

CHAPTER EIGHT

BAHA'IS OF IRAN: POWER, PREJUDICES AND PERSECUTIONS

Margit Warburg

This chapter presents and analyses the position of the Baha'is of Iran and their relationship with Iranian society, including the State and the Iranian *ulama*. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979, the Baha'i minority has suffered from intensified persecutions, and the analysis deals primarily with these persecutions as seen in the light of the Baha'is' historical relationship with the Iranian State and the *ulama*, respectively. The analysis includes the issue of the position of the Baha'i minority in Iran, the doctrinal tensions between the Baha'is and the *ulama*, and the different prejudices about the Baha'is, which fuel the popular support to the persecutions.

The Baha'is

The Baha'is constitute the largest religious minority group in Iran, with more than 300,000 followers by 1979 (Smith 1984; Smith 2000: 208).¹ The religion has its background in heterodox movements in Shi'a Islam in nineteenth-century Iran.² In 1844 this milieu gave rise to an important millenarian movement, Babism. The leader of the movement, called the Bab (born 1821, executed 1850), saw himself as the gate to the Hidden Imam, and he succeeded in attracting quite a number of followers. In the following years the movement radicalised in religious terms, and in the summer of 1848 the Babism abrogated the shari'a officially and declared that the era of Islam was over and a new revelation had dawned (MacEoin 1986).

The Babi movement was soon perceived as a revolutionary threat, and the government attempted to suppress the movement by military force. The government's fear of the Babism was not totally unfounded, because

¹ The number of Baha'is in Iran must have decreased to some extent since the revolution in 1979, because many Baha'is have fled from Iran, but no reliable census is available.

² For an overview of the rise and development of the Babi and Baha'i religions see Smith 1987 or Warburg 2006: 6–15.

already in a circulatory letter early in 1848, the Bab declared himself to be the Hidden Imam (MacEoin 1986; MacEoin 1992: 82). According to Shi'ite thinking, this announcement meant that the power of the ulama was nullified, and the shah himself should subordinate to the Bab, who was to lead the faithful in the final battle against the unbelievers (MacEoin 1982; Momen 1985: 170–171).

In 1852–53 after several years of irregular battles between the Babis and the governmental troops, all the main Babi leaders had been killed or exiled, and the Babi movement lost its impetus and went underground. In the 1860s, the remnants of the movement developed into the Baha'i religion under the exiled Babi leader, Mirza Husayn-Ali Nuri (1817–1892), called Baha'u'llah. He attempted to uphold the delicate position of being in non-violent opposition to the Iranian State wishing to change the perception of the Babis as religious revolutionaries. Instead, both Baha'u'llah and his son and successor Abdu'l-Baha (1844–1921) advocated in writing for political reform in Iran (Cole 1992; Cole 1998: 79–108). Apparently this policy helped, and in the 1880s and 1890s a number of Baha'is held high positions in the government (Cole 1998: 97). However, the improved relations with the State did not prevent the occasional eruption of mob riots with lootings of Baha'i property and killings of Baha'is. These local persecutions had a seedbed in the widespread public animosity against the Baha'is and were often encouraged from *ulama* circles (Amanat 2008).

In the same period, the religion began to spread outside Iran: in the beginning by mission among the expatriate Iranian communities in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Egypt and India, especially in Bombay. A flourishing Baha'i community was established in Ashkabad in Russian Turkestan during the 1880s by Iranian emigrants (Momen 1991). Baha'i missionaries also went to the USA and Canada in the 1890s, and to Western Europe around 1900. Effective growth in Europe did not occur, however, until after World War II, when Abdu'l-Baha's grandson and successor, Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), organised a Baha'i mission in Europe, assisted by American Baha'is who came to Europe as Baha'i missionaries. During the 1960s and 1970s the Baha'is of the USA grew to become a wealthy and most influential community among the Baha'is worldwide.³

According to Baha'i doctrines both the Bab and Baha'u'llah are prophets and also "manifestations of God", which is in conflict with the central Islamic doctrine of Muhammad as the seal of the prophets. The Baha'is

³ The American Baha'i community grew from around 10,000 members in the beginning of the 1960s to 63,500 in 1975. See Warburg 2006: 215.

believe that by following the revelations of Baha'u'llah, humankind will become religiously and politically unified into one future world civilisation based on world peace and the enforcement of international law. In line with this vision the Baha'is advocate a number of social and ethical principles which emphasise universalism, cultural diversity, gender equality, and equal opportunities for all.

On a world basis, the total number of Baha'is was less than half a million in 1963, but in the subsequent decades the number of Baha'is outside Iran rose quite rapidly (Smith 2000: 137–154). Today, the Baha'is claim a membership of more than 5.5 million with Baha'i communities present in nearly all countries of the world.⁴

The rise of the Baha'i religion is extraordinary in the history of Islam. No other Islamic movement, whether emerging from a Sunni or a Shi'ite environment, has asserted its independence from its mother creed and claimed to be a religion in its own right (MacEoin 1990). For example, the Ahmadiyyas, who hold their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908) to be a new prophet after Muhammad, regard themselves to be Muslims although they are not recognised as such by many influential Muslim clerics and organisations.⁵ In contrast, both Muslims and Baha'is agree that Baha'i does not belong to the Islamic creed. Furthermore, Baha'i has also effectively transgressed the borders of its cultural homeland, Iran, so that the vast majority of its adherents have a non-Muslim background. From a sociological point of view, much speaks for regarding Baha'i as an independent religion and not as a derivative of Islam (Warburg 2006: 64–68).

Power, Prejudices and Persecutions

The Babi insurrections in 1848 and a couple of years after were undoubtedly perceived by the shah regime as a revolutionary threat, but it would be too simple to regard them on a par with the European secular revolutionary movements of the time (Warburg 2006: 147–153). After the crushing of the Babi movement in 1852–1853, neither the Babis nor their successors, the Baha'is, presented any objective threat to the Iranian government. However, the Babis were never forgotten in *ulama* circles, and the Baha'is were seen as a continuation of the Babi movement nourished by imperialist powers

⁴ According to the Baha'i yearbook *The Bahá'í World 2004–2005*, p. 295.

⁵ For example, in 1974 the World Muslim League unanimously adopted a resolution, which demanded that Ahmadiyyas should be “declared non-Muslims and ousted from the fold of Islam” (Bashir 1974). See also Arzt 1996.

hostile to Iran (MacEoin 1989: 6). As pointed out by Denis MacEoin, the Babi movement was essentially an expression of a conflict within orthodox Shi'a Islam, which ultimately led to a religious schism from which Baha'i evolved (MacEoin 1990). From the perspective of the *ulama* the Baha'is are therefore apostates, in addition to being agents of foreign imperialism.

During most of the history of Iran, the State and the *ulama* were separate and often conflicting pillars of power in society, but with the Iranian revolution in 1979, the two pillars of power merged into one totalitarian regime, which historically and doctrinally, was destined to be very hostile to the Baha'is (Amanat 2008; Arzt 1996). This created a new and qualitatively different situation for the Baha'is in relation to the Iranian State.

The new Islamic regime of 1979 soon initiated systematic persecutions of its Baha'i citizens with arbitrary arrests, confiscation or destruction of Baha'i property, torture and executions (Afshari 2008). The persecutions seriously drained the Baha'is in Iran of their human and financial resources: Thousands of Iranian Baha'i refugees sought new lives among the Baha'i communities of the West, and their fortunes and property were often left for confiscation. In fact, the persecutions of the Iranian Baha'is have had a profound demographic, economic, and cultural impact on the Baha'i communities both inside and outside Iran (Warburg 1995).

The first part of this chapter is an analysis of the relative power of the Baha'i minority in Iran, where I shall discuss not only their minority situation inside Iran, but also the consequences of the fact that the Baha'i leadership resides outside Iran and that the far majority of Baha'is today are non-Iranians. The second and larger part of this chapter deals with an analysis of the persecutions, their doctrinal justification by the *ulama*, and the popular prejudices against the Baha'is. Among Muslims, and in particular among the Shi'a of Iran, anti-Baha'i sentiments and reactions constitute an analogy to European anti-Semitism, albeit less widespread and less known (Chehabi 2008).⁶ Like European anti-Semitism, the public and popular anti-Baha'i discourse tells more about the persecutors and their audience than about the persecuted. By analysing the persecutions of the Baha'is of Iran and their foundation in religious and popular prejudices we can therefore also obtain an insight which points to important aspects of Shi'ite self-images.

⁶ Outside Iran, anti-Baha'i attitudes and activities have been reported in several other countries with a Muslim majority, notably Egypt (U.S. Department of State 2008).

Sources

The presented examples of prejudices and persecutions against the Baha'is of Iran are based on many and varied sources. The primary written sources are documentary material in the form of official documents, letters, and newspaper articles from Iran. In 1980–1982, I received a considerable amount of such early documentary material on the persecutions from Iranian Baha'is in Denmark, and many of these documents were translated with the help of my informants and published in Danish together with the Persian originals (Warburg 1985). Some of the examples in this book were later rendered in English (Warburg 2006). In the same period I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 expatriate Iranian Baha'is about their personal experiences of discrimination and persecutions back in Iran.⁷ Many of these informants also contributed with a number of second-hand accounts of persecutions. During my fieldwork at the Baha'i World Centre, Haifa in 1988–89, I also interviewed about 10 Iranian Baha'is on the same topics. The interviews added significant, confirmatory details to the overall picture derived from the written sources.

An early report on the persecutions was issued by the London-based Minority Rights Group (Cooper 1982). The most extensive report was issued in 2006 by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center in New Haven, Connecticut (*A Faith Denied* 2006).⁸ The many other secondary sources include different international reports, in particular UN reports, reports issued by the International Baha'i Community, and a range of academic works on the topic. These sources are referred to where they are relevant.

Clearly, individual sources may be biased, but the evidence for the harsh persecutions of the Baha'is of Iran since 1979 is overwhelming and has not been disputed by independent observers. Iranian authorities have also themselves at several instances declared that the Baha'is are not to be tolerated in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Sanasarian 2000: 114–123). The persecutions have regularly been denounced in international forums,

⁷ These interviews were carried out in connection with a more comprehensive qualitative and qualitative interview study of the Danish Baha'i community.

⁸ According to its homepage, the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center is an independent organisation with a Board of Directors comprising internationally recognized human rights experts and advocates, both Iranians and non-Iranians. The funding is varied, mostly private funds from the United States and Canada. It is clear that the center is not associated with the International Baha'i Community.

primarily in the United Nations, seriously contributing to Iran's bad standing with regard to human rights in general (United Nations General Assembly 2008).

Empowerment and Disempowerment: Compact and Diffuse Minorities

In the introductory chapter in *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, political scientist Gabriel Ben-Dor discusses the issue of power and powerlessness of the minorities in the Middle East (Ben-Dor 1999). He draws a distinction between what he denotes *compact* minorities and *diffuse* minorities—a terminology he borrowed from Albert Habib Hourani (1947: 14). A compact minority lives mainly in a geographically limited area, and here it may make up a significant proportion of the local population. A typical example of a compact minority is the Druze community in Lebanon. The position as a compact minority can give a certain base of power locally, and this power can be exercised to give the minority a considerable influence on the often relatively weak states of the Middle East (Ben-Dor 1999). As the term implies, a diffuse minority lives scattered over a larger area, and it is not demographically dominant anywhere. In the Middle East the Greek-Orthodox and the Armenians are examples of diffuse minorities. All other things being equal, a diffuse minority is in a less powerful position compared with the situation of a compact minority.

The Issue of Power Regarding the Baha'í Minority in Iran

In Iran the Baha'is must be characterised as a diffuse minority. This goes back to the time of the Babi movement, which was not a local movement but spread in the 1840s like a wild-fire over most of Iran. Although there were cities, such as Mashad, Yazd, and Zanjan, which were known as particular Babi strongholds, the Babis seemed in general to be of a very mixed background (Momen 1983). Geographically, they came from all parts of Iran, and they represented most of the Iranian society with respect to occupation (*ibid.*). Underrepresented groups among the Babis were primarily the nomadic tribes, who, at that time, made up one quarter of the Iranian population (Smith and Momen 1986). When the majority of the surviving Babis later rallied around Baha'u'llah's leadership and became Baha'is, they were thus already living as a diffuse minority in Iran.

Baha'u'llah was in exile in the Ottoman Empire when, in 1863–1867, he proclaimed himself to be a new prophet and transformed Babism into the

Baha'i religion. He and his successors never returned to Iran but gradually established a Baha'i world leadership in exile. By a coincidence of history, this was in the area of Akko and Haifa in present-day Israel, because the Ottoman authorities had arrested Baha'u'llah in 1868 and transferred him to this then remote part of the Empire. This explains why the Baha'i World Centre today is situated on the northern slope of Mount Carmel in the city of Haifa. That the Baha'i headquarters is in Israel adds another twist to the relationship between the Baha'is and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as will be expounded on later.

Thanks to an effective network of couriers, Baha'u'llah kept contact with his adherents in Iran, and during the 1870s and 1880s, the Baha'is of Iran gradually gained a firm position in most parts of Iran (Momen 1998). They began to gain new followers, in particular among the better-educated or upwardly mobile strata of Iranian society (Smith 1987: 93–97). The Baha'is also had some success in gaining converts among other religious minority groups in Iran, specifically among Zoroastrians and Jews (Smith 1987: 93–97; Stiles 1984; Vahman 2008; Fischel 1934).

The External Power Base of the Baha'is of Iran

In an empowerment perspective it was undoubtedly a great help to the Baha'i community of Iran that the supreme leadership of the Baha'i religion was in exile and therefore enjoyed the protection of other powerful states in the Middle East—first the Ottoman Empire, then the British during the mandate period and, lastly, Israel. When the persecutions were intensified after 1979, the Baha'is had already gained a strong resource base outside Iran, and Baha'is worldwide could support the Iranian Baha'is by publicly raising the issue of the persecutions and urging their governments to protest. This has had an effect: since 1979 the UN Commission on Human Rights has passed 18 resolutions on human rights violations in Iran, all mentioning the Baha'is, and since 1985, the UN General Assembly has approved 13 resolutions (Warburg 2006: 165). As late as 30 March 2009, Canada's House of Commons unanimously condemned the persecution of Baha'is in Iran and called on the Iranian government to release Baha'i leaders imprisoned in Tehran (Canada House of Commons 2009). Most observers agree that the appeals directed by the international community and the news media to Iran, calling for an end to the persecutions, have not been without effect (Affolter 2005). However, although the killings and executions seem to have come to a halt, the harassment of the Baha'is continues, and it has even been intensified during 2008 and 2009, with expulsions of Baha'i students,

arbitrary arrests, destruction of property, etc. (United Nations General Assembly 2008; United Nations General Assembly 2009).

The Baha'i representation at the United Nations has played a crucial role in providing documentation for the persecutions (*The Bahá'í Question* 1993; *The Bahá'í Question* 2005). So, although the Baha'is, as a diffuse and relatively small minority in Iran, can appear powerless, they are not totally so in reality, thanks to their strong presence and political contacts outside Iran. Because the Baha'i supreme leadership historically has been located outside Iran, the Baha'is of Iran are accustomed to the international Baha'i community speaking on their behalf. Iranian Baha'is are also well-represented on the supreme board of leaders of the Baha'is, the Universal House of Justice in Haifa, and among the high ranking staff. So there is little doubt that the international lobbyism is well coordinated with the interests of the Baha'i community of Iran.

Nevertheless, the fact that the Baha'is of Iran constitute a diffuse minority makes it difficult for them to mobilise strong local support. As scattered, individual families the Baha'is are vulnerable to informers and to mob persecutions.

Prejudices, Discrimination and Self-Images

It is well-known in both sociology and social psychology that prejudices and discriminatory attitudes toward a minority reveal, among other things, self-images and prevailing norms among those who express these attitudes (Greenberg et al. 2009). Typically, the minority is stereotyped to incarnate negative projections of virtues esteemed by the majority (Pickering 2001: 69–78). In a broad sense stereotyping is a way for outsiders to condense perceived characteristics of a sub-group, whether these characteristics reflect a reality or not. In principle, stereotyping might be an unbiased characterization; however, in most cases stereotyping serves to picture the sub-group as inferior.

The underlying psycho-social mechanism of stereotyping is quite general. In cases where people classify other people as belonging either to their own kind, the in-group, or to an out-group, members of the in-group often enhance their self-esteem by derogating the out-group in generalised terms, thereby highlighting the (assumed) positive qualities of their own group (Greenberg et al. 2009). It should be added that it works both ways; also minorities have negative prejudices about the majority—prejudices that primarily are negations of virtues that the minority members perceive to

share among themselves. Stereotypes, prejudices, discriminatory attitudes and persecutions may therefore be analysed as cultural mirrors of self-understanding.

Such mirror stereotyping is quite common and not particular to majority-minority relations in the Middle East, as the following brief example from European history will show. Religion also has a prominent position in this case.

The French and the Germans fought three major wars against each other before World War II: The War of Liberation 1813–15, the Franco-Prussian War 1870–71, and World War I (1914–18). During these wars Protestant pastors all over Germany held patriotic sermons directed against the moral defects of the French and contrasted them with the high morals of the Germans. The historian A.J. Hoover has analysed hundreds of these sources and found that the virtues claimed by the Protestant clergy to be held by the Germans were nearly always the opposite of the vices of the French (Hoover 1987). The virtues of the Germans were said to stem from a basic religious attitude and the vices of the French from an irreligious attitude. When Hoover summed up the priestly contemplations on national characters, a colourful contrast emerged:

the French were irreligious, godless people; this infidelity caused them to be lustful, sexually loose, superficial and frivolous, proud, vain and arrogant, sly, tricky and dishonest. The Germans in contrast were a religious, spiritual people, a basic fact that caused them to be honest, serious, upright and faithful, chaste and simple in tastes, frugal, industrious and skillful, brave, honourable, obedient and patriotic (Hoover 1987: 304).

Stereotypes and prejudices are often upheld against objective knowledge, and counterexamples exemplified by concrete out-group members are usually regarded as exceptions that prove the rule (Gaertner and Dovidio 2009). It is also commonly observed that negative images of a particular group prevail also among those who do not have any contact with the group. An illustrative example is that anti-Semitism in Poland is still common long after about 90 percent of the three million Jews in Poland were killed in World War II.⁹

⁹ Nearly all of the rest of the Polish Jews emigrated after an anti-Jewish purging campaign in 1968, but Polish anti-Semitism did not disappear with them.

Persecutions and the Baha'is' Relations to the Iranian Ulama

While the Baha'i relations with the Iranian State gradually improved from the 1880s and until the fall of the Pahlavi regime in 1979, the tensions between the Baha'is and the Iranian *ulama* were lasting. The Babis were themselves strong opponents of the Iranian *ulama*, and the Baha'is maintained pronounced anti-*ulama* sentiments in line with their doctrinal abolishment of any kind of priesthood. The Baha'i leaders have repeatedly expressed anti-clerical views, and the *ulama* have been denounced in Baha'i literature with words such as "tyrants", "vipers" and "wolves who had destroyed Iran" (MacEoin 1989: 18). Baha'u'llah also resorted to the classical accusation of greed:

Many ecclesiastics in Persia have, through innumerable designs and devices, been feeding on illicit gains obtained by usury. They have contrived ways to give its outward form a fair resemblance of lawfulness (Baha'u'llah 1988: 134).

The *ulama*, on their side, have succeeded in maintaining and spreading anti-Baha'i feelings in Iranian society. The tensions between the two parties often led to local persecutions and even occasional lynching of Baha'is, but in general these persecutions were not actively encouraged by the State. In fact, during the Pahlavi regime (1925–1979), the Baha'is enjoyed longer periods of relative tolerance (MacEoin 1989: 19–24). The Baha'is were generally better educated than the average Iranian, and many Baha'is found employment within the educational and health care sectors. Some even gained high posts in business and state administration (Chehabi 2008).

Despite their gradual appeasement with the Iranian government the Baha'i position in Iran was often threatened because of the continued, general popular hostility against them, with periods of relative tolerance interrupted by periods of mob persecutions, arbitrary arrests, and killings (Momen 1986). In 1903 widespread persecutions took place, with mob riots and fatal assaults on Baha'is in several cities (Amanat 2008; Momen 1981: 389–390). Furthermore, it did not improve the Baha'is' situation that, although they were sympathetic towards democratic reform in Iran, they did not speak out against the unpopular shah regime during the constitutional revolution of 1905 and its aftermath, but attempted to navigate along a course of non-involvement (Milani 2008).

Also in 1955, nation-wide persecutions broke out again, instigated by a number of *ulama* associated with Ayatollah Khomeini (*A Faith Denied* 2006: 7–10). Baha'i centres were demolished, Baha'i property was looted,

and Baha'is were molested, raped, some killed and their dead bodies mutilated.¹⁰

There is no doubt that the rise of the Baha'is to middle class positions during the last shah has made them appear as supporters of the regime in the eyes of many Iranians. The 1955 pogrom against the Baha'is showed that anti-Baha'i feelings in the Iranian population were strong and widespread (Akhavi 1980: 76–90). When representatives of the *ulama* came to power with the Iranian revolution of 1979, these feelings were exploited once more and as vigorously as ever.

The Legal Status of the Baha'is in the Islamic Republic

The legal situation of the Iranian Baha'is changed drastically with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which gave the legal system of the country a stronger reference to religious law. For example, the judicial expression for 'illegal', *gheir-e qanooni*, which literally means 'without law' in general, was changed to *na-mashru'*, which refers to something that is illegal according to shari'a (Warburg 1985: 14–25). Both words are in common use, but by changing the term, it is stressed that offenders are not only offenders of any law; they have violated the law of Islam. This is an effective stereotyping of the Baha'is as a religious out-group versus the in-group of the Muslim majority.

From the perspective of the *ulama*, the Baha'is are regarded as apostates from Islam and, therefore, have violated the law of Islam (MacEoin 1989: 4; Arzt 1996; Sanasarian 2000: 122).¹¹ This is founded in the Babis' official break with Islam in 1848 as mentioned above. Crucial to this schism was a meeting between several of the leading Babis in the summer of 1848 (the Bab himself was imprisoned at that time). For several days they debated whether the Babis should break with Islam or not; in the end the majority decided to declare the abrogation of shari'a, and recognised the Bab as a source of new revelation (Amanat 1989: 325–328). According to a Baha'i historical narrative, Baha'u'llah played a key role in reaching this conclusion (Shoghi Effendi 1974: 292–298). The account of Baha'u'llah's significance

¹⁰ This can be seen from a survey of *A Basic Bahá'í Chronology* for the year 1955 (Cameron and Momen 1996: 320–327).

¹¹ As remarked by Denis MacEoin, it does not seem clear, however, if Baha'i converts from Zoroastrian or Jewish background also are regarded as apostates in terms of Islamic law (MacEoin 1989: 4).

for this early radical break with Islam established a doctrinal continuity between the Babi movement and the Baha'i religion, which is emphasised also in later official Baha'i expositions of the religion (Shoghi Effendi 1995: 32–33; Hatcher and Martin 1989: 29–30).

In classical Islamic penal code apostasy is considered an offense against God, and in practice it was often punished by death (Arzt 1996). So the Iranian government had its religious arguments for a harsh treatment of its Baha'i citizens, and these arguments were soon codified by law. Thus, in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was drafted in 1979, it was specifically mentioned in Article 13 that Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians—the Peoples of the Book—were the only recognised religious minorities (Ghanea-Hercock 2002: 102–103).¹² In principle these *dhimmis* (i.e. non-Muslim religious minorities) enjoyed protection of the Islamic State and were free to cultivate their own religion (Sanasarian 2000: 19–21; Arzt 1996). Government officials, including Khomeini himself, explicitly excluded the Baha'is from this category, denouncing them as a harmful political faction whose religious activities were not to be tolerated (Sanasarian 2000: 20–22; *A Faith Denied* 2006: 20).

The Iranian Baha'is' inferior legal status may be exemplified by the so-called 'blood money', which is an economic compensation to be paid by the offender to the relatives of a crime victim.¹³ However, if the victim is a Baha'i, the relatives of the victim are not entitled to this compensation. For example, in a court case involving a Muslim who had killed two Baha'is by careless driving, the judge ruled that "blood money is not applicable to them [the Baha'is]."¹⁴ Underlying the law of 'blood money' is the view that Muslims are superior humans to those who are regarded to have rejected Islam.

¹² Also during the time of the shah, Baha'i was not one of the recognised religions, and according to the law, only members of recognised religions could be employed by the State. However, in that period, the law was not applied strictly and many Baha'is were employed by the government as mentioned above (Cooper 1982: 14).

¹³ The tradition was that if the victim was a Christian, a Jew, a Zoroastrian, or a woman, the payment to the relatives was only half of the amount given to the relatives of a male Muslim victim. However, in 2003 a law was passed that provided equal compensation for male Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians (*Payvand's Iran News* 27 December 2003).

¹⁴ Translation from the Persian of the Ruling of the Public Court (District One) in Minu-Dasht, 10 March 2002. Enclosure, Lise Raben (the Danish Baha'i community) to Margit Warburg, 13 November 2002.

State-Organised Persecution of Baha'is

One of the most efficient ways to persecute people is to deprive them of opportunities of education and employment through ministerial decrees and other "legal" measures. Such means provide an additional advantage for the regime in that such harassment draws less international attention than does physical persecution. Baha'i students and professors were barred from admission to or employment at any university in Iran according to a decree issued in 1979 shortly after the revolution (Warburg 1985: 77–87; *The Baha'i Question* 2005: 24–25; *A Faith Denied* 2006: 20). In response, the Baha'is established their own higher education programme in private, called the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education. In 1998, 36 of the voluntary faculty members of the "institute" were arrested in cities across the country (*The Baha'i Question* 1993: 61–64).

Already from 1979, the government began to dismiss Baha'i civil servants and teachers without compensation (Cooper 1982: 13; Warburg 1985: 33–75). According to Baha'i sources all Baha'i public servants had been dismissed by 1982, and the pensions of retired Baha'i civil servants had been terminated (*The Baha'i Question* 1993: 31). Some of the dismissed persons were even told to repay the salaries they had received during their lifetime employment (*A Faith Denied* 2006: 43–44). These measures were followed by attacks on Baha'is in the private sector, where the trading licenses of Baha'i businesses were revoked, the assets of businesses run by Baha'is were confiscated, bank accounts of Baha'i businessmen were frozen, and Baha'i farmers were denied admission to farmers' co-operatives (Warburg 1985: 33–75; *A Faith Denied* 2006: 43–45).

The leading role of the Iranian government in inflicting physical persecutions of the Baha'is, such as destruction of property, arbitrary arrests, torture and executions is well-documented and has naturally been a main point in the many international protests against Iran's gross violation of human rights (Cooper 2002 *passim*; Warburg 1985 *passim*; *A Faith Denied* 2006: 23–39).

Popular Anti-Baha'i Sentiments

Nationalism, and Anti-Western Attitudes

The official persecutions of the Baha'is are nourished by widespread popular prejudices against Baha'is and other non-Muslim minorities. Political scientist Eliz Sanasarian writes that common prejudices against Baha'is are

“apostasy, association with the West and Israel, pro-monarchism, and an elite club bent on self-promotion and propaganda” (Sanasarian 2000: 53). These prejudices reflect to some extent a reaction against the westernisation during the last shah—a reaction that eventually brought the *ulama* to power in 1979. The accusations against the Baha’is as associates of the West and Israel perpetuate earlier accusations that the Baha’is were instruments of British conspiracies against Iran (Vahman 2005). In fact, much of the material from the persecutions of the Baha’is plays on popular nationalism and anti-Western attitudes.

An example of the nationalistic arguments against the Baha’is is an early letter (dated 29 July 1979) from the provincial government of Sirjān to a local agricultural cooperative, urging the management to dismiss a Baha’i from the cooperative. The letter, which states that it has been discussed in the local council of “pious and reliable men”, characterises the Baha’i religion as follows:

Baha’i is not a religion, nor is it a sect or philosophical school; it is not even a creed. The Baha’is are lackeys created by the assistants of the imperialist Russian Czars, and the Englishmen’s aggressive and deceitful policy has helped them, and the bitter and ugly fruits of this unclean tree are plucked by America and Israel. Baha’i is the fifth column of imperialism in Iran, and it is obvious that the adherents of this misguided sect definitely are *mushrik* [polytheists], and that they represent from an intellectual point of view some of the worst imaginable reactionary tendencies of the twentieth century (translated from Warburg 1985: 71–73).

These accusations carefully play on prevalent sentiments among many Iranians—sentiments that are rooted in the humiliations of Iran during the nineteenth century by the combined efforts of Britain and Russia and which made it possible for the Pahlavi shahs to cultivate a strong Iranian nationalism (Vahman 2005). All Iran’s traditional and new enemies are lined up in the quotation above, and the fact that the Baha’i world headquarters is situated in Haifa gives public credibility to accusations that Baha’is are agents of Israel. Accusations of being the fifth column of imperialism indicate that Baha’is are regarded as internationalists and traitors of Iran. This is a well-known prejudice, also before the Islamic revolution (Vahman 2005; Tavakoli-Targhi 2008). The implications are, of course, that Iranian Muslims themselves are nationalists and stand up against the enemies of Iran. This implicit characterisation of “good” Iranians as being both nationalists and true Muslims should be seen in the light of the fact that, when the above letter was written in July 1979, nationalistic liberal groups still played an important role in the revolutionary government (Cottam 1989). Later, the liberal forces were ousted by Khomeini, but the nationalistic and

anti-imperialistic appeal to the public was retained, undoubtedly in tune with popular sentiments in Iran (*ibid.*).

In the surge of accusations against the Baha'is the Iranian authorities do not always seem consistent in their view of the Baha'is as political or religious opponents to the Islamic Republic: In the letter above Baha'i is first described as not being a sect or not even a creed, but a little later these "adherents of this misguided sect definitely are *mushrik* [polytheists]", which clearly places them as religious opponents.

Another illustrative example of the above ambiguity in the official views of the Baha'is is from the leading, conservative Tehran newspaper, *Kayhan* 16 July 1980. It reproduces the verdicts from the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tabriz, which led to the execution of 14 persons, including two Baha'is. One of the verdicts runs like this:

Yad'ullah Astani, son of Ahmad and chair of the Baha'i council in Tabriz is accused of having collaborated actively with the rotten Pahlavi-regime and the now dissolved SAVAK [the secret police of the shah regime] with the purpose of oppressing the fighting Muslims. He is charged with spreading prostitution, undertaking other unforgivable things, and having direct connection with the occupying power in Israel [i.e., the Israeli government] and international Zionism, with the purpose of oppressing noble Muslims anew. He is further charged with sending detailed reports with cultural, political, geographical and military information to Israel, to collect money and transfer it in support of Israel, to rebel against Islam and the Muslims by direct collaboration with Israel, and to have travelled frequently to Israel to accomplish the ominous plans of Zionism. He is condemned as an opponent of God and the Messenger of God, and he is thus the corruption of the world (translated from Warburg 1985: 134–137).

It is interesting that the pronounced anti-Zionism is intertwined with the charges of being a potential suppressor of the Muslims and an opponent of God. The verdict concludes that Yad'ullah Astani is the "corruption of the world", and this is a crime which implies a death sentence (United Nations General Assembly 2009: 9).

The above examples illustrate that the official propaganda against the Baha'is seems to operate along two tracks. Part of the propaganda openly appeals to those who oppose the Baha'is for religious reasons. For example, in 2005 the newspaper *Kayhan* brought a series of articles criticising and defaming the Baha'i religion and its leading figures right back to its first prophet, the Bab, who was attacked in several articles (*A Faith Denied* 2006: 50–51). Such a reference to a religious schism, which took place 160 years ago, is obviously addressing the *ulama* and the broad circle of more or less self-appointed religious specialists among the supporters of the regime.

However, the government is also aware that most people do not care much about theological finesses rooted in historical events. Appeals to anti-Zionist and anti-Western attitudes are likely to reach a wider audience in Iran, and other *Kayhan* articles therefore devote a fair share of words on claims that Baha'is are the fruits of Israeli and Western imperialist influence (*A Faith Denied* 2006: 50–51).

The stereotyping of the Baha'is as agents of Western imperialism is in concord with popular anti-Baha'i feelings rather than possible popular animosities against Westerners in general. A study of stereotypes held by different social groups in Iran in 1980 showed that stereotypes of Americans were generally favourable (Beattie, Agahi, and Spencer 1982). The authors conclude that the rather intense anti-Western propaganda in the first years after the revolution had not resulted in negative attitudes towards Westerners in general. The study also showed that Arabs were viewed unfavourably, being stereotyped as “lazy” and “happy-go-lucky”—just as black Americans were stereotyped by white Americans in the 1930s. Anti-Arab sentiments run deeply in Iranian society, nourished by the rise of Iranian nationalism in the early twentieth century (Vahman 2005).

Muslim Morals

Baha'is have often been met in court with charges of prostitution, adultery and immorality. These charges were formally founded in the fact that until recently the Iranian authorities did not recognise Baha'i marriages as legal marriages, and their children were considered illegitimate. In the logic of the *ulama* the Baha'i couple had an extra-matrimonial relationship, which is religiously forbidden (Cooper 1982: 14). Behind these charges are general prejudices about the Baha'is' bad or absent morale (MacEoin 1989: 4–5). Most Iranians know very little about the Baha'is, and all kinds of rumours circulate. Some of the most stubborn rumours tell that Baha'i families have incestuous relations: Father and daughter, and mother and son sleep together (Warburg 1985: 20).

The Baha'i doctrine and practice about equality of the sexes further nourishes the imagination. One of the quite common rumours is that Baha'i assembly meetings are in reality group sex parties (MacEoin 1989: 5). A more fanciful variation of that rumour is that when the Baha'is have an assembly meeting, they turn off the lights. Then, the men put on the women's clothes and the women put on the men's clothes (Warburg 1985: 20)! This rumour may reflect that in many Muslim countries cross-dressing is controversial: for example in December 2007 the Kuwaiti parliament

amended the penal code to make cross-dressing illegal (Whitaker 2008). Obviously, the rumour implies that decent behaviour with regard to the opposite sex is part of Muslim moral. Such prejudices about the sexual immorality of minority groups are common in many societies.

The Case of the Anti-Baha'i Society in Yazd

The public animosity against the Baha'is is also channelled into private organisations, of which the Iranian anti-Baha'i society, called *Hujjatiyeh*, is the most important. In the following I shall give an example of the activities of this organisation, which was founded in the 1950s and became widely represented among the *ulama* (Vali and Zubaida 1985).

As part of a rare autobiography, Iranian Mehdi Abedi tells about his own joining of the local branch of the anti-Baha'i society in Yazd, when he was a young, enthusiastic student before the revolution (Fischer and Abedi 1990: 50).

I did not know much about Baha'is before this time. Children in the alleys would sometimes chant, *Tū pīr-e bābi ridam* ("I shit on the Babi saint"), and my father had told me that the "Babis" (he did not distinguish Babis and Baha'is) did not say their prayers, and were *najes* (impure).

When Abedi's father said that the Baha'is did not say their prayers, he implied that proper Muslims did. Abedi's father also said that he regarded the Baha'is as impure, implicating that he, himself, was religiously pure. The concept of religious impurity, *najes*, is very important in Iranian society, and I shall expound on this in the subsequent section.

The local branch of the *Hujjatiyeh* society in Yazd operated from a mosque across the street from the Baha'i centre, and its strategy was to recruit young men to infiltrate the Baha'i community, pretending to be potential converts. Abedi describes, for example, how he befriended a young Baha'i man and abused his friendship by stealing a rare Baha'i book that he did not return, despite the pleas of his friend (Fischer and Abedi 1990: 52–53).

Shortly after the revolution the activities of the *Hujjatiyeh* society indirectly led to the execution of one of the leaders of the Yazdi Baha'is, Nurullah Akhtar-Khavari, (Fischer and Abedi 1990: 49). The execution was filmed for television, but when it was discovered that the viewers were repulsed by the scene, the broadcast was suppressed (Fischer and Abedi 1990: 49). The local leader of the *Hujjatiyeh* society, Dr. Paknejad had received private tutorials in English from Akhtar-Khavari, but Paknejad did not use his influence to prevent the killing. The Baha'is here again suffered from being a

diffuse minority, and even in Yazd, which historically was one of the centres of the Babi movement, the Baha'is were obviously defenceless.

In 1983 the *Hujjatiyeh* society was banned and went underground, but in the beginning of the 21st century the organisation has resurfaced, and it seems to attract support also from the upper strata of Iranian society (Radio Free Europe 2004). The Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is claimed to fraternise with the anti-Baha'i society (Hughes 2005).

Najes

The concept of religious purity/impurity may be traced back to pre-Islamic Zoroastrism, and the question of pollution (*nejasat*) is much more elaborated among the Shi'ites than among the Sunnis (Sanasarian 2000: 23–24). It became more widespread in Iranian society with the writings of the Shi'ite theologian, Muhammad Baquer Majlesis (d. 1699) who prescribed the rules for how Muslims should behave in the presence of non-Muslims (Sanasarian 2000: 23–24). Non-Muslims are *najes*, which means that physical contact with a non-Muslim, or food or drink from a non-Muslim should be avoided. For example, a Baha'i refugee told in an interview that when he had been arrested together with other Baha'is and transferred to an interrogation centre, the wardens called them *najes*, and they tried to avoid touching the prisoners for this reason (Gilad 1989). Even indirect contact may pollute; for example, it has been reported that a Muslim, after receiving money from a Jew, washed the unclean Jewish money before he could have it in his pocket (Fischel 1934).

The codes of pollution vary considerably, both locally and socially, and they have had significant consequences not only for the Baha'is, but also for other non-Muslim groups in Iran. I shall give a few brief examples in the following—the two first are from Eliz Sanasarian's book, the next two from my own informants:

- 1) After the Islamic revolution, non-Muslim food store owners such as bakers or sandwich-sellers had to put up signs, "especially for minorities" as a warning to Muslims (Sanasarian 2000: 86).
- 2) The Armenian owned Coca-Cola factory was confiscated, and the Armenian workers were fired and replaced by Muslims. The reason was that non-Muslims could not touch the bottles or their contents (Sanasarian 2000: 84–85).
- 3) One of my own informants told me about a *mullah* who had confiscated an apartment from a wealthy Baha'i family. Before he took over the apartment, he had to make it religiously clean. Relatives and friends

to the unfortunate Baha'i family could watch while he had the whole apartment including all the furniture and carpets washed with a fire hose (Warburg 1985: 19).

- 4) Another of my informants was a female high school student. She told me that all the students in her school in Iran had been asked to give blood to the wounded soldiers from the Iran-Iraqi war. When she heard about the need for blood, she immediately went to the school nurse to get an appointment for the next day. However, the class prefect had talked to the teacher about it, and they had agreed that her unclean Baha'i blood should not be offered to the Muslim soldiers (Warburg 1985: 19).

The belief underlying these and many other accounts is that religious impurity is contagious. Muslims who have a self-image of representing religious purity must therefore protect themselves from all contact with the impure.

These reports are not exotic cases; in fact, they follow typical patterns of how people deal with religious purity and impurity—a dichotomy that is ubiquitous in, for example, traditional Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. Such religious classificatory systems are deeply rooted in tradition. According to my informants many Muslim Iranians ridicule the concept of *najes*, which they claim is only believed by uneducated peasants and the city proletariat. Nevertheless, incidents like the above are known to all Iranian Baha'is and have also occurred in situations among people from the middle class.

Conclusion

Behind the present persecutions of the Baha'is in Iran there is a logic, which can be understood (but not excused, of course) on a complex historical background, where Islamic doctrines, popular religious beliefs, and nationalistic currents in Iran are mingled into a *pêle-mêle* of justifications for the anti-Baha'i stance of the regime. The relationship between the Iranian Baha'i community and the Iranian *ulama* was moulded during the Babi period, where the Babis broke with Islam in 1848. The Baha'is were a revival and continuation of the defeated Babi movement, and in religious terms the Baha'is continued the Babi track of heterodoxy and heresy relative to mainline Shi'ism and gradually developed a religion of their own. This was bound to result in permanent tensions between the Baha'is and the *ulama*, who logically enough regard the Baha'is as apostates.

The Babi insurrections following the schism in 1848 laid the foundation for the often strained relationship between the State and Baha'i community of Iran. Politically, the Baha'is attempted an appeasement with the Iranian State, and from the late nineteenth century and until the fall of the last shah in early 1979, the Baha'is were largely accepted by the government, and many Baha'is became employed in public service. However, the government also occasionally tolerated persecutions and harassments of the Baha'is, exploiting the widespread popular animosity and the prevalent *ulama* hostility against them. As a diffuse minority in Iran the Baha'is could not mobilise enough local support to resist persecutions but were vulnerable to informers, to mob harassments, and to anti-Baha'i organisations, such as the *Hujjatiyeh*.

The Baha'is' unstable balancing between the two pillars of power in Iranian society, the State and the *ulama*, was brought to an end with the Iranian revolution of 1979, where they merged into one totalitarian regime. The Islamic revolutionary government was very hostile to the Baha'is right from the take-over of power, and soon the government unleashed widespread, organised persecutions of its Baha'i citizens, including dismissal of thousands of Baha'i public servants, arrests, torture and executions of representatives of the Baha'i leadership.

Like other historical examples of state-organised persecutions, the persecutions of the Baha'is of Iran follow a common pattern: The minority is stereotyped in negative terms, utilising existing, more or less diffuse, prejudices among the majority population, and the persecutions are justified by reference to the imaginary threats posed by such potentially subversive elements. The persecutions of the Baha'is are both in tune with, and also extreme extrapolations of, widespread sentiments and prejudices against Baha'is among the Muslim majority in Iran. In the state-organised propaganda these prejudices are repeatedly and systematically projected into negative stereotypes of the Baha'is. In particular, the accusations of the Baha'is being disloyal to Iran and agents of Israel and the West strike a chord mirroring Iranian nationalism. Occasionally, the propaganda reminds the public that the Baha'is are also religious enemies of the Islamic Republic.

Stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory attitudes can be analysed as cultural mirrors of self-understanding. For example, there are popular prejudices in Iran depicting the Baha'is as immoral, irreligious, and religiously impure (*najes*), and these prejudices contrast with a self-image of Shi'ite Iranians being moral, pious and unpolluted. In particular, the understanding of the Baha'is as being *najes* gives many Shi'ites a reason

to understand why the Baha'is must be removed from positions within the teaching and medical professions.

State-orchestrated manipulations of popular prejudices as an argument for persecutions often serve a cynical purpose of diverting attention from governmental mismanagement. Although this motive cannot be ruled out, considering that the persecutions (except for the executions) have intensified during the period of the Ahmadinejad government, the selection of the Baha'is as prime scapegoats can only be understood by tracing the religious-historical origin of the *ulama* hostility against the Baha'is. With the *ulama* coming to power in 1979, history inevitably made the Baha'is the chosen internal enemy in Iran.

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