

Postings on Church and State in Babism

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Subject: Politics in Babi thought (short paper)  
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This is a section from the projected second edition of my *\_Church and State\_*, which is at present an expanded text but is intended eventually to be substantially shorter, God willing. I have moved some of the longer footnotes into the text, and others into endnotes. The references to sources, by short title, will I hope be familiar to Tarikh subscribers.

Babism is not my field, and I do not pretend that this is adequate, even as a survey of what we know about political ideas in Babism. In *\_Church and State\_*, this section serves as a background to the following discussion of Baha'u'llah's *Kitab-e Iqan*, where my real topic begins. With sufficient additions and corrections from the tarikh members, it might become a worthwhile survey

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#### Politics in Babi thought

The Bab's mission, and the Bahai calendar, begin during Muhammad Shah's reign (in 1844). Muhammad Shah's reputation for heterodoxy, and his distance from the Shiah hierarchy, are part of the background of the Bab's story: they explain for instance the attempts to arrange a meeting between the Bab and the Shah, and the willingness of some government officials to shelter him against the wishes of the ulama. However we will only mention the Babi movement briefly here, since anything I had to say would suffer from comparison with the best monograph to date in the field of Babi and Bahai studies, Abbas Amanat's *\_Resurrection and Renewal\_*, which provides a detailed history of the movement.

The Babi religion had its roots in the Shaykhi school and shares many doctrines with it, but the difference between living in expectation of the imminent return of the Mahdi, and believing that he has actually come, is fundamental. The realized eschatology of the Babi religion places it in a similar position in some respects to the extremist (ghuluw) sects of Iranian history, such as the Qizilbash, who helped the first Safavid monarch to his throne: a God-king who was expected

to put the world to rights, and did succeed in turning it upside down. But the realized eschatology should not obscure the fact that the Babi religion did not share key ghuluw features such as the belief in reincarnation, exalting the Imams above Muhammad, and antinomianism. Nor does the Babi religion seem to have been world-denying.

Fischer and Abedi characterize Babism as "a qualified egalitarian, politicized, and even revolutionary, millennialism." (*\_Debating Muslims\_* 229) In calling it 'politicized and revolutionary' they intend to link it to activist millennialist groups that seek to prepare for and promote the millennium by 'awaking' the population, in contrast to quietist groups who believe that the time is fore-ordained and the true believers need only endure passively until it comes. The 'politicized' label, as Fischer and Abedi use it, is not intended to support the charge that Babism was a political movement, and it does not in itself tell us anything about the question of church and state in Babi belief. They say that "The return of the Mahdi implied the institution of a just society, and thus Babis brought property rights, the taxation system, and the political hierarchy into question," (*\_Debating Muslims\_* 230) but there is a great difference between questioning the ethics of the state (seeking to moralize it) and denying its right to exist.

Among those who have interpreted Babism as a political movement we should mention Peter Smith, who says that the Bab "asserted the Shi'i principle that only the Imam or his representative might exercise legitimate authority," (*\_The Babi and Baha'i Religions\_* 20) but since he fails to provide a reference for this, and makes a false generalisation about Shi'ism, it is hard to know what weight to give to it. He states that "The Bab's claim to Mahdihood was an explicit challenge to the entire existing religious, social and political order. His followers' attempt to establish a theocracy was inevitably a political as well as a religious endeavour," but does not say whether this 'explicit challenge' was explicit in the Bab's own teachings or was a function of the way his followers, and the state and the ulama, understood the implications of the title of Mahdi.

Smith and Momen, in 'The Babi movement,' say that "The Babis were explicitly political in their demands. The Bab's claim to Mahdihood challenged the legitimacy of the existing institutions. Their attempt to establish a theocracy entailed the displacement or cooption of the existing regime." (Page 80: see further endnote 1) Similarly MacEoin refers to the "essentially theocratic hopes of Babism" ('From Babism to Baha'ism' 220) and Browne says that the Babis looked "for an immediate triumph over all existing powers, culminating in the universal establishment of the True Faith and Reign of God's Saints on Earth." (Endnote 2) It is notable that all these authors attribute the theocratic aims to the Babis rather than to the Bab himself. But Mangol Bayat says that the Bab himself "incited his followers to

conquest" and quotes him admonishing Muhammad Shah to "lay aside ... your dominion which belongeth unto God" and "subdue, \*\*with the truth\*\* ... the countries." (\_Mysticism and Dissent\_ 106-7, emphasis added, citing SWB 41-3) The point that Bayat seems to have missed is that it is the truth not the sword that is to be used. (Endnote 3)

Shoghi Effendi on the other hand says that the Babis involved in the Mazindaran and Nayriz upheavals categorically repudiated "any intention of interfering with the civil jurisdiction of the realm, or of undermining the legitimate authority of its sovereign," and that the Bab and his leading disciples had no political intent, for "the sovereignty of the Promised Qa'im was purely a spiritual one, and not a material or political one." (Endnote 4) He supports this with reference to what Baha'u'llah, who was a contemporary and partial eyewitness, writes in his Kitab-e Iqan, and by pointing to the willingness of leading disciples to lay down their arms and return to their homes. Abdu'l-Baha similarly paints a picture of the Shiah ulama demanding the literal fulfilment of the traditions concerning the sovereignty of the Qa'im (and other matters) while the Babi apologists wrote defences in which they "interpreted the sovereignty of the Qa'im as a mystical sovereignty, and His conquests as conquests of the cities of hearts." (\_Traveller's Narrative\_ 17.)

Abbas Amanat comes to a similar conclusion:

The Babi theory ... recognized, at least in principle, the de jure legitimacy of the temporal rulers as the protectors of the true religion. The Bab envisaged himself as a prophet, not a ruler; his misgivings about the state were directed at the conduct of the government rather than its legitimacy. The religious discipline of the Bayan, however, was considered comprehensive. The rulers of the Bayan era were to comply with the teachings of the new religion and after that with the teachings of future manifestations. Most Babis shared the observance of this duality of religious and political spheres. (\_Resurrection and Renewal\_ 407.)

Zabihi-Moghaddam points out that there is little contemporary evidence that the Bab was seen as a threat by the state, or that his teachings were perceived to imply anything but coexistence between the religious community and the state. ('The Babi-State Conflict at Shaykh Tabarsi' 92, 108-9). Similarly, in 'The Babi-state conflict in Mazandaran' he says that "the Bab did not make any claims to the throne" (184) and "rejects the idea that the faraj (deliverance) of the Mahdi implies sovereignty, an army, and a kingdom." Zabihi-Moghaddam suggests that by the time of the Mazandaran episode, the generality of the Babis no longer expected the Mahdi to establish temporal rule through the sword (188) and shows that Mulla Husayn did not understand the goal of the Babis in terms of temporal power, at

least at this stage (206). Yet Zabihi-Moghaddam also cites contemporary observers who saw the Babis as revolutionaries, not really concerned with religion. Perhaps it depended on which Babis one met.

### The Writings of the Bab

When we turn to what the Bab himself wrote, with due caution about the limited range of the Bab's works that are available, the evidence seems to support the views of Shoghi Effendi, Abdu'l-Baha, Amanat and Zabihi-Moghaddam. The great majority of the Bab's works are devotional or scriptural commentaries which would not be expected to contain a political theory. Of the early works, the first two chapters of the *Qayyumu'l-Asma* (1844) (endnote 5) do refer to the two sources of authority, the state and the ulama. The opening of the *Qayyumu'l-Asma*, dealing with these two groups, is interesting in relation to Kashfi's *Tuhfat al-Muluk* (page 50 in my *Church and State*, first edition), especially since the Bab read and praised another work by Kashfi. (Fazil Mazandarani, *Zuhuru'l-Haqq*, Vol. 3, 479.) The authority of the king is maintained, "for in this world you have been mercifully invested with sovereignty." In the passage that Bayat quotes, kings are rhetorically asked to lay aside their dominion, but they are also to use their position to aid the cause of God, and are promised 'a vast dominion' in the hereafter. (SWB 41-3.) The subjugation of India and Turkey, which Bayat refers to, is to be achieved not by conquest but by promulgating the writings of the Bab.

Among the later works, the Arabic *Bayan* (1847) contains a prayer and other actions to be performed by kings until the day of the manifestation of him whom God will make manifest, (*Le Bayan Arabe* 137-8 (Vahid IV); 148-9, 155-6 (Vahid V); 173, 175 (Vahid VII), 197-8 (Vahid IX), and 239 (Vahid XI)) and specifies contributions to be made by kings and officials such as viziers and governors, according to their rank. (213 (Vahid X, Bab 16)) Such verses require the continuance of the state order, which is remarkable if one considers the interpretation of Muhammad at Medina that one would expect the Bab to have taken as a model. By calling such officers 'masters of order' and giving them duties relating to the good order of the market, the Bab seems to also endorse the existence of civil powers as good and necessary in itself. (215-6 (Vahid X, Bab 17)) The righteous king has the right to collect a religious tax analogous to Baha'u'llah's *huququ'llah*. (157 (Vahid V, Bab 19)) This looks like the classical Sunni polity in which the state provides part of the institutional structure of religion. Babi kings are called on to select twenty-five members learned men (ulama) who will manage all affairs. (220 (Vahid XI, Bab 2)) In the light of other statements in the *Bayan* concerning ulama, in the sense of leaders of religion, it seems possible that the ulama in this case are 'learned men' rather than divines; that is, that kings are called on to devolve day-to-day government to a chosen

cabinet. Babis, according to the Bayan, are to be broadly educated in physical and political geography, religious history and economics. (232 (Vahid XI, Bab15)) The twenty-five learned men are to be chosen, not from the mujtahids or ulama class, but from all the inhabitants of the kingdom. They should learn the commandments of God, but religious learning is not a condition for appointment. (Parenthetically, this looks rather like the council of the learned advocated by Abdu'l-Baha in *\_The Secret of Divine Civilization\_*, who are also to be broadly educated in these fields, but in *\_The Secret of Divine Civilization\_* this council apparently functions alongside an elected legislature, as an upper house.)

The Persian Bayan, also from 1847, contains similar references to the rights and duties of kings, (Vol. 3 pages 53, 55-6 (V:19); Vol. 4 pages 20 (VII:9) and 145-6 (IX:3)) and some references that may point to a distinction between public and private spheres. On the one hand there are duties such as confiscating the goods of non-believers which fall on the rulers and explicitly not on ordinary people. (Vol. 3, pages 12-13 (V:5)) Other duties are explicitly laid on Babi kings and on all people. (Vol. 4 page 44 (VII, 16)): the 'duty' in this case is not to allow anyone to remain on earth who does not believe in this (Babi) faith. If ordinary believers are not permitted to seize the possessions of non-believers it seems unlikely that they are required to kill them. Presumably the duty is to be carried out by converting the non-believers with reason and without raising the voice, as prescribed elsewhere in the two Bayans. Other duties, such as the ban on pronouncing judgement on any soul, (SWB 144, *Kitab-e Asma'* XVII:4) are admirable as rules of conduct in the private sphere, but would be impracticable in the public sphere.

In a letter to Muhammad Shah, written in 1847 or 1848, the Shah is called on to act towards the Bab's cause in a way that befits "the station of thy sovereignty." This resembles a topos we find again in the writings of Baha'u'llah to the kings and rulers: their high station is affirmed, in order to call them to equally noble conduct. His earlier messages to the Shah, he says, were not delivered to the king personally, "however, now that the fateful hour is drawing nigh, and because it is a matter of faith, not a worldly concern, therefore I have given thee a glimpse of what hath transpired." "I seek no earthly goods from thee, be it as much as a mustard seed. Indeed to possess anything of this world or of the next would, in My estimation, be tantamount to open blasphemy." (SWB 13-14) In a similar letter a few months later the Bab says "I have no desire to seize thy property ... nor do I wish to occupy thy position." (SWB 26)

In the Persian Seven Proofs (1848) the Bab writes that the Muslims have been looking forward to the 'dispelling of grief' for the thousand years of the occultation of the hidden Imam, but did not recognise this solace when it appeared (in his own person). "Do you

think it lies in sovereignty, in military power, or a kingdom? But from the time of the Prophet until the present, God alone knows how many powerful kings there have been in Islam, and they (too) waited ardently for this dispelling of grief." (Le Livre des Sept Preuves 32; Zabihi-Moghaddam 'The Babi-State Conflict' 95)

The Bab also addresses the "assembly of the rulers of the earth and descendants of rulers," which would appear to foreshadow the assembly of kings and rulers foreseen by Baha'u'llah, (see note 6) and to recognize the legitimacy of their rule. Since the Bab considered himself in some senses to be the Mahdi and the promised Qa'im, it may be that he himself had gone beyond Kashfi's conditional theological legitimation of the state pending the coming of the Qa'im to full recognition of state and religious orders as equally established by God. Although the rulers are threatened with punishment if they do not support the revelation of the Bab, this punishment is to take place in the next world and not in this. The Bab as Qa'im has the right to denounce impious rulers, but not apparently to depose them, which implies a recognition of their independent legitimacy.

#### The Babi community

This evidence from the Bab's writings would seem to support Amanat's conclusion that the Bab recognized the legitimacy of the state *de jure*. However not all Babis understood his teachings in those terms. Many of the early Babis, particularly those drawn from the ulama rather than the bazaar, understood their new faith in terms of the overthrow of both church and state orders. Browne cites an example of a Babi leader writing to the Governor of Mazandaran, "We are the rightful rulers, and the world is set under our signet-ring." (From the *Nuqtatu'l-Kaf*, cited by Browne in his notes to *The New History* 362) Fischer and Abedi cite two Babis who assert, to the governor of Shiraz, that all property and the right to make all political appointments belong to the Bab. (*Debating Muslims* 230.) The Babis who assembled in Karbila in 1844-5 brought weapons with them in expectation of an eschatological battle against the anti-christ. (Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions* 45; MacEoin, 'Holy War' 111-112.) During the two years in which the Bab was imprisoned in Mah-ku and Chihriq we know that at least one of the Babis manufactured and distributed swords and arranged military training (*Amanat, Resurrection and Renewal*, 350. MacEoin also refers to an instruction to purchase arms in the *Qayyumu'l-Asma* (see 'Holy War' 104). The success of the Babis in defending themselves in Zanzan and Nayriz is evidence that there must have been a degree of military preparedness among the activist strand of the Babi community even before they were attacked. In the Nayriz uprising, Vahid appointed officers including a gaoler, executioner and military leaders, which might be an emergency measure but does suggest that the state has been replaced by the religious polity. When in 1848 the Bab called for them to "proceed

towards the land of Kha" [Khurasan], many assumed that they were to take part in the cataclysmic battle prophesied to occur when the Mahdi returned. Mulla Husayn was apparently delegated authority to lead whatever action was intended. Perhaps that was the Bab's intention, yet at about the same time he sent letters to the Shah and his chief minister in which he denies having any interest in the mundane possession of worldly trifles, while threatening the Shah with divine punishment. At this time at least, he stands over against the state in prophetic denunciation, while recognizing the separation of the religious and political spheres. (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 383) This is in marked contrast to the prevailing Islamic, and particularly Shiah, concept of the universality of the Imam's authority.

The particular question of Babi militarism (as distinct from millenarianism), and its relation to the Shiah expectation of an apocalyptic war between the followers of the Imam and all who oppose them, has been explored in some depth by MacEoin in 'The Babi concept of Holy War.' While not strictly relevant, this question is parallel to the question of church and state, in as much as the Shiah theory was initially that only the Imam had the authority to declare a holy war, but the mujtahids came to exercise this authority in the course of the Qajar period. From the references provided by MacEoin, it would appear that the Bab claimed the authority to prescribe rules of conduct for armies engaged in holy war, but expected the Shah to proceed to Karbila and lead the fight. The Shah failed to satisfy these hopes, yet there is no indication that the Bab conceived of any other institution displacing the Shah and thus the state in waging war. Instead, this hope was postponed, to rest upon some future sovereign who would support the cause. Zabihi-Moghaddam too notes that the model of holy war in the Bayan centres on the person of a Babi king, and it seems odd that MacEoin, who studied these texts, did not realise that they are not compatible with a theocratic state. So far as it goes, the evidence regarding the Babi doctrine of holy war supports the view that the Bab recognized the legitimacy of the state from first to last.

Fischer and Abedi's conclusion that "The Babi movement was a mixture of progressive ideas and initiatives and reactionary theocratic ones" ( *Debating Muslims* 230-31.) may well be true of the movement, but the mixture consists of the variety of ways in which the Bab's message was heard, rather than contradictory motifs in the message itself. This variety is partly to be attributed to social differences. Amanat points out that Babism in effect had two wings: the moderate wing consisting of the Bab himself and followers from the bazaar (merchant) and cultured classes (which would include Baha'u'llah, although Amanat does not say so) and the radical wing including Qudd s, Qurrat al-cAyn, lower ranking ulama (and a few mujtahids), artisans and peasants. Smith's account (chapter 3) also shows that the Babi message

appealed to distinct social groups who understood it in distinct ways (see endnote 7). The 'progressive ideas and initiatives' might well correspond largely to converts from the merchant class, the 'reactionary theocratic' ideas to the many members of the lower clergy and heterodox schools who expected Babism to deliver the end of the world rather than its modernization. The radical wing prevailed, and its millenarian militancy in armed uprisings in 1848 and 1849 justified the state repression that cost the Bab his life, drove the movement underground, and broke its organisation and unity.

The martyrdom of the Bab, and repression by the state, tended to polarise the Babi community into activist resistance, exemplified by the Zanzan and Nayriz uprisings, and quietism, with the former perhaps dominating within Iran. As Arjomand has noted:

the initial difficulties encountered by the Babis, and especially the failure of their armed uprisings, generated intense messianism. This messianism was reflected in, and in turn encouraged by, the Bab's foretelling of a new cycle of resurrection ... ( Shadow of God 254)

Baha'u'llah's half-brother, Subh-e Azal, was among those who advocated the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a theocratic state, thus beginning a tradition of revolutionary activism that continued among the Azalis until the Iranian constitutional revolution. There seems no doubt that the community as a whole was characterised by intense messianism and disdain for the Qajar dynasty. ( Zabihi-Moghaddam, 'The Babi-State conflict' 108-111) They may well have been expecting the task of creating a Mahdist state to be taken up by 'He whom God will make manifest.' Perhaps because of the emphasis placed by the Bab on this figure, the Shiah messianic hopes that he had not himself fulfilled were not reinterpreted by the Babi community, but rather transferred. This is the community in which Baha'u'llah was operating in the Baghdad period, and addressing in early works such as the Kitab-e Iqan. These therefore are the views that Baha'u'llah had to displace.

#### Endnotes

1. Smith and Momen also claim that the Babis "wanted to establish a theocracy, initially in Iran and ultimately in the whole world" and that they intended "to establish the theocratic kingdom of the Mahdi" (45, 49). In a 2005 publication, Momen has stated that the Bab did not "at any [time] call for a holy war or the overthrow of the political order." ('Millenialist Dreams' 103).

2. *The New History*\_ xvi. An almost identical summary is given in his *Materials*\_ xv. The terminology in both cases is Christian rather than Islamic, and is repeated by Maceoin in 'Baha'i fundamentalism' 70,



suggesting the Browne's view has been influential here.

3. Zabihi-Moghaddam makes the same mistake in 'The Babi-state conflict in Mazandaran' 182

4. For Mazindaran see *God Passes By* 39-40, for Nayriz, *ibid* 43; *Unfolding Destiny* 426.

5. I have made grateful use of a provisional translation, posted on the Talisman email discussion group by Stephen Lambden, of the first Surah of this work, the Surat al-Mulk. MacEoin, ('Holy War' 101) suggests that the writing of the *Qayyumu'l-Asma* was continued and completed in 1845, which seems likely.

6. The situation is somewhat confused because he goes on to speak of this recognition as accorded to the Shah of Iran, who is to use his soul and sword to "subdue the countries" and "purge the Sacred Land from such as have repudiated the Book." The 'Sacred Land' may refer to a Babi kingdom, or to Tehran as Shoghi Effendi glosses it in *The Promised Day is Come* 42, but it might also be used in a conventional sense as the region around Kufa and Karbila in Iraq, containing shrines especially sacred to the Shiah. If so, the Shah was being called on to support a Shiah revolt against the Ottomans, who had bloodily put down such a rebellion in 1842. A similar command in the Bab's *Qayyumu'l-Asma* to purify the 'holy land,' is glossed by MacEoin as referring to Karbila ('Holy War' 104)

7. The importance of social background as an explanatory factor in the diversity of Babi attitudes to the state is supported by Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 407, and Smith and Momen, 'The Babi Movement' 82. Quddus is said to have denied any temporal ambitions, but the report is not reliable (Zabihi-Moghaddam, 'Babi-State conflict in Mazandaran' 208)