

The Religious State

A Comparative Study of Sixteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Opposition—The Case of the Anabaptists and the Bábís

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Abstract

This article provides a tentative comparative study between the nature and persecution of Anabaptists in sixteenth-century Europe and the nature of opposition to the early Bábí movement in nineteenth-century Iran. In spite of the major differences in historical context, the study shows that charismatic religious reform movements even from such distinctly different historical periods and geographical regions could undergo similar developments, evoke similar responses from rulers and orthodox religious leaders, attract a devoted following willing alternately to fight to the death or suffer martyrdom, and construct an apocalyptic ideology. The article is divided into three parts: First, it presents a brief overview of the nature of and opposition to the Dutch and North German Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century. Second, it provides a similar survey for the nineteenth-century Bábís. Third, it tenders several conclusions regarding important parallels noted between these movements.

Résumé

L'article établit une comparaison entre la nature du mouvement et des persécution des Anabaptistes du seizième siècle en Europe et la nature de l'opposition faite au jeune mouvement bábí du dix-neuvième siècle en Iran. Malgré les différences majeures dans le contexte historique, l'étude démontre que les mouvements charismatiques de réforme religieuse, même issus de périodes historiques et de régions géographiques aussi distinctes peuvent subir des développements semblables, évoquer des réactions similaires des dirigeants et du clergé orthodoxe, attirer des adhérents dévoués prêts à se battre jusqu'à la mort ou souffrir le martyr, et construire une idéologie apocalyptique. L'article est divisé en trois parties: en premier lieu, un survol de la nature du mouvement anabaptiste hollandais et du nord de l'Allemagne, ainsi que l'opposition enregistrée. Ensuite, l'article repasse les mêmes faits pour les Bábís du dix-neuvième siècle. La troisième partie offre plusieurs conclusions concernant les importants parallèles qui peuvent établis entre les deux mouvements.

Resumen

Este escrito, a título de ensayo, estudia la comparación entre la forma de persecución de los Anabaptistas en la Europa del siglo dieciséis y la forma de oposición al movimiento bábí en sus comienzos en el Irán del siglo diecinueve. A pesar de serias diferencias en el contexto histórico, el estudio demuestra que movimientos religiosos carismáticos y reformistas, aun de tan diferentes períodos históricos y regiones geográficas, pueden experimentar desarrollos similares, causar reacciones tan parecidas de parte de los soberanos y de los líderes religiosos ortodoxos, que atraen adherentes lo suficientemente devotos como para luchar hasta la muerte o sufrir martirio produciendo en el proceso una ideología apocalíptica. El artículo se presenta en tres partes: La primera ofrece un sobrepaso sobre el modo de ser de los movimientos Anabaptistas de Holanda y de Alemania del Norte y su oposición en el siglo dieciséis. La segunda parte hace una encuesta similar referente a los bábíes del siglo diecinueve. Por último, presenta varias conclusiones a raíz de las semejanzas de consideración entre los dos movimientos.

This essay, originally a colloquium presentation,¹ pretends to be nothing more than a tentative comparative study between the nature and persecution of Anabaptists in the sixteenth century and the nature of opposition to the early Bábí movement in nineteenth-century Iran. As a historian of the European Reformation I have expertise in the former, not the latter. Once I began research, however, I was almost immediately struck by the remarkable parallels between sixteenth-century Anabaptists and nineteenth-century Bábíes. These parallels were observable not only in the nature of government opposition to new religious reform movements but also in some aspects of their development and ideology. None of these similarities should be thought of as glossing over the very real differences between religious movements from such diverse social, cultural, political, and theological contexts. Certainly the Germanic Empire of the sixteenth century was a different place from nineteenth-century Iran. However, the discovery that charismatic religious reform movements from such distinctly different historical periods and geographical regions underwent similar developments, evoked similar responses from rulers and orthodox religious leaders, attracted a devoted following willing alternately to fight to the death or suffer martyrdom, and constructed an apocalyptic ideology, suggests the potential fruitfulness of a comparative approach.

This analysis, then, purports to be nothing more than an initial cross-cultural investigation into the development of radical religious movements. It is divided into three parts: First, it will present a brief overview of the nature of and

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opposition to the Dutch and North German Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century. Second, it will provide a similar survey for the nineteenth-century Bábís. Third, it will conclude with a discussion of important parallels noted between these movements.

The Early Anabaptist Movement in the Netherlands, 1530–1550

The Anabaptist movement(s) began in the maelstrom of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation in Germany. At this time, the German Empire was a collection of several dozen relatively independent principalities united loosely under the reign of a normally weak emperor. But in 1519, Charles V, who was already king of powerful Spain, was selected. Charles brought enormous commitment to his position, although his strength was always balanced by the need to make concessions to the German princes and independent cities.

The emperor, however, was a thoroughly committed Catholic, unlike many of the Renaissance Popes. A major goal of his rule was to recapture and maintain the unitary religious devotion of his German subjects, for he realized, as did most rulers, that if people were divided religiously it would be virtually impossible for them to maintain their allegiance to a single ruler. At the same time, Charles was increasingly frustrated with the power and independence of the upper clergy (bishops and archbishops) and with the notorious immorality and ignorance of the clerical estate that were provoking so much discontent within Germanic society.

Immediately upon mounting the imperial throne, however, Charles was faced with the religious reform movement(s) begun by the German professor and monk, Martin Luther, whose opposition to the hierarchical church—based initially on his disgust at the sale of letters of Indulgence (providing forgiveness of sins for a financial donation)—had spread to virtually every corner of Germany and the Low Countries. Luther's call for the "Freedom of the Christian Man" and the "Priesthood of All Believers" in particular found support among the common people (peasants, artisans, and many lower clergy) who were inspired to demand freedom from feudal servitude. Hand in glove with the commoners' protest against their socioeconomic oppression and political powerlessness went their disdain for the clerical estate. Justified by the hierarchical and sacramental system, the priesthood had become the sole mediator of religious knowledge and the guardian of salvation, regardless of the individual cleric's moral or spiritual fitness. The higher clergy had also become extravagantly wealthy and clerical landlords—both regular and monastic—were often harsher in their exaction of taxes and tithes than their secular counterparts. Luther had originally posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* against the sale of papal indulgences which had been approved so that Albert, the new Archbishop of Mainz, could repay the enormous loan incurred to purchase his position. From

the start, then, anticlericalism was a major aspect of the reformation, bringing together disparate elements of protest, aiming at increasing lay involvement in salvation without the mediation of a socially privileged religious elite.²

Such anticlericalism and social discontent formed the basis for the Peasants' War of 1525, which saw rural and urban common people, inspired by Luther's example of standing against authority, rise up in rebellion against their oppressive feudal landlords in most regions of South and Central Germany. While the revolt was crushed, radical religious reform groups continued to call for a transformation of society. Among these were the Anabaptists.³

Common among most Anabaptists was the belief that Luther and the other major Reformers had not gone far enough in their demands for spiritual renewal. In fact, most Anabaptists came to regard other Protestant preachers as just another class of clerical elite as bad as the Catholic priesthood.⁴ A purified church and society was their major goal.

Many Anabaptists also came to see the conflicts of their age as signs of the impending return of the Lord Christ for judgment.⁵ Such apocalyptic foreboding came to dominate Anabaptism in North Germany and the Low Countries, particularly as a result of one South-German lay preacher, Melchior Hoffman. A furrier by trade but a Lutheran lay-preacher by calling, Hoffman quickly won the hostility of both the Catholic and Protestant clergy, the latter fearing in particular that the Catholic authorities would identify them with the increasingly radical direction taken by Hoffman.⁶ Hoffman argued that the end of the world would occur in 1533⁷ and that he had a unique, divinely inspired gift to interpret the Scriptures, an ability superior to that of the formally

2. For popular hostility toward the wealth of the sixteenth-century Catholic priesthood, see Henry Cohn, "Anticlericalism in the German Peasants' War 1525."

3. For the Peasants' War, see Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525*. For the relationship between Anabaptism and the Peasants' War, see Stayer, *The German Peasants' War*.

4. See especially Goertz, *Die Täufer*.

5. A leader of peasant revolt and a radical reformer, Thomas Müntzer, identified the Peasants' War as the final conflict between the godly and ungodly before the return of Christ. One of a few survivors of Müntzer's group, Hans Hut (Müntzer himself was killed), rationalized the peasants' defeat by arguing that they had not been the "pure, unselfish champions of God's honor." When in the spring of 1526 he joined the Anabaptists, Hut naturally associated them with the truly godly, and sought to baptize, or "seal" as many people as possible before the coming apocalyptic judgement. See Seebass, "Hans Hut" 55. Hut's version of baptism involved no water, but the marking of the sign of the cross on the forehead (Packull, "The Sign of Thau").

6. This discussion on Hoffman is based on Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman* and his summary in "Melchior Hoffman: Contradictions" 178-90.

7. The last 3½ years would be filled with apocalyptic tribulation. Hoffman made his prediction in 1526 in his commentary on the book of Daniel, *Das XII Capitel des propheten Danielis aussgelegt*.

educated theologians whom he called the servants of the letter. After becoming an Anabaptist in 1529, Hoffman came to believe that the world required a great cleansing before the return of Christ. During this cleansing—conducted by the major cities of the Empire against the combined ungodly forces of the antichristian emperor, papacy, and clergy—the Anabaptists would not themselves take up the sword, but would assist the cities by non-violent means.

Beginning in the Spring of 1530, Hoffman's message of apocalyptic victory was eagerly received by the already persecuted religious dissenters of the Low Countries. In 1533, Hoffman, certain that the Lord's return was near, allowed himself to be arrested in Strasbourg. To his dismay, the day of deliverance did not appear and Hoffman most likely died in prison sometime around 1543.⁸

Hoffman's movement, however, continued to grow to mass-movement proportions. Because of his incarceration, leadership fell into the hands of those who were much less patient for reform. As a result of a unique confluence of circumstances, in late 1533 Anabaptists from Holland joined the reformers of the northwestern German city of Münster in the bishopric of Westphalia, intending to transform it into the New Jerusalem, which would see the return of Christ in Easter (April 5) of 1534. Münsterite emissaries were sent throughout northern Germany and the Low Countries, where their message that the Lord would soon establish his kingdom in Münster led thousands of Anabaptists, already driven to desperation by the poor economic conditions and the pressure of persecution, to set out for Münster in March 1534. Their intention had been to gather first under the "banners of righteousness" at a designated spot in the Eastern Netherlands, although only a few actually made it even that far.⁹ When on the day appointed the divine deliverance failed to appear and lift the siege, the Anabaptist prophet of Münster, Jan Matthijs, marched out of the city to be cut into pieces by the besiegers. Jan van Leiden, a Dutch innkeeper, took Matthijs's place, but had himself anointed as king of an Old Testament-style theocracy and instituted polygamy. Other attempts were made in 1534 and 1535 to install forcibly the kingdom of God in other cities or regions in the Low Countries, but these failed. At the end of June, 1535, the decimated and starving Anabaptist defenders of Münster were defeated and all but a handful were massacred by the mercenary besiegers. This marked the end of the revolutionary stage of the Dutch Anabaptist movement for all but a handful of believers, although small bands of militant Anabaptists, seeking revenge on

8. Packull discusses Hoffman's imprisonment in the light of his discovery of evidence that a recanted Anabaptist named Melchior Hoffman appeared in Schwäbisch-Hall after the Anabaptist prophet's supposed death ("Melchior Hoffman").

9. For more on Münster, see Stayer, "Conception of Early Dutch Anabaptism."

their slaughtered brethren, continued to plague the Low Countries until the 1560s.¹⁰

At the same time, most of the Anabaptists turned to a less revolutionary approach. One of the key figures in this shift was the glasspainter David Joris (c.1501–56). Because his biography contains several illuminating parallels with that of the Báb (and of other “inner-light” religious figures), it might be useful here to summarize his life briefly. Joris was born to a middle-class merchant family of Delft, Holland. He received a Latin school education typical for a merchant, although he did not seem interested in his formal studies. According to an early biography (or autobiography),¹¹ Joris as a boy exhibited unusual religious devotion, and after becoming an accomplished glasspainter (his parents’ wish to see him become a merchant was frustrated by his father’s early death) and setting up shop in 1524 in Delft, he became an advocate of first Lutheran and then, in the winter of 1534–35, Anabaptist reform. His goal after the fall of Münster was to mediate between the rival Anabaptist factions. In 1536, he experienced visions depicting an apocalyptic figure whom he called the third David who, with the power of the second David, Jesus Christ, would usher in the new spiritual kingdom and restore the “children of God” to their rightful glory. Joris came to regard himself as the divinely inspired messenger of the Lord (probably as the third David), and his writings as authoritative Scripture. His first published tract was composed immediately after the visions in a fit of inspiration, an experience that his biographer described in terms that later could just as easily describe the experience of the Báb:

Thereupon, when he awoke or came to himself, he was as exhausted as if he had run for two miles, so heavily was he breathing from exhaustion. He immediately seized feather and ink with both hands, and wrote while still standing. . . . See, all of this the man wrote down and indeed three, four, or five times more words were said before he could write it with the quill. After this was written, there came to him a vision in the form of verses, which he quickly wrote down with a swift hand. . . . (Waite, *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris* 54)

Thus inspired, Joris set out to reunite the divided Anabaptist groups under his charismatic leadership. Joris redirected Anabaptist fervor in an inner purification of the individual believer, as opposed to an outward purification of the world. He also prudently allowed his followers to hide their true beliefs while outwardly conforming to approved religion. As a result of these ideas,

10. For those Anabaptists who continued in the militant direction, see Waite, “From Apocalyptic Crusaders to Anabaptist Terrorists.”

11. For Joris, see Waite, *David Joris and Dutch Anabaptism*. A translation of Joris’ anonymous biography is included in *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris, 1535–1543* 35–103.

Joris was able to win followers from the remnant of militant Anabaptists as well as from the peaceful followers of Hoffman.

Competing with Joris for followers was Menno Simons (c. 1496–1561), a former priest from Witmarsum, Friesland. He took his followers in the direction of a separated, pacifist fellowship, enforcing the purity of the church by the use of the ban and guarding the flock from the subversive ideas of the leaders of the other Anabaptist camps such as David Joris.¹² (The descendants of Menno's group are known as the Mennonites.) Menno sought to distance his followers from the revolutionary actions of the Münsterites in order to allay the fears of the authorities. Under his direction, eschatological fervor waned, while the Mennonites were organized into a pacifistic religious community.

As a result of their revolutionary heritage and heterodox opinions, the Anabaptists, including the peaceful followers of Menno and Joris, underwent a terrible period of persecution, and they made up the majority of the over 1300 heretics who died on the scaffold between 1523 and 1566. As the hereditary lord of the Low Countries, Charles V could exert more direct control in these territories than in the German states. He established an inquisition against heresy in the Low Countries, which was run by imperially appointed clergy and which was given a mandate to execute heretics. In his attempts to crush heterodoxy, however, he faced considerable opposition on the part of the Dutch nobility and city fathers, who constantly resisted the emperor's attempts at political centralization. At the same time, local lords justifiably feared that allowing social-religious reform movements to gain a popular following would provide justification for Charles to centralize his political control of the provinces more fully. In any event, the persecution kept the Anabaptist groups underground and ineffectual as a major reform movement.

The continuance of government-sponsored bloodshed, long after the threat of an Anabaptist uprising had passed, increased the level of frustration of Dutch leaders against their hereditary ruler. When, in the 1550s and 1560s, Charles's son Philip II likewise attempted to suppress the Calvinist reformers violently, he found himself faced with opposition so strong that it led to the Wars of Independence, which eventually resulted in the creation of the Dutch Republic noted for its religious toleration. As several traditional rulers were to learn, the blending of nationalistic and religious passions was a fateful one elsewhere in Europe as well. In response to persecution, several religious reform groups (especially the Calvinists) armed themselves and made alliances with various princely or ruling factions, leading ultimately to the so-called Wars of Religion, which convulsed Christian Europe for a century, from the 1540s to 1648. Even then, the peace treaties did not provide full protection for all minority groups

12. For Menno Simons, see Krahn, *Menno Simons* and Horst, "Menno Simons" 203–13. For the dispute between Simons and Joris, see Stayer, "Davidite vs. Mennonite" and Zijlstra, "Menno Simons and David Joris."

and the heirs of the Anabaptist groups, including the Mennonites, were still not welcome in most regions of Europe (except for the Dutch Republic). In fact, it was not until the vast majority of them moved to the New World that they found a relatively safe haven from religious intolerance. It seems that only those who were being persecuted the most, the Anabaptists (who already had been defeated militarily) became eager to strive for a separation between church and state and an end to religious persecution.

The Persecution of Nineteenth-Century Bábís

Like the German empire of the sixteenth century, nineteenth-century Iran was very hard for its ruler (*sháh*) to centralize. The predominant decentralization allowed its growing clerical estate ('*ulamá*) to gain considerable independence, as seen in the fact that by the nineteenth century the '*ulamá* had their own tax system, private armies, and virtual control over religious doctrine. In fact, according to Nikki R. Keddie, the independent power and dominance over religion of the upper '*ulamá*—the *mujtahids*—was a "dramatic feature of nineteenth- and part of twentieth-century Iran" (*Religion and Politics in Iran* 6). This power was especially surprising because a priesthood was not native to Islam. Technically the '*ulamá* were not a priesthood in any sense approximating the Christian clergy. Hamid Algar instead defines the '*ulamá* as "essentially those who have acquired prominence in religious learning, transmitted by former generations, and who can lay no claim to ultimate doctrinal authority" (*Religion and State in Iran* vii).¹³ Be this as it may, as a result of the Shiite doctrine of the Occultation of the Imám and expectations of his return and manifestation, the '*ulamá* became the intermediaries between the community and the Imáms (Algar, *Religion and State in Iran* 5–6).¹⁴ In this role, they performed a social function within Iran similar to that played by the Christian clergy of the German Empire, and their weapon of *takfír*, declaring an opponent or enemy to be infidel (Algar, *Religion and State in Iran* 20), was parallel to the priest's ability to excommunicate the unfaithful. Especially in the cities, the '*ulamá* came to fill a prominent vacuum in authority (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 33).¹⁵ By the nineteenth century they had succeeded in monopolizing

13. The concepts of sacrament and hierarchy are foreign to Islam. Juan R. Cole, however, concludes that in the nineteenth century the usuli '*ulamá* had come very close to being a clergy in the Christian sense of a body of persons specially ordained to perform sacraments ("Imami Jurisprudence" 33–46, esp.43).

14. The *Shaykhí* doctrine of the Occultation of the Imám taught that in the ninth century the last successor to Muḥammad, the twelfth Imám, voluntarily entered another state of existence and will return as the Mahdí. Prior to his return, the Imám was to be represented by an agent, or "gate." Among other things, this doctrine led to a Shiite preoccupation with the cult of the charismatic leader. See Watt, "The Significance of the Early Stages of Imami Shi'ism" 21–32).

15. The '*ulamá*, moreover, controlled the nongovernmental judiciary and educational

all rights to the interpretation of the law, in controlling civil and commercial courts, and in becoming economically important in trade, agriculture, money-lending, and property (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 40).¹⁶ In such positions, the 'ulamá also came under the same temptations that had earlier plagued the Catholic priesthood: the growing tradition of inheriting clerical positions and increased wealth led to charges of venality. All of this resulted in increased expressions of discontent toward their privileges on the part of the faithful (Algar, *Religion and State in Iran* 14–16).¹⁷ The dominance of a clerical estate which had made itself integral to the society as a whole and which was determined to maintain its position of privilege was therefore a common feature of the two societies under investigation here. So too was the presence of a segment of that clerical estate that was frustrated in its attempts to redirect religious leadership back to what was perceived as the original, spiritual goals of their respective religious communities.

In any event, as in Reformation Germany, the Iranian community was not able to separate national aspirations from religious devotion. The ramifications of this blending of nationalistic and religious goals were as far-reaching in Iran as they had been in the Germanic empire.

The 'ulamá were determined to maintain their position of privilege at all costs. In this goal, they faced two forms of opposition: First, the conflicting political goals of the ruling shah and his minister, who sought every possible means to centralize and modernize Iran's government and administration; and second, populist religious reformers, mystics, and preachers who frequently targeted the prosperous 'ulamá for popular dissatisfaction.¹⁸ The rebuttal of innovation, in terms of both religious heterodoxy and governmental secularization, was the primary focus of 'ulamá activity in the nineteenth century.

Bábism emerged out of the context of apocalyptic *Shaykhí* Shiism. Shiism had become the established religious order in Iran after the successful Safavid revolution of 1501. In this act chiliastic aspirations fused with the militancy of Turkoman nomáds to allow the Safavid dynasty to gain control over Iran. When institutions, as well as influencing public opinion through the preaching of sermons and leading of public prayers.

16. Azar Tabari also examines the resurgence in the power of Iran's clergy in the nineteenth century. Among other things, the clergy became adept at using social discontent to thwart the state's attempts to undermine the clergy's power ("Role of the Clergy" 47–72).

17. According to Algar, the primary sources of income for the 'ulamá were individual grants and endowments attached to shrines and mosques, a parallel to the endowed masses and positions that funded the Catholic clergy.

18. "It was, however, the ulama who formulated the most explicit reaction to Babism and its claims, and in this case as in others we see the ulama functioning as de facto leaders of the nation, concerned on this occasion to preserve its religious uniformity" (Algar, *Religion and State in Iran* 137).

this conception to his family, and while some protested, he won over his uncle Siyyid 'Alí. Soon Siyyid 'Alí was acting as the Báb's intermediary between him and the large number of interested individuals who now began to flock to him.²⁶ At this early stage, the Báb's writings are marked by antischolastic and anticlerical remarks, castigating Islamic scholasticism's preoccupation with legal and grammatical studies. These works are also notable for their spontaneous, prophetic style, "sometimes to the extent of incomprehensibility, [which] turns the Bab's writing into a 'stream of consciousness' [*sic*] and himself into a prolific, almost compulsive, writer" (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 144).²⁷

That people joined him after his proclamation of May 1844 was proof to Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad that his calling was true, and he continued to declare that he was "the sole source of divine guidance then on earth," insisting on a high degree of obedience (MacEoin, "Early *Shaykhí* Reactions" 27–28).²⁸ The death of Rashtí in January, 1844 had at the same time created a vacuum in *Shaykhí* leadership, for the *Shaykhí* teacher had not left a designated replacement. According to MacEoin, the void came to be filled by two individuals who took their following in decidedly different directions: Karim Khán Kirmani, who turned away from *Shaykhí* tendencies and toward Shiite orthodoxy; and Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad, whose ideas led to a complete break with that orthodoxy (MacEoin, "Early *Shaykhí* Reactions" 9–11). Several key Rashtí disciples became important in the early Bábí movement, foremost among whom was Mullá Muḥammad Ḥusayn (b. 1814) who helped direct the

26. Amanat asks the question of what prompted Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad to believe he was a divinely inspired figure. He concludes that the Báb was "(1) a self-educated layman who never benefited from scholastic knowledge of the time; (2) he possessed a degree of devotion and sanctity that was considered exceptional; (3) in intellectual and mystical pursuits, he demonstrated a singular passion for an intuitive approach. . . . His contacts with Shaykhism helped him to see his claim in the perspective of Shaykhi theophany without being formally committed to it. This detachment enabled him to adopt a self-styled approach that ultimately led him to eschatological and millenarian themes" (*Resurrection and Renewal* 151).

27. "One can assume that in a gradual move toward a prophetic claim, the Bab must have absorbed and internalized some portions of this diffused esoteric body of knowledge. What a modern observer might describe as an effort to reconstruct and synthesize the knowledge learned by personal inquiry and unsystematic exposure to a complex intellectual milieu the Bab himself called 'unlearned knowledge'." Again, the same could be said of the intellectual process and writing of Joris, whose esoteric ideas and prophetic or "stream of consciousness" style of writing frequently confused his contemporaries (Waite, *David Joris* 70–72).

28. Such proclamations and sense of personal religious authority are common among charismatic movements; for example, Joris made, albeit in rather obtuse fashion, demands that his followers obey his teaching without question.

expansion of Bábism outside of Shiraz and who was regarded as the "Gate of the Gate" (Báb al-Báb) (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 156). Supporters such as Muḥammad Ḥusayn also helped to develop the Báb's self-conception as the divinely appointed messenger, for, according to Amanat, they directed the undefined inspirations of the Báb into a framework of Shaykhí prophecies (*Resurrection and Renewal* 174).²⁹ Others, such as Mullá Muḥammad-'Alí Bárfurúshí (Quddús), highlighted the Báb's anticlerical ideas, affirming that the 'ulamá be required to submit to the Báb and then the sultan would obey and support the true religion (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 188).³⁰

Soon the Bábís faced considerable 'ulamá hostility, not the least of which came from a number of Shaykhí notables who feared that they would be tarred with the same brush of Bábism and who "proved eager to take a leading role in the theological, judicial, and even physical attack on the Bábís" (MacEoin, "Early Shaykhí Reactions" 10–11).³¹ Given their desire to maintain their elevated social position, 'ulamá opposition to the teachings of the Báb was expected. In spite of the fact that many lower and middle ranked 'ulamá joined the movement, most of the leading *mujtahids* refused to put at risk their socio-religious position delicately balanced as it was between an interfering government and an often critical public. Algar has again pointed out that the 'ulamá class had little option but to oppose the claims of the Bábí movement,

for its claim to validity presupposed the supersession of Islam. The coming of a new revelation would have destroyed the worth of the existing one, which regarded itself as final. The ulama, on the other hand, were the institutional expression of the power of Islam, the expositors and guardians of its doctrine and the enforcers of its law, and among their functions was the rebuttal of heresy and innovation. (*Religion and State in Iran* 138)³²

It should not be surprising, therefore, that anticlerical themes formed an important feature of the Báb's early preaching; anticlerical sentiment proved to

29. Balyuzi recounts Ḥusayn's first meeting with Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad and his conviction that Siyyid fulfilled Rashtí's prophecies of the promised one (*The Báb* 18–21).

30. Balyuzi describes the initial meeting of Quddús with the Báb (*The Báb* 23–24). The Báb himself insisted on the subservience of the 'ulamá, warning them, "O! assembly of the 'ulama, fear God in your verdicts from this day for the *Zikr* is among you from our presence and truly he is the witness and the judge. Shun all that you are receiving from other than the Book of God, the Truth. For on the day of Resurrection you will stand on the path and will be answerable to the Truth" (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 205).

31. According to Amanat, the leading Shaykhí clerics were prominent in the anti-Bábí campaign not only because of their fear of losing their status as religious leaders, but also because of their efforts to exploit the issue in order to curry favor with the state at the time when they were under fire from the Usuli jurists (*Resurrection and Renewal* 293).

32. Keddie affirms that the 'ulamá support of the government "was shown in many ways, but most dramatically in the ulama-governmental alliance against the Babi religion" (*Religion and Politics in Iran* 8).

be as decisive in the Báb's gaining of a popular following as it had been for the earlier Anabaptists.

Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad attempted to encourage his following by using apocalyptic expectations of a Holy Insurrection and the creation of a new theocracy.³³ With his return, the Qá'im, aided by the faithful and the resurrected Prophet and Imáms, would begin the final battle against the forces of evil and against those who did not believe in him or in his representative.³⁴ In a symbolic act, the Báb and his followers planned to reenact this eschatological drama. First, several of the Báb's disciples dispersed throughout Shiite lands to mobilize support for the final appearance of the Imám; then the Báb was to travel to Mecca to declare the Advent of the Imám; finally he and his followers were to collect in the 'Atabat to await the final eschatological drama. Although based on *Shaykhí* eschatological thought, the Báb clearly intended to create a "new prophetic system modeled on Islamic religion but deliberately independent from it" (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 205). The threat to the existing political and clerical elites was therefore a real one, in large measure because Bábí missionaries were able to gain considerable popular sympathy for the Báb, winning over a few prominent *Shaykhí* 'ulamá, a number of the lower clerics, and some merchants, traders, and artisans.³⁵ According to best estimates, the population of Bábís in the late 1840s was approximately 100,000 or 1.6% of Iran's total population and over 4% of the country's urban population, a considerable minority force indeed (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 370).³⁶ The vast majority of the upper 'ulamá class rejected the Báb's message as blasphemous, and one of the leading Bábí proselytizers, Mullá 'Alí

33. Smith describes Bábism as a nation-wide movement "which explicitly challenged the authority of the Shi'i religious leaders, who moved rapidly to oppose the movement. Aspiring to establish a theocratic state, the Babis also came into conflict with the Iranian government" (*The Babi and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* 1).

34. MacEoin points out that in 1844 the Báb claimed only to be the representative of the Imám and that it was not until his imprisonment in Máh-Kú in 1847-48 that he claimed to be the return of the hidden Imám ("Early *Shaykhí* Reactions" 13, 17-20). Amanat suggests, however, that even at this earlier date "The Bab was convinced that though externally he was the Gate to Imam, internally he was the long-awaited Imam himself" (*Resurrection and Renewal* 195-96).

35. For a more thorough analysis of Bábí membership, see Momen, "Bahá'í Community of Iran." The reasons for merchant support of Bábism are discussed by Amanat on pages 334-61. He argues that merchants and artisans who joined the movement did so as a result of "a dual crisis, both economic and moral" (*Encyclopedia* 360). See also n. 41 below.

36. The most politically powerful reform group in the sixteenth-century Netherlands, the Calvinists, who helped lead the wars of independence, rarely gained an official membership exceeding 10% of most of the Netherlands's urban population. See Duke, "The Ambivalent Face of Calvinism."

Bastámí, who had already gained considerable support for the Báb's cause in Iraq was arrested in Karbilá at the end of October, 1844, for distributing Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad's major early work, the *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá*.

Why did the 'ulamá class of Iraq demand this harsh approach, and why did the government cooperate? A heightened sense of messianic expectation in Karbilá and the rest of Iraq, centered on the Islamic year 1261 (1843–44), led to considerable popular interest in the *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá* and increasing support for the Báb. Furthermore, news had reached Karbilá that the Báb would shortly reveal his cause in Mecca and enter Karbilá to fulfill the prophecies. Many Bábís travelled to Karbilá and seemed prepared to "fight a *jihád* in the company of the Imam" (MacEoin, "Early *Shaykhí* Reactions" 22–23).³⁷ These developments disturbed the *mujtahids*, who believed that their unique, socio-religious status and privileges were under serious threat and they turned to the government, arguing that this new heresy posed a serious threat to the authority of the ruling Turks, who were not always well-loved. 'Alí Bastámí and his fellows were therefore arrested not only on religious charges but also for threatening the public peace. No longer was the Báb's teaching a matter of internal Shiite interpretation and leadership, but it became the focus of a new rift in Shiite–Sunni relations. In nineteenth-century Iraq as well as Iran, the "question of a new prophetic revelation affected a wide range of political and religious interests" and brought to a head tensions between the Sunni 'ulamá—supported by the government—and the persecuted Shiites (Balyuzi, *The Báb* 58–68; Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 219). Local authorities cooperated with the 'ulamá so that the Ottoman Turks would not use the conflict as a pretext for increased political centralization, which the Shiites regarded as undue interference in their traditional liberties. If not handled properly, the case of Mullá 'Alí Bastámí could have become a focal point for a wide range of political, social, and religious resentments against the central authorities and the upper 'ulamá (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 222). On 13 January 1845, the 'ulamá court unanimously declared that belief in *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá* was an act of blasphemy punishable by death. While the court became embroiled in a debate over the proper sentence for Bastámí (the Sunni members pushed for death while the Shiites called for banishment), the accused remained in jail for three more months. At the end of April, Bastámí was sent to the sultan's hard labor camp where he died shortly before the message to release him reached the camp.

Fears of an anti-Turkish rebellion increased with what seemed to the Shiites to be growing Turkish interference in Persian affairs. At the same time, the Baghdad trial shook the eschatological confidence of the Bábís. The Báb himself had in September, 1844 set out for Hijáz where he intended to proclaim his message, but after reaching Mecca in December, 1844 and Madina in February, 1845, news of the Bastámí trial forced his return to Iran in June.

37. The Báb changed his plans, however, returning to Iran before reaching Karbilá. His true intentions regarding Karbilá are therefore unclear.

Although he had gained some followers during his tour of the Iraqi holy shrines, the Báb still waited for a major breakthrough, cancelling any immediate fulfillment of the apocalyptic Zuhur (and losing many Iraqi followers as a result). Direct leadership over the Iraqi Bábís had since fallen into the capable hands of Qurratu'l-'Ayn, who between 1844 and 1847 managed to rebuild Bábí support in Iraq until her exile from Iraq in March, 1847. Thereafter she helped maintain the militant spirit of the Bábís until her execution in 1852 (*Amanat, Resurrection and Renewal* 237; see also 295–330). Meanwhile, the Báb became increasingly critical of the 'ulamá, including *Shaykhí* opponents such as Karím *Khán*, writing that “in their selfish illusions claim to be mandated by God, they are among liars. They have not read a word of God's Book” (qtd. in *Amanat, Resurrection and Renewal* 250).³⁸

In late September, 1846, the Báb found a haven in the home of the governor of Isfahan, Manuchihr *Khán* Mutamad al-Daula, who regarded his guest not only as a persecuted holy man but also as a useful tool to gain popular support. However, enroute to Shiraz, the Báb was arrested and at the request of the 'ulamá, put on summary trial by the governor after which he was placed under house arrest. In a neighborhood mosque, he prudently remained silent about his claims to be the Imám's representative or deputy—a rumor was circulated to the effect that he had in fact recanted—a move which saved him from the death penalty (Balyuzi, *The Báb* 85–105). The clergy pushed the government to arrest Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad again, but an outbreak of cholera allowed the Báb to escape to Isfahan where he was hidden by the *Khán* until the latter's death a few months later. The Báb was discovered, arrested, refused an audience with the shah, and sent into exile in Máh-Kú.

The Báb's response to his incarceration and the persecution of his movement was not unlike that of Melchior Hoffman who faced similar desperation in prison. From May, 1847, the Báb was in Tabriz, where he rejected offers of attempted rescue. Arrival in the Máh-Kú fortress in July increased his preoccupation with his destiny and suffering, and he began a campaign of protest to the government in stronger apocalyptic terms. Now the Báb made his identification with Islam's messianic figure, the Qá'im, much clearer. He proclaimed the end of the Islamic dispensation, warning the shah of the impending judgment of the Last Day in which he would witness divine wrath for his crimes against the Bábís (*Amanat, Resurrection and Renewal* 375–77). In late March, 1848, Mullá Ḥusayn met with the Báb in Máh-Kú to receive his permission for more active resistance on the part of the Bábís, perhaps, as *Amanat* believes, as “part of a greater scheme to hoist the banners of Insurrection and ultimately to try to rescue the Bab” (*Resurrection and Renewal* 379). The shah's deteriorating health and increasing unpopularity indicated to

38. For other treatments of the growing hostility between *Shaykhí* 'ulamá and the Báb, see MacEoin, “Early *Shaykhí* Reactions” 40; and Smith, *Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* 16–20.

Husayn that it was now time to act. In response to the Báb's threatening missives, the shah's minister, Áqásí, sent the Báb to the remote castle of Chihríq, where he spent most of the rest of his life. Although conditions were even stricter here, the Báb continued to keep in touch with his followers.

From Chihríq the Báb sent even more foreboding letters to the shah and Áqásí, missives known as "Sermons of wrath." In these works he condemns the shah for yielding to the diabolical temptations of his minister and the 'ulamá, and he warns him that the divine gift of kingship will soon be removed from him if he persists in his arrogance. In one of these works he writes:

For four years I have seen from you and your people . . . nothing but intense oppression and arrogance. . . . I take refuge in God from those who take partner for Him; my intention is to take revenge, as it is destined in the Book of God, from those who slew the true martyred Imam [Husayn]; their descendants too will join them in the sufferings of Hell. (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 381)

In spite of his incarceration, the Báb still managed to attract new supporters in Chihríq, raising the ire of the province's 'ulamá, who petitioned the government to act. In response, the Báb was ordered to face a trial by the 'ulamá in Tabriz. The 'ulamá, not without reason, feared a Bábí uprising; according to Amanat, the support for the prophet illustrated public impatience with the clerical establishment. Áqásí wanted the trial to first, publicly humiliate the Báb; second, to show the Bábís the consequences of further militancy; and third, to remind the troublesome 'ulamá of their ultimate dependency on his good will (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 387).³⁹ During the proceedings, the Báb refused to rescind his proclamations or to back down on his claim of Mahdihood. The presiding 'ulamá ridiculed his teachings, but because the government wanted a lenient sentence (the shah did not want to create a martyr) the meeting ended indecisively.⁴⁰ The late summer of 1848 was therefore a turning point for the Bábís; the Báb's open declaration and apparent confounding of the Tabriz 'ulamá, his increasing popular support, and Mullá Husayn's march from Mashhad at the head of a Bábí contingent signalled a new stage of Bábí resistance and indeed a decisive break from Islam (Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* 25; Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 393).

The 'ulamá did not have to look long to find instances of Bábí militancy. For example, after his attempt to free the Báb from prison failed, Shaykh 'Alí 'Azím then planned an uprising to overthrow Iran's premier Mírzá Taqí Khán Amír Kabír, a plot that was foiled by Kabír's secret agents (Amanat, *Resurrection*

39. It is with good reason that Áqásí was regarded as "the Antichrist of the Bábí Revelation" (Balyuzi, *The Báb* 117).

40. Balyuzi excerpts some passages from the trial to illustrate the farcical nature of the questioning (*The Báb* 141-45).

and Renewal 280–81). In 1852, 'Azím plotted the unsuccessful assassination attempt on the life of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, which resulted in the massacre of a large group of remaining Bábí activists in Tehran, including 'Azím himself. In some Bábí circles, desires for vengeance against the hostile persecuting 'ulamá led to other assassinations or attempts. In August–September, 1847, Qurratu'l-'Ayn's major Usulí opponent and uncle Mullá Muḥammad Taqí was slain by a Bábí sympathizer without Qurratu'l-'Ayn's knowledge. This growing desire for vengeance was in response to the increasing oppression of the Bábís who were enduring persecution, house arrests, physical threats, and banishments. It became increasingly clear to the Bábís, as it had to the Anabaptists of Münster, that they had to make a choice between recantation and self-defense. To recant meant abandoning what they sincerely believed to be the message of God for Iran and the rest of the world. Many, led by Mullá Ḥusayn, Quddús, and a remarkable woman, Fatima Zarrin Taj Baraghani (Qurratu'l-'Ayn), eventually chose the alternate path. In October, 1848, Mullá Ḥusayn raised the "Black Standard" in Khurásán, thus symbolically proclaiming the arrival of the Mahdi. Several hundred Bábís—a large portion of whom were minor 'ulamá—gathered under this banner and soon began the militant defense of the fortress of Ṭabarsí.⁴¹ Similar to Münster, the siege of Ṭabarsí ended seven months later with a terrible slaughter of the defenders, as did later battles at Nayríz and Zanján.⁴² This growing militancy was to lead, almost inexorably, to an intensified period of persecution, directed principally by Mullá Muḥsin the Bábí Killer (Bábí Kush) (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 322–23).

After the Bábí insurrection had begun, the government imposed stricter security around the Báb's Chihriq prison. In the first months of his return to Chihriq, the Báb was still confident of victory. By the beginning of 1850, however, the disastrous end to Ṭabarsí and the fall of his prominent disciples deeply distressed the Báb. By the middle of the year, Bábí resistance was crumbling and the new premier, Amír Kabír, proved to be even more oppressive in his dealings with the Bábís, aiming at eradicating the heresy that he regarded

41. The best social analysis of the participants in the militant phase of the Bábí movement is Momen, "The Social Basis of the Bábí Upheavals in Iran (1848–53)."

42. Peter Smith suggests that insurrection was not at the heart of the Bábís' intention: "the numbers of defendants at Ṭabarsí rose to perhaps 500–600 individuals. At their centre was a large group of highly motivated clerics and theological students. For men such as these, schooled in the subtleties of Shaykhí esotericism and steeped in the Shi'í traditions of martyrdom and sacrifice, armed struggle appears to have assumed a complex symbolic role, besides the attainment of any more 'realistic' objectives. The ideal of the Imam Ḥusayn's struggle and martyrdom at Karbalá provided a paradigm for their actions. Fighting a defensive *jihád* against the forces of unbelief, the defenders gave testimony to God's truth, both by the dispatch of their opponents 'to hell' and by their own martyrdoms" (*Babi and Bahá'í Religions* 26–27). Likewise, the Anabaptists' resort to the sword in Münster began as a purely defensive measure.

as responsible for a wide range of Iran's problems. The suppression of the major Bábí insurgencies led the way for the execution of the Báb (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 395).⁴³ After a mock trial, the unrepentant Báb was executed by an army firing squad on 9 July 1850, depriving the movement of its charismatic leader. What was left of Bábísm entered a period of decline and of meagre survival as a persecuted, underground movement, which broke into several competing factions. Some Bábís, in the face of the Báb's incarceration and the increasing futility of militant action, chose passive resistance "as the only realistic alternative to assimilation" (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 282). This is seen in the work of Mírzá Ḥusayn 'Alí Nuri, Bahá'u'lláh, who, after 1847, emerged as the major representative of the non-violent side of the movement and who achieved some success in mediating between the two Bábí streams (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 327–28). After the Báb's death, Bahá'u'lláh's nonviolent approach appealed to many Bábís who remained and he formed them into a distinct religious movement. As with the Mennonites, however, even these peaceful followers could not shake the reputation of their militant past. The government, for its part, seems to have become enamored with the use of bloodshed and persecution to maintain religious uniformity and political obedience. It clearly used the incidents of Bábí militancy—created in large measure by the very policy of persecution maintained by the government and 'ulamá class—as justification for the violent suppression of the pacifistic Bahá'í. Not until the 1870s was Bahá'u'lláh able to rekindle the nearly extinguished Bábí spark (Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* 29–30).⁴⁴

Conclusions

While this discussion has only been a cursory comparative examination of the persecution of two religious reform movements, some tentative conclusions can be offered. First, it seems that apparently similar charismatic-apocalyptic movements could arise in different cultural contexts under certain conditions, among them: a vibrant but minority-held preoccupation with esoteric and eschatological ideas; widespread social and economic distress; difficulties surrounding political centralization; and an extremely unpopular clerical elite whose functions many lay people increasingly regarded as redundant. Charismatic leaders who, with their millenarian hopes, were able to tap into this broadly based discontent, found considerable popular support.

43. Smith correctly points out that Bábí revolts in some regions were not finally suppressed until 1853 (29).

44. Amanat concludes that the "execution of the Bab deprived the movement of its charismatic leader and accelerated its collapse. Firm action of the government, far more effective than the adversity of the 'ulama, helped to reduce the Babis to a despised heresy. The new prophet's human vulnerability turned the ephemeral sympathy of the miracle-seeking public into indifference and soon into hostility" (404).

Second, the clergy's attempts to crush all forms of competition for religious leadership led them to exert considerable pressure on local and then central governments to take action against heterodoxy. To be successful, they had to suggest to government leaders that the heretics posed a severe threat to the state, that religious heresy always leads to both immorality and insurrection.

Third, the governments desired to maintain a balance between keeping the clerical estate as dependent allies and recapturing popular support. They therefore moved cautiously or haphazardly to a program of full suppression of the new religious movements. Isolated trials and punishment of some of the movements' leaders led to a dramatic rise in apocalyptic fervor and militancy of the rank and file of the respective reform movements. Such popular militancy moved beyond the original goals of the early leaders, many of whom were no longer around to maintain a moderate direction. In other words, governmental persecution of unorthodox religious leaders led to the fulfillment of the established clergy's fears of insurrection.

Fourth, once persecution started, both the sixteenth-century Anabaptists and the nineteenth-century Bábís were faced with the same choice: either succumb to the government's pressure and renounce open advocacy of religious reform, or turn to militant means to defend themselves and perhaps inaugurate the hoped for return of the Messiah figure and Final Judgement. Initial willingness to wait for an unequivocal sign from God before embarking on their apocalyptic missions disappeared under withering pressure from the clergy and government.

Finally, after the militant activities of both movements were crushed, the remaining adherents were faced once again with a similar choice: either renounce their earlier commitment and fervor altogether, or reshape what was left of their following and ideology into a pacifistic religious movement that on the face of it would provoke less hostility from the authorities. Most Anabaptists (except those fortunate to have survived in the Northern Netherlands until the end of religious persecution there in 1566) created separatist, non-violent communities that survived periodic intolerance by proving their value as farmers in underdeveloped regions (Prussia, the German Palatinate, Russia, and finally the New World). Bahá'u'lláh, for his part, established a peaceful religion that likewise has found toleration only in regions outside of its home.

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