in any case, a frail thing cultivated by people with irenic temperaments. The reality of religious behavior is still, in many ways, Catholic versus Protestant in Northern Ireland,¹ Hindu mobs in India, Islamic mobs in Kashmir, Jew versus Muslim in the Middle East, right-wing American fundamentalism spoiling for a fight with Islam, and Muslims on several continents *contra mundum*.

Globalization and Scientific Values

There is a link between globalization and science that is crucial and exciting. The virtues of science are neutrality, objectivity, and secularity. Just as there cannot be 'Jewish science', 'Muslim science', 'Hindu science', and so on, so there cannot be American globalization, British globalization, conservative globalization, or liberal globalization, and so on.

By its very nature, a globalized outlook threatens parochial interests and outlooks. Irish by birth, when I watch a French film or read a Persian poem or listen in awe to Cristina Branco sing *Aquele Tao*

1 Where a recent Queen's University survey shows that inter-community prejudice is worse than it was when the Troubles started over thirty years ago, even among three-year-old children.

Triste Dia or marvel at a piece of Arabic calligraphy – in all of these undertakings I transcend the ‘Orangeism’, the ‘meat and two veg’, the ‘Kick the Pope’ songs, and the constant bigotry of my Northern Irish origins. I am not alone.

The most important resistant culture and religion is that of Islam. Of course there are similar strains in Haredi Judaism, in militant Hinduism, in the German sects of North America, and in the Paisleyite variety of Protestantism. But Islam has stolen the stage, not only in its terrorist-militant forms, but even in most of its moderate incarnations. Although Islam is far from homogeneous, having two important divisions: Shi’i and Sunni, Sufi and non-Sufi; and more graduated variations between regional styles, it remains visibly less sectarian than any other religion of its size, with idealizing and universalizing pressures that reduce the impact of the divisions. Many Sufi brotherhoods have been and are highly shari’a-minded, many mystics have taken part in or led holy wars, the four Sunni law schools differ on minor points only, and Shi’is and Sunnis agree on more things than they fall out over.

Today, only a minority of Muslims are terrorists, but larger numbers will support the jihad-based struggle of the minority, while even larger numbers will condemn terrorism outright while agreeing with classical formulations regarding holy war, the priority of Islam, or the sacredness of martyrdom. It can never be accurate to say ‘Muslims do this’ or ‘Muslims believe that’; but with some degree of caution it is easier to generalize about the Islamic world than most other religious congregations.

Muslim insistence on denying a fullness of human rights to women and religious minorities, the persistence of practices like female genital mutilation and honour killing, or the extraordinary continuance of a vicious anti-Semitism at most levels of society, in the popular press, on radio and television, even in school textbooks are all indications of a culture that has distanced and continues to distance itself from some of the most basic demands of a globalized society. Those Muslims most likely to embrace globalization and its consequences wholeheartedly will inevitably be partly or wholly secularized. It is secularization that provides the real test of openness to global values, not relatively insignificant distinctions of style between Cairo and Qum.

I think it is not untrue to say that any Muslim, if asked, would welcome the dissolution of the state of Israel and its replacement with a

Muslim Palestinian state. Some might seek the physical destruction of Israeli Jews, others might accept them as *dhimmi*s under Islamic law, yet others might seek to exile them to any country that would have them. The thing is that the underlying desire to see Israel gone and Islam resurgent has a powerful influence on politics throughout the Muslim world, and this in turn makes Muslim involvement in global issues harder than it might be.

Baha'ism and Islam

Having said all this by way of preamble, let us return to the Baha'is.

What, the informed reader may wonder, has Islam to do with this? I had been tempted to make my title read: 'a post-Islamic response', but a moment's thought told me that we are definitely not living in a post-Islamic world, much as George Bush and his advisers might like to think so. The Baha'i faith, of course, is manifestly not a sect or school of Islam, and you will not find me arguing that. Baha'is do think of themselves as post-Islamic (and post-Christian, post-Buddhist, and so on), but that should not carry so much weight with the rest of us.

Although it has broken from Islam and offers a post-Islamic revelation, it is important to remember that Baha'ism does carry a heavy weight of Islamic influence, such that any intelligent examination of its position among other cultures must take account of this. Just as we can talk without contradiction of Judaeo-Christian this and that, so we can, I think, speak accurately about Islamo-Baha'i theology and theophanology, Islamo-Baha'i legalism, Islamo-Baha'i ritualism, Islamo-Baha'i morality, and so on.

A notable feature that Baha'ism shares with other New Religious Movements, and that distinguishes it fundamentally from major world religions, is the absence of any real polarity between Great and Little Traditions within the religion. It would be unrealistic to expect one so soon. But it would also be reckless to anticipate such a development as inevitable. In spite of their best efforts, the Baha'is have so far failed to develop either local cultures or a single universal one. What traces, if any, of a culture that do exist are manifestly too weak to provide a real identity for the religion, and as yet much too undeveloped to exercise a perceptible influence on local cultures, let alone on those of international stature. There is, for the present, no distinct Baha'i art,

no Baha'i music, no Baha'i architecture,² no Baha'i literature (by which I mean, for example, poetry, *belles lettres*, and even fiction), no Baha'i cinema, no Baha'i cuisine, no Baha'i humour, and so on. It could take another century, and probably more, before such cultural expressions begin to emerge, if they do at all. More probably, by that time a global culture will have taken hold that will encourage Baha'i poets to write, composers to compose, or painters to paint in that context, rather than searching for a more limited form of religiously-defined expression.

But to anyone familiar with the movement, the absence of a distinct culture does not mean that Baha'ism has no flavour, that it is ersatz, that its books and rituals and doctrines are the blank products of unformed minds. What we actually find is a young religious tradition rich in Islamic cultural and religious referents, whose doctrinal, legal, and ritual core is colored throughout by 'Islamicity', if I may use such a clumsy term. Alongside this wealth of themes, symbols, rituals, mystical styles, and much else from Islamicate culture, there is an overwhelming sense of the abiding presence of Persian influence, from the literary style of the scriptures (even where written in Arabic),³ to the design of book jackets, to the use of Persian chant in devotions, to the hanging of the *Ya Baha' al-Abha* calligraphic symbol on walls, to the availability of Persian food, to the physical and psychological presence of Iranian Baha'is in most Baha'i communities.

Because an assertion of independence from Islam has been of such importance to Baha'is almost from the inception of the movement (though, as is widely known), Abbas Effendi continued to attend the mosque until his death), there has been an understandable tendency

- 2 The existence of several *mashariq al-adhkar* and the various buildings that make up the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa have convinced some people that a recognizably Baha'i architecture does exist. I disagree. The Haifa buildings are either straight copies of the neo-classical design found in public buildings around the world, or developments of it, not least of forms found in totalitarian states. The better-designed *mashariq* have a very individual quality, but are very different among themselves, so that there is no coherent style.
- 3 It is worth noting the great differences in the Arabic styles of the Bab, Baha' Allah, and 'Abd al-Baha'. Only the third wrote in an authentic Arab style, as a result of Arabic lessons in early life and life in an Arabic environment after 1868.

for members to exaggerate the originality of everything from laws to common practices.

The 'External Influence' versus 'Divine Inspiration/Innate Knowledge' Debate

More recently, a debate has developed between liberal Baha'i scholars like Juan Cole on the one hand, and what I would term fundamentalists like Nader Saeidi and many others on the other. The former have propounded a scenario that puts the Bab, Baha' Allah and 'Abd al-Baha' deep within their cultural environment, and have identified a range of possible influences on their thinking, from Islamic mysticism to Western republicanism. The latter, arguing that all three figures were, in two distinct measures, divinely inspired from the moment they first took breath, deny any possibility of the slightest influence on their thought from any quarter whatever, other than God himself.

It's not my purpose here to enter into that debate, other than to say I find myself wholly on the side of the liberals, and that I find nothing in the Baha'i scriptures that cannot be ascribed to existing norms. This may seem like a minor internal debate, but the truth is that it has enormous significance for understanding the relationship between Baha'ism and the wider culture.

Because everything the Bab and his successors did or said is deemed to have come from their innate knowledge (*'ilm-i laduni*, an old Sufi term), it follows that all new ideas in Babism or Baha'ism must be treated as though wholly original, as though brought into the world *tabula rasa* from the mouth of the twin prophets. This creates an extraordinary ahistoricism, whereby all earlier examples of the phenomenon in question are simply ignored.

Thus, for example, the principle of the equality of men and women was enunciated by Baha' Allah, but not by the Bab. Despite that, orthodox Baha'is will attribute this same teaching to the Babi poetess Fatima Baraghani Qurrat al-'Ayn. My most strenuous researches have failed to reveal the slightest mention of this subject in Qurrat al-'Ayn's extant writings, and I doubt very much whether she gave the matter much thought. Certainly, I would not count her as an active promoter of women's rights, much less as the first woman in the world to adopt such a position.

It is quite understandable that earlier generations of Baha'is, lacking

hard information about feminism in history, may have granted Qurrat al-'Ayn a primacy that was ill-justified. That they persist in doing so is less easy to comprehend. The historical position is clear. Open writing and debate about women's position in society, including detailed demands for equality between the sexes began in England and France from the fourteenth century and reached remarkable proportions by the late 16th.⁴ By the time of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), the rights of women were firmly on the agenda for women in Europe and North America.

Baha'i insistence here and in many other areas on Baha' Allah's primacy is inconsistent with a worldview that recognizes the achievements of other cultures and religions. It resembles the old Soviet trick of claiming primacy for almost all modern inventions for Russia. Surely it should be enough that the Baha'is support the principle of male and female equality, without making a song and dance about a historically indefensible primacy.

Let me put all this in a somewhat different form. The Bab and Baha' Allah were never influenced through the whole range of their religion-making activities by the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, Shintoist, Amerindian, African, Protestant, Confucian, Tibetan, Santerian, or any other significant religious tradition. Though that may sound like stating the obvious, the absence of any coloring from such sources is extremely relevant in the context of globalization. Quite simply, potential converts from those and many other traditions will see nothing familiar in Baha'ism on their first contact with it, but will instead be asked to take on board a host of ideas and acts of worship or personal routine saturated with Iranian, Arab, Sufi, Shi'i, Islamo-Christian and related norms. It's a one-way street, in other words.

By way of contrast, individuals from an Iranian, Shi'i, or Sunni Muslim background will have no difficulty in recognizing, say, the Baha'i *hajj*, or the practices of *ziyara*, *salat*, or *sawm* as cognates of

4 There is no space here for anything but the sketchiest of accounts. Readers looking for a complete picture of early pro-feminist writing should consult the 30-volume series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996-). The central point is that a serious debate about the equality of women began in the 16th century, long before Babism or Baha'ism came on the scene.

Islamic ritual practices, even if the forms differ; they will feel at ease both with the style of Baha'i historical narrative, and with much of the content; they will recognize theological concepts such as *tawhid* (the divine unity), progressive revelation, and even the Manifestation of God (which has exact cognates in some Shi'i literature); they will find photographs of early Babis and Baha'is resonant with images of their own grandparents; they will find that the original scriptures are in languages they will understand or at least partly recognize; they will find some Baha'i imagery (such as the *ya baha' al-abha* symbol, the ringstone symbol, and the five-pointed star) essentially familiar; they will find the names of historical figures familiar and pronounceable; they will feel at ease with the style of chanting used in devotions; they will find 'Abd al-Baha's insistence that women wear headscarves unsurprising; they will have no problems with the ban on alcohol; they will have no difficulties with the extensive use of Quranic and *hadith* quotations in scripture; they will not be ill at ease with the use of *Al-lahu abha* as a greeting. I could go on, but I think the point has been made.

But how would a Scottish Presbyterian, say, or a Tibetan Buddhist or a Vodoun priestess or a Mormon elder react to all the above? Everything I have just mentioned will be unfamiliar, alienating, and often downright mysterious. There is no comfortable link between the Isle of Lewis and City of Shiraz, or between the Potola and the mansion of Bahji.

Oddly enough, the community that would find Baha'ism most familiar — Islam — displays the most negative reaction in fact, whereas a community without common referents (Hinduism) has proved a major source of converts.

Does Cultural Connectivity Matter?

Baha'is may say that none of this matters, because the main features of their religion revolve around matters like world government, world peace, and world brotherhood, or the administrative order, or international development. There's some truth in that, but I am not convinced that the Baha'i faith can travel so far from its roots as to become genuinely culture-free at heart. Matters like theology, the law, ritual, and sacred history are far more important in defining a religion than, say, involvement with the UN or advocating a world language

or promoting racial harmony, activities which are common to many other religions and secular bodies.

At this point, I feel I am only scratching the surface of the problem. Practising Baha'is, at least those who aspire to some serious knowledge of their origins and beliefs, will say that they do not feel alienated by these elements of their faith. But many Western Baha'is find long Persian names, or historical accounts set in the alien world of 19th-century Iran, or even Shoghi Effendi's impossibly long periods difficult to read and digest. Converts from Christianity frequently find the Islamic-style legalism hard to link with earlier beliefs in the primacy of conscience.

Perhaps that does not matter, and perhaps it doesn't matter today how little new converts among tribespeople and other marginalized groups may understand these things.

But the children and grandchildren of these converts are, presumably, going to receive a more thoroughgoing Baha'i education, and we must assume that that will alienate them to some degree from their own traditions and belief systems. Indeed, such a process has to happen if Baha'ism is not to suffer the fate of so many earlier faiths and find itself overgrown by a congeries of beliefs and practices alien to its original nature. In fact, there appears to be a genuine disapproval of 'Little Tradition' features that 'corrupt' the 'pure' Baha'i teachings and prescribed practices.⁵ Newly-converted tribes are put through 'deepening classes', the purpose of which is to acculturate them to Baha'i ways of thinking and doing.

And this is roughly where my worries centre. To speak of Baha'ism as a global religion and yet pursue a conversion and educational process which allows one culture (i.e. Baha'i/Islamic/Persianate culture) to dominate seems to me contradictory. Although official Baha'i teaching emphasizes a need for 'unity in diversity', one is often struck by an overriding stress on the unity side of the equation. This is because fear of sectarian division has led Baha'is to be cautious of words and behavior that might compromise the integrity of the *gemeinschaft*. Any attempt to introduce, say, Hindu prayers into Baha'i worship might be deemed contrary to strict orthodoxy.

5 On this, see Denis MacEoin (1994).

The Oneness of Religion

Baha'is preach their belief in the oneness of religion. But what does this really mean? In practice, it means something very similar to the Islamic belief (from which it is obviously derived) that there has only ever been one heavenly religion, and that it has been manifested historically by Judaism, Sabeanism, Christianity, and now Islam, or by prophets like Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The Islamic doctrine of the oneness of the heavenly religions had a side-effect of rendering Judaism and Christianity betrayed and corrupted faiths that had to be infantilized into 'protected peoples'. All others were out of the game entirely.

The Baha'i faith widens this a little, by artificially incorporating Buddhism and Hinduism as divine religions, while stripping both of them of everything that makes them 'Buddhism' or 'Hinduism'. There is no scriptural indication that other faiths (Sikhism, Jainism, Shintoism, Maori religion, the new Japanese religions, African religions, Mormonism, Candoblé, Vodoun and so forth, together with the innumerable sectarian variations in them and in the larger faiths) have any value whatever. Standard Baha'i texts on progressive revelation or world faiths simply ignore them.⁶ They are certainly not considered by Baha'is to be divinely revealed, nor are their founders (where one exists) considered Manifestations of God.

This in itself means that, as far as a large proportion of mankind is concerned, the only possible interaction with Baha'ism is either to convert or to remain resistant. Neither seems appropriate in a globalization context.

Baha'i Dogmatism

But this is not all. Like Islam, Baha'ism is a dogmatic religion. Very clear lines are drawn between truth and falsehood ('This, verily, is the truth, and all else naught but error', Baha' Allah).⁷ This means, for example, that Christian belief in the Trinity, in the status of Christ as God incarnate, in the resurrection of Jesus, in the divine origin of the

6 One exception is Amerindian religion, which is credited with a chain of oral prophecies believed to foretell the advent of Baha'ism.

7 Baha' Allah (1956) *Lawh al-malika*, in *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, trans. Shoghi Effendi: 255.

Church and the liturgy, in the status of Mary as Mother of God, in the intermediary role of the priesthood, in the salvific power of confession and the forgiveness of sins, in the intercession of the saints, in the resurrection of the dead, in the infallibility of the Pope, in the efficacy of the sacraments, and so much else that is absolutely fundamental to all Catholics (other lists could be made for other churches) are all regarded as errors or worse by Baha'is.

Similarly, the absence of a Buddhist belief in God is not only considered false, but is subject to extreme revisionism, as in the Baha'i book by Jamshid Fozdar, *The God of Buddha*.⁸

It is hard to see how this essentially intolerant attitude can hope to further the aims of globalization, in which no one culture or set of beliefs should be allowed to dominate. Baha'is have for a long time claimed that their faith is a strong force in bringing together disparate religious traditions. But we have only to look at the content of Baha'i-managed World Religion Day events to see them as ham-fisted attempts to declare all previous religions as precursors of Baha'ism, all conforming to basic ideals of one God, a succession of prophets, one true faith from Adam to Baha' Allah, and so on.

This divisive approach is accentuated by the intensity of the Baha'i international missionary effort, an endeavour that has for many decades now dominated Baha'i activities in all continents. Baha'is do not set out to bring religions closer in an ecumenical manner, but rather seek to convert Hindus to Baha'is, Buddhists to Baha'is, and even Northern Irish Protestants to Baha'is. Positively understood, globalization is not about proselytizing, but about mutual respect, tolerance, and an abandonment of earlier beliefs about one religion's superiority over another.

In its favour, it is worth remembering that Baha'ism has broken from Islam in a number of important areas. It has abolished *jihad*, it no longer punishes apostasy,⁹ and it contains strict rules for the tolerant treatment of religious minorities of all kinds, whether 'People of the Book' or not. But the urge to convert and to establish Baha'i states and an eventual 'Baha'i World State' rather undermine what might have been an important ecumenical role for the faith.

8 Fozdar, Jamshid K. (1973).

9 It does, of course, punish dissidence ('covenant-breaking') by total excommunication.

Globalization and Secularization

Let's leave the purely religious aspect for the moment, and take a look at some other aspects of Baha'ism that may create problems for a serious Baha'i role within a broader globalization process. It is, I think, axiomatic that healthy globalization must involve the spread of democratic forms of government, a monitored attachment to human rights, and – more controversially – a gradual secularization of societies across the globe.

Though much criticized in some quarters today, secularization has for some time now been seen as a prerequisite of democracy, liberalization and socio-economic progress. I would not be the first to suggest that nothing would further the peace progress in my native Ireland more than a massive injection of secular values on both sides. Certainly, the development of democracy and human rights legislation has been markedly more positive in mainly secularized countries, such as those in Europe, than in the Islamic world or other religiously determined societies.

Even though the simple secularization thesis has been abandoned in the face of a wave of determined religious revivalism, there seems to be no evidence that religions can work easily with modernization, other than in mechanical, technological ways. Ideological aspects of modernity, such as women's rights or the rights of the individual to freedom of conscience and expression (including the right to change one's religion and to dissent), tend to meet with resistance in the religious realm, particularly from Islam, where apostasy is, strictly speaking, punishable by death, and simple questioning as often as not equated with apostasy.

I have said before that, like Islam, Baha'ism is, by its very nature, a dogmatic religion. I'm not saying that that is, in itself, a bad thing to be. Many people seek precisely the sort of security and certainty that such a religion can bring. But their certainty in dogmas may be bought at a high price for their fellow citizens.

Dogmatism is particularly visible in the system of Baha'i law, the *shari'a*, based on Islamic norms but in this case sent down from heaven by Baha' Allah. Baha'i behaviour in most things can be determined from the *Kitab al-aqdas* and related texts, and in future fresh laws and rulings are expected to be delivered (under divine inspiration) by the Universal House of Justice.

Although the Baha'i *shari'a* is, as yet, far from as detailed as its Islamic model, or, for that matter, its eccentric precursor, the Babi *shari'a*, it does contain injunctions that ensure the Baha'is will be unable to modify their stance on certain issues, much as modern Muslims have resisted social change through a reluctance to alter or even reinterpret their own legal code.

Two matters may bring Baha'is into increasing dissonance with liberal social opinion in the West, particularly in Europe. One is approval of capital punishment, including its use in cases of arson (where the perpetrator may be burned to death), the other, famously, is prohibition of active homosexuality. Europeans (and a considerable number of Americans) have come to regard capital punishment with abhorrence, and opposition to it has come to be identified with a sense of compassion and justice that is socially more adult than the baser motives of revenge that surround executions.

Acceptance of homosexuals as worthy fellow citizens has come to symbolize respect for our fellows and the vital importance of tolerance in all parts of the social sphere.

To become identified with intolerance while preaching the abolition of prejudice may do the Baha'is harm in precisely those social contexts that may be most supportive of the positive aspects of globalization. A religion that tells men how long they may grow their hair, or that even provides detailed directions on how to eat (as laid down in Baha' Allah's *Lawh al-tibb*) is likely to fall out of favor with a majority of independent-minded people in the West, and with growing numbers of people in developing countries who are only now learning how to break away from their own stultifying traditions and petty injunctions.

Religion and Secular Norms

This almost certainly means that, whatever role religion may play in the globalization process, it is always likely to be out of step with secular achievements. Here are some examples: the refusal of the Iranian government to recognize Baha'is, Hindus, Buddhists and others as citizens, or to accord Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians full legal rights; the illegality of preaching or converting to non-Muslim faiths within Islamic countries; the blatant intolerance displayed towards all non-Muslim faiths by Saudi Arabia; the persistence of caste divisions

in India; the opposition until recently of both the Russian and Greek Orthodox churches to the legal recognition of Catholicism, Judaism, and other faiths; the insistence by the Afghan Taliban that Hindu citizens wear badges indicating their faith; the long-standing interference in politics by the American Christian right; the imposition of shari'a law on animists in southern Sudan; the concealed involvement of the Unification Church in the restore Nixon campaign; the role of the Dutch Reformed Church in promoting and justifying apartheid; the belated acceptance of black converts by the Mormon church; the support given to the Ceausescu régime by the Romanian Orthodox Church, and obstacles created for young members to join the pro-democracy movement; the banning of various religious movements by the state of Brunei, which actively promotes Islam; the close involvement in right-wing politics, high finance, and academia of the Catholic order *Opus Dei*, especially in Spain; the insistence of several religious groups in the United Kingdom on the right to provide their children with separate education to that of the majority, an attitude long established in Northern Ireland, which is nobody's model for a healthy democracy capable of taking part in the globalization process; and so on.

All of the above, tedious as it may be, is only part of a broad picture that shows most religions to have a reactionary and intolerant side which often dominates, and to be quite incapable of providing a secure basis for democratic processes and the rule of law in keeping with the International Declaration of Human Rights. It is because of this that secularists like myself are forced to conclude that the only healthy way forward is through a thoroughgoing secularization that keeps the hands of priests and *ulama* off areas like freedom of thought and the right to dissent.

Baha'ism, by way of contrast, sees no true globalization, no true international unity, other than by means of religious forces. And, most importantly, it sees those religious forces as inhering exclusively within itself.

The Promised Day is Come

To understand this (and what is to come) correctly, one has to read Shoghi Effendi's 1941 treatise, *The Promised Day is Come* and related texts, from which I can only quote very selectively here.

The main thrusts of this central text are, first, that the Bab and Baha' Allah have come to usher in the Day promised in all the holy books; secondly, that both prophets suffered terribly at the hands of clergy and rulers alike; thirdly, that all religions, but Islam and Christianity in particular, have gone into rapid and permanent decline as retribution for their rejection of these two figures, so prominently prefigured in their scriptures; and, lastly, that the future of humanity is glorious and will culminate in a global world political system provided by the Baha'i faith and the emergence of one world religion (which obviously is not going to be Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism).

In other words, all the events of the past one hundred and fifty years or so have been set in motion by the appearance in the world of the Baha'i revelation. Even secular events like wars and revolutions ultimately owe their appearance to the earlier emergence of Baha'ism and its rejection by the forces of ignorance, bigotry, and arrogance.

The 'Decline' in Religious Influence

Shoghi Effendi expresses the decline in religious influence throughout the text, as in the following declaration:

The decline in the fortunes of the crowned wielders of temporal power has been paralleled by a no less startling deterioration in the influence exercised by the world's spiritual leaders. The colossal events that have heralded the dissolution of so many kingdoms and empires have almost synchronized with the crumbling of the seemingly inviolable strongholds of religious orthodoxy. That same process which, swiftly and tragically, sealed the doom of kings and emperors, and extinguished their dynasties, has operated in the case of the ecclesiastical leaders of both Christianity and Islam, damaging their prestige, and, in some cases, overthrowing their highest institutions. (Shoghi Effendi, 1941: 71)

With regard to Islam, he says:

The dissolution of the institution of the Caliphate, the complete secularization of the state which had enshrined the most august institution of Islam, and the virtual collapse of the Shi'ih hierarchy in Persia, were the visible and immediate consequences of the treatment meted out to the Cause of God by the clergy of the two largest communions of the Muslim world. (*ibid.*: 86)

This message is hammered home in numerous other passages too long to quote here. Christianity is treated in much the same way:

Indeed, ever since the Divine summons was issued, and the invitation extended, and the warning sounded, and the condemnation pronounced, this process, that may be said to have been initiated with the collapse of the temporal sovereignty of the Roman Pontiff, soon after the Tablet to the Pope had been revealed, has been operating with increasing momentum, menacing the very basis on which the entire order is resting. Aided by the forces which the Communist movement has unloosed, reinforced by the political consequences of the last war, accelerated by the excessive, the blind, the intolerant, and militant nationalism which is now convulsing the nations, and stimulated by the rising tide of materialism, irreligion, and paganism, this process is not only tending to subvert ecclesiastical institutions, but appears to be leading to the rapid dechristianization of the masses in many Christian countries. (*ibid.*: 99)

Whether Shoghi Effendi will one day be proved right, and we will see the utter decline of all religions save Baha'ism, it is not for me to argue. What is more interesting here is his almost inadvertent support for secularization (as in the 'rapid dechristianization of the masses in many Christian countries' mentioned above). In some of his letters from around the 1930s and 40s, he speaks with great approval of the secularizing policies of Reza Shah in Iran. The more the Pahlavi regime tried to reduce the influence of Islam, the more Shoghi gave it his backing. He writes more than once of the benefits this situation gave to the previously persecuted Baha'i community. And many Baha'is, with their Western education (acquired abroad or in Baha'i schools), their ability to act as entrepreneurs outside the narrow confines of the Bazaar, their international contacts, their attraction to subjects like science, engineering, medicine, or architecture, acted as important conduits for the secularizing process.

Perversely, both Shoghi Effendi and subsequent conservative Baha'i writers in Persian and English have shown themselves to be stridently anti-secular, to the point where their fulminations could comfortably be exchanged with those of their fundamentalist Christian cousins. What they see as a decline in public morality, a breakdown in law and order, and the spread of individualism and excessive personal freedom chimes perfectly with the main concerns of right-wing Christian and Muslim writers.

Many of these Baha'i thinkers are particularly exercised by the thought that modern men and women are given the freedom to make their own decisions on issues like morality. The Baha'i preference is for a society governed by divine law and instruction, for the only true freedom lies in absolute and unquestioning obedience to the Law of God and its elevation above the human intellect and conscience.

This can be carried to ridiculous lengths, as in the ruling that couples seeking to marry should first obtain the consent of all living parents, even if the couple be in their forties or fifties and parents themselves. That is a barely-concealed method of guaranteeing arranged marriages for almost everyone.

This distaste for the freedoms, rights, and responsibilities that make up secular society sometimes results in blatant contradictions. For example, Udo Schaefer, a major advocate of 'the Law above all' approach to social relations writes that 'most people' are at present inclined to the idea of a concrete, apodictic religious law with its absolute, non-questionable, obligatory nature as much as the devil loves holy water'. Later, he actually quotes with approval part of an interview with a French sociologist who speaks of the way in which young people in Europe have abandoned organized religion.¹⁰

Considering that Shoghi Effendi and other Baha'i writers have thought that the abandonment of the established churches was a sign of God's hand at work in society, punishing the detractors of the Baha'i faith, and clearing the way for its coming triumph over the religions of the past – it seems odd that Schaefer should regret the spread of secular values so much.

Shoghi Effendi got his prophecies badly wrong when he predicted the ongoing decline of faiths, almost all of which are currently experiencing waves of regrowth. He got it wrong, of course, by trying to impose a grand scheme on everything and everybody. His 'Divine Plan', a plot made up of the future advent of a new world order, the need for God to punish those responsible for the sufferings of the Bab, Baha' Allah, and their followers, and an overriding desire to believe and demonstrate that history is not something made by human beings, but rather thrust upon them by a divine puppet-master proved itself constantly prone to rebuttal by the simple march of human events.

10 Udo Schaefer (2000: 321).

The Baha'i Dilemma

So, the Baha'is have a dilemma. They don't want the process of secularization rolled back, since this would mean either the regeneration of old faiths that ought to be on their way out or the forward march of new religions whose temporal success would surely negate a Divine Plan that has no role for them. Since it is far from likely for the foreseeable future that Baha'ism alone will both challenge secularism and supplant it globally, it looks as though the Baha'is will have to accept a secular society for a long time to come. In any case, only a tolerant secular society, the sort of society that grants human beings their liberty to think and speak and write as they wish, can provide the context for any forward movement of the Baha'i faith. But since the Baha'is don't really like secular society and make a point of adopting a conservative position on many issues that will only serve to alienate the best minds and most tolerant participants in such a society, they aren't likely to get very far.

What does this imply for Baha'ism and globalization? If my argument is correct, that a global society needs to be a secular society, then it suggests that the Baha'is won't know which way they are going. If they choose secularization because it means toleration for their own beliefs and activities (something they certainly do not find in Muslim societies), their anti-secular attitudes will probably result in their marginalization or some sort of unholy alliance with the Christian right. If, on the other hand, they prefer to promote firm religious belief, we have already shown the problems this may create between them and the adherents of other churches and faiths.

Summary

To sum up: it seems to me axiomatic that Baha'ism can be characterized as:

- Intolerant of other religions, yet tolerant of their adherents (but not their priesthoods).
- Triumphantist with regard to the defeats of other faiths.
- Intolerant of the best aspects of secular society, such as freedom of thought and speech, freedom to dissent, freedom to reject religion, and so on, which are important factors in creating a tolerant global society.

- Ambivalent towards secularization, which offers them advantages and helps fulfill prophecies, but emphasizes freedoms for which they do not care too much.
- Intolerant towards internal dissent, to the extent that non-conformists may lose their voting rights or be excommunicated.

The foregoing may seem to most people reading this paper a contradiction of what they believe the Baha'i faith to hold dear. How could Baha'ism be intolerant of other religions, for example? I think I have provided enough evidence above to show that this is really the case, notwithstanding World Religion Day and the willingness of Baha'is to take part in inter-faith activities. It may be true that Baha'is will never actively persecute the members of other faiths. But Shoghi Effendi, whose views are never challenged in Haifa or elsewhere, seemed to think it a matter worth rejoicing over that Christians, Muslims, and others were subjected to humiliation and worse during his lifetime.¹¹ The Universal House of Justice, despite clear evidence to the contrary, has continued to pursue a vision of a world falling into irremediable decay, and the continuing infliction of divine vengeance on all non-believers. To my knowledge, no modern Baha'i authorities have tackled the topics of the meaning of the Holocaust, AIDS, global warming, etc. in the context of God's supposed plan for mankind.

I do not doubt that the Baha'is will contribute to what they see as half-way measures towards world unity, while working in their own fashion towards the establishment of a Baha'i World Commonwealth somewhere in the future. They will continue to participate in conferences on world unity and peace, they will continue to show a concern for human rights (and to publish booklets on human duties, which they

11 He is never anti-Semitic; but it has to be borne in mind that the idea of divine punishment being visited on the people of specific religions begs the question whether the Holocaust may not be read in this light. It would be interesting for some Baha'i thinkers to discuss this and the modern Jewish debate about the Holocaust (see under the term *hester panim*). What was God's will in the Holocaust remains a central theological topic completely neglected by the Baha'is. If, like the present writer, one considers the Shoah to be the most important event of modern history, possibly of all history, it is axiomatic that a religion that regards the modern era as the beginning of a new religious dispensation should do some hard thinking about the theological meaning of six million Jewish deaths.

see as essential corollaries to rights), and they will continue to enter into some sort of dialogue with the followers of other faiths, even if this is only window-dressing, since they don't actually believe those other faiths to be anything but distortions of some pristine faith. They will – with total justification – protest to the UN and other bodies about the persecution of Baha'is in Iran, and yet enjoy a thrill of satisfaction every time Islam meets with a setback there or elsewhere.

My conclusion is that, if the Baha'is are going to get anywhere in their contribution to globalization, they will have to reinvent themselves, and I'm not sure they will be willing or able to do that. A less Islamicist religion, one that was better able to adapt itself to circumstances, rather than believing circumstances should adapt themselves to its universal prescriptions, might accomplish much. Obsolete laws would be placed where they belong, silly historicist theories would be cast aside, absolute scriptural rulings would be interpreted in a more liberal fashion, and ethics would bend to accept things that human beings, in their foolishness and dignity, have found to be of benefit. But Baha'ism has inherited from Islam a rigid core and a thoroughgoing authoritarianism that sit uneasily beside its seeming openness, and it is this that may, as the very nature of the global enterprise develops, make it a dinosaur.

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