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Martyrdom and Servanthood in the Bābī and Bahā'ī Faiths

A Struggle to Defend a Cosmic Order

Per-Olof Åkerdahl (Gävle)

I. The Bābī and Bahā'ī Concepts of Martyrdom and Its Relations to Other Religions

For a long time martyrdom has been included within the general study of each of the Abrahamic religions. It has particularly been treated as a central subject within the study of Shia Islam, Church history, and the Bahā'ī Faith. The importance for Shia Islam stems from the central importance of Imam Ḥusayn and 'Āshūrā'. In Church history the study of martyrdom is connected to the period of persecution of the early Christians. Martyrdom is also of great importance in the study of the Bahā'ī Faith, due to the persecution of the Bahā'īs in Iran.

The concept of martyrdom has been used in a number of religions – including the Bahā'ī Faith – in such a way, that I would like to refer to the study of martyr ideals in different religions as comparative martyr studies. My point is that in order to understand how this concept was taken up in different situations in the history of religion, it is not enough to study it in isolation within a single religion. While the idea of martyrdom has been developed within different religions, a process of exchange between these religions always existed, leading to sufficient similarities between these concepts to discuss their development in a comparative context. One such example is the Bahā'ī Faith, where the idea of martyrdom has its roots in Shia Islam in Iran, but has taken a unique direction in the specific Bābī and Bahā'ī context.

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam the idea of martyrdom was developed over centuries. In Islam two separate martyr ideas emerged: a general idea of the martyr and a concept specific to Shia Islam. Though distinct in its development, the idea of martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith is so strongly rooted in Shia Islam that it is basically – in the first instance at least – the same idea. This can to some extent be seen as a parallel to the way the Tamil Tigers started to use the concept of martyrdom. The Christian concept of martyrdom was adopted by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, influenced by the presence of the British colonial system, a background recently illuminated by Peter Schalk.¹ Other ideas have circulated which reveal parallels, referring to similar phenomenon though certainly not

¹ Peter Schalk, *Cavilum valvum. Auch im Angesicht des Todes werden wir leben*, Dortmund 2006, 180-181.

rooted in a firm concept of martyrdom. Prominent among these is the Japanese idea of the kamikaze in the Second World War, which was rooted in the Shinto religion and Japanese history.

During the waves of persecution beginning in the 1840s of first the Bābīs and later the Bahā'īs in Iran, a great number were killed for their religious beliefs and subsequently named martyrs. They choose not to deny their faith and had to pay for this with their lives; but this does not mean that martyrdom is an ideal in the Bahā'ī Faith. The believers are not encouraged to actively search for martyrdom. Rather it recognises their willingness not to deny their religious beliefs, even if the price to be paid for this steadfastness is their own life. In 1932 Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahā'ī Faith between 1921 and 1957, wrote the following to a believer:

The Cause at present does not need Martyrs who would die for the Faith, but servants who desire to teach and establish the Cause throughout the world. To live to teach in the present day is like being martyred in those early days. It is the spirit that moves us that counts, not the act through which that spirit expresses itself, and that spirit is to serve the Cause of God with our heart and soul.²

Here Shoghi Effendi is explaining that the Bahā'ī Faith had no need for martyrdom at the time. He certainly does not rule out that there could be need for martyrs again in the Bahā'ī Faith; the guiding ideal, though, was servanthood and not martyrdom. This shift of ideal was not new in the Bahā'ī Faith however. Bahā'u'llāh had expressed it almost 80 years earlier in one of the most famous and appreciated tablets of the Bahā'īs, the *Tablet of Ahmad*.

The background to this shift of ideal is related to the general development of the Bābī and Bahā'ī Faiths. In the Bābī and Bahā'ī Faiths the situation shifted over time, also depending on the situation facing the leadership of the time: it shifted from the time of the Bāb, to Bahā'u'llāh, to 'Abdu'l-Bahā, to Shoghi Effendi and, from 1963, to the Universal House of Justice. It is, however, important to realise that a central authority was in place at practically all times. This has proven to be of great importance for the recognition of believers that were killed for their faith as martyrs.

The naming of martyrs has always been strongly related to the spiritual leader of the time in these two Faiths, for it is only God who knows who really is a martyr and it is God, according to beliefs of the Bahā'ī Faith, who raised the leader. In the period after the execution of the Bāb in July 1850 and the declaration of Bahā'u'llāh in April 1863, the leadership of the Bābī community might not have been very clear to many, particularly when seen from a theoretical point of view; but there seems to be little reason to believe that Bahā'u'llāh was not seen as the leading figure in the community by the majority of the Bābīs.³

² Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2, Mona Vale 1991, 5.

³ For a more detailed description on the question of the succession to the Bāb see Hasan M. Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahā'ī Faith*, Oxford 1970, 87.

The number of recognised Bābī martyrs during this period was very large, as Shoghi Effendi later showed in *God Passes By* and other writings. Bahā'u'llāh also refers to this in the *Tablet of Aḥmad*, which was written at a time when the martyrdom of these Bābīs was still quite fresh in the mind.

After the 1863 declaration of Bahā'u'llāh in Baghdad, he and a relatively small group consisting of his family and a few others were sent to Constantinople (Istanbul) and from there to Adrianople (Edirne), leaving behind most of the believers in Baghdad. After some time one of the believers, Mīrzā Aḥmad Yazdī, longed so much to see Bahā'u'llāh that he decided to follow him. When he reached Constantinople he received a tablet from Bahā'u'llāh that had been revealed in Adrianople, and is known today as the *Tablet of Aḥmad*. Upon reading this tablet carefully, he realised that he should not continue his search for Bahā'u'llāh but should instead go to Iran and teach the Bābīs living there that Bahā'u'llāh was the 'Promised One' predicted in the Bābī Faith. Undertaking this mission he became a key person, and together with some other Bahā'īs initiated the process that saw the majority of the Bābīs of Iran become Bahā'īs.⁴

A part of the *Tablet of Aḥmad* is of special interest for the aspect of martyrdom. Seen in terms of general conceptions of martyrdom, two sentences are entirely unexpected considering the high esteem given to martyrdom in the Middle East⁵:

Learn well this Tablet, O Aḥmad. Chant it during thy days and withhold not thyself there from. For verily, God hath ordained for the one who chants it, the reward of a hundred Martyrs and a service in both worlds.⁶

The statement that the one who chants it has a reward of a hundred martyrs and a service in both worlds indicates the change of an ideal: from the ideal of martyrdom so common in the Middle East to the ideal of the faithful servant. According to this ideal, not only can the station of the servant be compared to the station of one martyr, but it can be compared to the station of a hundred martyrs. During the first decade of the Bābī Faith the persecution had been brutally severe, with many dying and subsequently hailed as martyrs among the Bābīs. The ideals of martyrdom inherited from Shia Islam, where Imam Ḥusayn was the primal martyr and the believers were encouraged to follow in his footsteps, had dominated the minds of the Bābīs. Now Bahā'u'llāh set about changing this, encouraging service instead.

⁴ H. Richard Gurinsky, *Learn Well This Tablet*, Oxford 2000, 8.

⁵ In 1997 I had a short discussion about these lines with the late Jan Bergman, a professor of comparative religion. We both agreed that seen from the aspect of general martyr studies, this was more or less impossible to understand and that Bahā'u'llāh must have had something very special in mind when writing these lines. My suggestion for a solution presented here goes back to very this brief discussion. I am extremely grateful to him for pointing out this problem to me and his suggestion to look at it from the background of the martyr studies project that was being conducted at the University of Uppsala at that time.

⁶ *Bahā'ī Prayers*, Wilmette 1982, 212.

The ideal of servanthood has been central to the Bahā'ī Faith. Whenever the death of a Bahā'ī deserved to be called martyrdom, he or she was called a martyr, but it is the ideal of servanthood that was always given priority and preferred. As there is no form of priesthood in the Bahā'ī Faith, neither hereditary nor based on a theological education and followed by an ordination, the ideal of servanthood is the sole basis for the individual's active participation in any part of the Bahā'ī administration. The Bahā'ī administration is thus based on this ideal in terms of membership in local and national Assemblies as well as the Universal House of Justice. It is also the basis for the institutions of the Counsellor, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. Another aspect of servanthood in the Bahā'ī Faith is teaching, both in organised classes for children and adults as well as the act of teaching in the sense of spreading information of the Bahā'ī Faith and kindling interest to know more.

II. Parallels to Christian Martyr Concepts

It is correct to say that to be a martyr in Christianity is to be a witness, as the word *martyrs* means "to witness". The word was used in the sense that a person who was suspected to be a Christian, refusing to pay homage to the statue of the emperor, was taken to a court, where they had to bear witness or testify to their belief in Christianity. Once it was clear that the person was a Christian they were killed in ways described as gruesome and cruel. This situation changed in the year 311 with the publication of the Edict of Tolerance, which accepted all religions in the Roman Empire as approved religions, including Christianity. From that time on, the number of martyrs ceased to increase by any substantial number. Nonetheless, martyrs continued to be hailed in different ways, especially among the common believers, which meant that the church had to accept this situation. A step in this direction was taken when in 608 Pope Boniface IV asked for and gained approval from the Emperor to use the heathen temple of the Pantheon in Rome as a Catholic church dedicated to "Virgin Mary and all the Martyrs". A further step in this direction came when the Catholic Church started to officially name saints in 993. The first to be named a saint was the bishop Ulrich of Augsburg. By naming saints, the Church had officially left behind the earlier ideal of martyr, accepting instead an ideal of servanthood, whereby persons other than martyrs could become saints.

In the Christian context the concept of martyrdom was used according to the principle of sheep going to slaughter, meaning that the martyrs had not tried to resist their martyrdom. To the Christians Jesus Christ was the primal martyr and he was the one to set the pattern of how to face martyrdom. The path he took showed this principle. To the Bābīs it was natural to follow the existing pattern in Shia Islam, which was to meet the persecutions with sword in hand, the pattern set by Imam Ḥusayn. With the martyrdom of the Bāb however, a new pat-

tern was set. At his martyrdom he desisted from any kind of resistance, accepting his martyrdom in complete submission. In this way his martyrdom was a parallel to the martyrdom of Jesus Christ. Was this one of the aspects Shoghi Effendi was actually referring to in *God Passes By*? Even if not, there can be no doubt that he saw this parallel as central and of great importance, an aspect that was well worth the effort for a student of comparative religion to engage in for a deeper study.

The passion of Jesus Christ, and indeed His whole public ministry, alone offer a parallel to the Mission and death of the Bāb, a parallel which no student of comparative religion can fail to perceive or ignore: in the youthfulness and meekness of the Inaugurator of the Bābī Dispensation; in the extreme brevity and turbulence of His public ministry; in the dramatic swiftness with which that ministry moved towards its climax; in the apostolic order He instituted and the primacy He conferred on one of its members; in the boldness of His challenge to the time-honoured conventions, rites and laws which had been woven into the fabric of the religion He Himself had been born into; in the role which an officially recognised and firmly entrenched religious hierarchy played as chief instigators of the outrages which He was made to suffer; in the indignities heaped upon Him; in the suddenness of His arrest; in the interrogation to which He was subjected; in the derision poured, and the scourging inflicted, upon Him; in the public affront He faced; and finally, in His ignominious suspension before the gaze of a hostile multitude – in all these we cannot fail to discern a remarkable similarity to the distinguishing features of the career of Jesus Christ.⁷

III. The Bahā'ī Community in 'Isfāhān – An Example of Servanthood

The concept of martyrdom was born in Judaism and Islam from theological concepts and in Christianity from a historical situation – the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The same applies to the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn on the Karbala plain in 680 CE in Shia Islam. Once a concept of martyrdom has been set out and established, it becomes imperative to then defend, for it is a key component in the cosmic order of that group. There are thus a number of historical situations where defending this concept has led to religious persecution, with the persecution of the Iranian Bahā'īs one example from modern history. The background to this persecution is that in Shia Islam there is the expectation that Imam Mahdī, the twelfth Imam, will return, while the very foundation of the Bābī and Bahā'ī Faiths is that this expectation was fulfilled with the emergence of the Bāb. This was not accepted by the Shia *'ulamā'*, who lead and guide the Shia community in the name of Imam Mahdī. Their station in society rests on this expectation and the trust of the people that when Imam Mahdī returns the *'ulamā'* will accept his sovereignty. The Bahā'ī community is therefore seen as a threat to the Shia *'ulamā'*, albeit not a political or military threat, for the Bahā'īs have neither the means nor the ideological motivation for this. The threat is rather on a level of principles. If these expectations have been fulfilled, the basis

⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, Wilmette 1982, 56f.

for the rule of the *‘ulamā’* would disappear and so the persecution becomes a defence of the cosmic order of Shia Islam as seen by the Shia *‘ulamā’*. They maintain that his return will come from the hidden place where he has been since his disappearance and that he will come in the flesh. Many have, however, accepted the Bābī and Bahā’ī viewpoints and the Bahā’ī community has grown in size over time, with the result that the persecution has continued.

I have used and explained this idea of defending a cosmic order in my *Bahā’ī Identity and the Concept of Martyrdom*. In my discussion on the persecution of the Bābis and the Bahā’īs in Iran I came to the conclusion that although the persecution was often described as very aggressive, the persecutors saw it as an act of defence, one they had to undertake because it fell within their responsibility. To them, the existence of these two religions was itself an attack on a cosmic order that existed within Shia Islam, where Imam Mahdī was the central figure and the Shia *‘ulamā’* were his representatives and the protectors of this cosmic order.

As far as the Bahā’ī community in ‘Ishqābād, Turkmenistan, is concerned, it was built by Iranian Bahā’īs who had moved to the new city of ‘Ishqābād at the end of the 19th century. Hassan Balyuzi has described the background of this migration as follows: “Persian Bahā’īs, harassed in their native land, were attracted to ‘Ishqābād, as were others of their countrymen.”⁸ Seen from this perspective, the migration becomes results from the defence of the cosmic order of Shia Islam. It can also be seen as a wish to become servants in the Bahā’ī Faith in accordance to the writings of Bahā’u’llāh. Perhaps though, the background can be seen as a combination of these two factors.

The persecutions in Iran made life very problematic for the Iranian Bahā’īs and thus those who moved to the newly founded city of ‘Ishqābād had reason to believe that life would be safer there. This hope was put to a test when a Bahā’ī in ‘Ishqābād was murdered by two assassins from Iran in September 1889. If the murder had taken place in Iran, then there was a good chance that they would have gone unpunished; but as this was in Russia, a reasonably well-functioning judicial system pursued the case. Eventually, the two murderers were condemned to death, but the Bahā’ī community pleaded that they should not be executed. As a result they were sent instead to Siberia together with six others implicated in the plot.⁹

If this incident is seen as defending a cosmic order, this must be considered a part of the defence undertaken in the name of Shia Islam in Iran, expanded into Turkmenistan. It is not possible to say today if this undertaking was actually meant to test the plausibility of expanding defence to a neighbouring country at the time of its conception; what is clear though, is that it has meanwhile become an efficient test. There seems to be nothing written about any more attempts by

⁸ Hasan M. Balyuzi, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá – The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh*, Oxford 1971, 108.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

the enemies of Bahā'ī to murder Bahā'īs in 'Ishqābād or to arrange any other form of persecution. The situation had changed though, and it changed once again for the Bahā'īs in 'Ishqābād when 'Abdu'l-Bahā asked Hājī Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī, a Bahā'ī in 'Ishqābād, to build the first Bahā'ī temple in the world.¹⁰ The foundation stone was laid in December 1902 and the dome was completed in 1907.¹¹ Close to this temple schools for boys and girls were built respectively, in accordance with the basic plan for how a Bahā'ī temple should function.¹² Once completed, the whole temple complex soon developed into a centre for the activities of the Bahā'ī community in 'Ishqābād.

With the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917 not very much changed for the Bahā'ī community in general, although it probably brought about major changes to the lives of individual Bahā'īs. Activities continued as before and the temple remained their hub, organised and guided by the Local Spiritual Assembly. However, upon Stalin taking over a well-documented systematic persecution against potential threats and possible adversaries was launched, and its targets included the Bahā'īs of 'Ishqābād. The persecution is described in two books, *Years of Silence – Bahā'īs in the USSR 1938-1946* by Asadullāh 'Alizād and *Exiles of the City of Love* by Mahīntāj Izādī. Both books are biographies: the first describes the experiences of the author in Soviet Union, while the latter relates the story of Mrs. Laqā' Shahīdī as told by her daughter. Both were living in 'Ishqābād. The first book features quite a number of pictures of the Bahā'ī temple as well as different groups of members from the Bahā'ī community in 'Ishqābād.

As mentioned, it was not until Stalin took over power that changes impacted the Bahā'ī community in 'Ishqābād. 'Alizād relates a relevant incident. The authorities closed and sealed off the temple, preventing the Bahā'īs from reading the early morning prayers there.¹³ In response they gathered in the gardens around the temple instead to read prayers. The Local Spiritual Assembly asked its chairman to go to Moscow to plead with the government and persuade it to change its decision to close the temple. After many long discussions this proved successful. He was, however, also interrogated and tortured by G.P.U.¹⁴ in 1928 and died as a result of the injuries suffered during torture. The following year the nine members of the Local Spiritual Assembly were arrested and deported to Iran.¹⁵ The problems continued into the next year, but it was not until 6 February, 1938 that a great wave of arrests came. On the first night 80 Bahā'īs were detained, but a greater number of Muslims was also arrested. The common factor was that they were foreigners in the Soviet Union, and foreigners were specifi-

¹⁰ Ibid., 109.

¹¹ Ibid., 110.

¹² Asadu'llāh 'Alizād, *Years of Silence – Bahā'īs in the USSR 1938-1946*, Oxford 1999, 1.

¹³ One of the functions of a Bahā'ī temple is to be a place where the Bahā'īs can gather to read prayers at dawn before they start the work for that day.

¹⁴ The name of the secret police in Soviet Union during the years 1922-1934.

¹⁵ 'Alizād, *Years of Silence*, 2-4.

cally targeted in this operation throughout the Soviet Union.¹⁶ Mentioned in both books, it is looked upon as the major catastrophe.¹⁷

Years of Silence opens with a short history of the Bahā'ī community in 'Ishqābād, which ends with the closure of the Bahā'ī temple by the authorities. When the text comes to describing the wave of arrests, the author switches to his own memories and experiences. The majority of the men and some women were sent to Siberia, while many of the women and a few men were sent to Iran. The author knew many members of the Bahā'ī community in 'Ishqābād and got to know others during his time in Siberia. He describes the background of many of these persons and what happened to them. He also writes about the everyday life in prison and some incidents that happened there. The book ends in 1946 when the author was finally released and could travel to Iran.

Exiles of the City of Love starts with a dedication: "Dedicated to those brilliant souls who suffered imprisonment and exile, and to those who bravely laid down their lives during the years of persecution from 1938 to 1946." The book about Laqā' Shahīdī is introduced in the same way as *Years of Silence*, with the difference that the introduction is shorter. The story starts on the day of the wave of arrests, 6 February 1938, when Laqā's husband, Muḥammad 'Alī Shahīdī is arrested. Laqā herself was then arrested three months later. Now left alone, the children joined relatives and they managed to travel to Iran. The book continues with Laqā's prison time in Siberia, describing life there. The book ends when Laqā is finally set free and is able to travel to Iran, where she is united with her children. Her husband however had passed away during his imprisoned exile in Siberia.

The persecution of the Bahā'īs in 'Ishqābād stemmed from secular motivations under Stalin's rule, but is this the complete motivation? The motivation was that they were foreigners, but my suggestion is that this is not the only reason. The fact that they were believers in a religion was also of importance. Although the wave of arrests carried out on 6 February, 1938, targeted foreigners, they were not the only 'category' affected. Stalin was obviously trying to put into place a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and there was no room for competing ideologies, neither religious nor secular.

It is possible to see it as an irony of fate that the Bahā'īs of 'Ishqābād had to confront the "defence of the cosmic order" from two directions: first from the Shia '*ulamā*' in Iran and a few decades later from the Soviet state under Josef Stalin. During the persecution in the Soviet Union some Bahā'ī were taken to prison camps, while others managed to escape to Iran where the power of the '*ulamā*' had been limited under Reza Shah. As for the remainder of the Bahā'ī community in the Soviet Union, they mostly kept the Bahā'ī Faith as their private religion within the family, only practicing in secret so as to avoid punishment. Thus,

¹⁶ Ibid., 52-53.

¹⁷ Mahíntáj Ízadí, *Exiles of the City of Love*, New Delhi 2006, 5.

generational differences in the practice of religion arose and the Bahā'ī Faith developed into a "grandmother's religion". The first generation practiced it very cautiously, the second generation ignored it and the third generation, which experienced the fall of the Soviet Union, had the possibility to really look into what grandmother actually believed in. I have had the opportunity to meet and interview a handful of these persons. Their accounts have shaped the description given here of the development of the Bahā'ī Faith in the former Soviet Union, especially around 'Ishqābād. The expansion of the Bahā'ī community in what was once the Soviet Union has given the community a boost in the Central Asian Republics. And it is this boost that afforded me the opportunity to meet and interview them.

These interviews were not designed as part of a comprehensive research project. They are the result of meetings with Bahā'īs during my travels in India and the United Arab Emirates, whom I spontaneously interviewed 'on the spot'. Although the pattern of events they describe is largely uniform and coherent, I would like to suggest that a suitable research project be planned and carried out – there is undoubtedly a lot more interesting and important information to be found in Russia and the Central Asian Republics.

The examples of religious persecution discussed in this article covered the Bahā'īs in Iran and the Soviet Union. This persecution is divided into two parts. The first part took place in Iran and was purely religious. This is evident in the fact that persecution was ceased if a Bahā'ī gave in and converted to Islam. The persecution in the Soviet Union however was completely secular in its motivation. What these two parts have in common is that they are motivated by a defence of a cosmic order, whether religious or secular.

