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**BAHAISM
IN AZERBAIJAN****A b s t r a c t**

The author traces the history of Bahaism in Northern Azerbaijan, the religious movement born in 1844 in Iran that assumed its final shape in 1863 under the influence of its founding father Mirza

Husayn Ali Nuri (1817-1892), known as Baha Ullah, and analyzes the present and future of Bahaism in the context of the relations between the state and society in Azerbaijan.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Due to its geopolitical specifics, Azerbaijan (tucked in between Europe and Asia) has been always open to all sorts of cultural, spiritual, religious, public, and political influences and their synthesis. This enriched the Azeris' religious and cultural identification and made it possible to preserve it throughout the centuries.

In the late 1980s, after the prolonged stagnation of the Soviet period, Azerbaijan attracted numerous confessional groups, trends, and sects of all sorts, which entered into fierce competition for new followers. Some of the newcomers left deep marks in the history of Azerbaijan's religious life.

Bahaism, the religious doctrine that appeared in the mid-19th century in Iran and assumed its final shape in 1863, is one such confession, the followers of which are actively seeking the status of a world religion. Indeed it comes second after Christianity in terms of geographic distribution, Islam and Buddhism, two traditional world religions, trailing behind. According to different sources, there are about 6 million Bahais across the world. The Bahai community is a well-organized hierarchical

structure with branches functioning in over 200 countries; the *Encyclopedia Britannica* cites the figure of 5,742,000 Bahais.¹

How Bahaism Came to and Developed in Azerbaijan

Bahaism in Northern Azerbaijan has evolved through several stages and ascended several levels. At the first stage, which ended together with the 19th century, it lived through several very different levels. It was brought to Azerbaijan and taught by families of Iranian subjects who fled the country to avoid persecution. Due to its geographic location, Southern Azerbaijan had been open to Bahai influence earlier. In Northern Azerbaijan, however, where Islam had been the dominant religion for many centuries, the new religion was not readily embraced. Until the late 19th century, Bahaism in Northern Azerbaijan remained limited to the groups of those who had brought it into the country. The Iranian refugees were gradually assimilated: the natural process promoted by many factors (ethnic, linguistic, and partly mental closeness in particular) helped Bahaism spread far and wide. The Bahai organizational mechanisms encouraged the proselytizing activities of the Bahai adepts.

Bahaism came to Northern Azerbaijan in 1860 when Baha Ullah was still alive; the echoes of the Iranian developments that accompanied the emergence of Babism (the precursor of Bahaism) reached Nakhchyvan even earlier, in 1844. In Ordubad, where the competing madhabs and Tariqahs remained locked in struggle, people embraced Babism in great numbers. They sided with Molla Sadyh Vanandli and Aga Mirkerimli of the village of Vanand. The supporters of the traditional Shi'a clergy represented by the Usuli School tried to gain control, similar to that of the secular authorities, over the local people. The theologians, however, remained disunited. Mujtahid Aga Ali, for example, a pupil of famous Sheikh Ahmad Ahsai (1753-1826), the founder of the Shi'a sect of Sheikhits, was against the Usuli School. For obvious reasons he preferred Sheikhism. The warring sides looked at the several thousand people who closed ranks under the banner of Babism as a nuisance or even a real threat. To keep the Babis in check Mujtahid Aga Ali sided with General Bekhbudov and his 5,000-strong army dispatched from Russia. Shikhalibek naib, the khan of Nakhchyvan (who was also a sheikhi), spent a lot of money to secure a victory for the sheikhi.² The Babis were defeated and dispersed; the riot was cruelly quenched to scare the local people. The ground for a new teaching (Babism transformed into Bahaism), however, had been tilled. Several years later, in the same region (or rather its border areas) there were Bahai villages. Such was the Evoglu village between Julfa and Hoi, on both banks of the Gotur.³ Well-known Azeri writer M. Ordubadi left descriptions of patriarchal rules in many of the Bahai families even though the Bahai ethics insisted on equal rights and freedoms for women. The Bahais believed that it was their faith's great advantage over Islam.

The fact that the events coincided with the Iranian developments is easily explained, first, by the territorial proximity of the two countries divided by a common border and the steady inflow of Babis forced to emigrate to avoid persecutions. Second, at that time the people of Northern and Southern Azerbaijan shared Imamate Shi'a as the dominant spiritual and religious idea dating back to the 16th century (the very beginning of the Safavid dynasty).

The polemics between Sheikh ul-Islam of the Transcaucasus Akhund abd-us-Salam Akhundzade and the Bahais supplies a lot of interesting information about the relations between the two religions at Bahaism's early stages.

¹ See: "Year in Review 1993: Religion," in: *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, available at [<http://members.eb.com/bol/topic?eu=125258&sctn=1>], 10 March, 2000.

² See: M.S. Ordubadi, *My Life and My Circle*, Azerneshr Publishers, Baku, 1996, p. 7 (in Azeri).

³ See: *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Sheikh ul-Islam criticized the book by Baha Ullah *Kitabi Igan* in the press. Published in pamphlet form, his remarks were sent to Akka in Palestine, home of the Bahai leaders. One of them, pastry-cook Aga Riza Shirazi, wrote a book of counterarguments, to which Akhund abd-us-Salam Akhundzade responded with a book of his own entitled *My Defenses against Enemy Objections about the Babism Faith*,⁴ which appeared in Tiflis in 1896. (At that time, the Bahais were still known as Babis). In Farsi, the language of the original, the book was called *Mutalie-i Kitab-i Igan dar radde miatalibi an* (Reading *Kitabi Igan* to Refute its Propositions).⁵

S. Umanets pointed out that while criticizing *Kitabi Igan* in pamphlet form, Sheikh ul-Islam remained within certain limits, his later book left no stone unturned to reveal the new religion's inconsistency from the point of view of Muslim theology. His arguments were refuted point by point by well-known Bahai ideologist and head of the Ashghabad Bahai community Mirza Abu'l-Fazl Golpaegani in his *Faraid*, a work that also discussed the main principles of the new religion. Later, in 1903, it appeared in book form in Cairo.⁶

Starting in 1863, Bahai communities openly and actively functioned in Baku, Ganja, Bard, Salyan, Geychay, Sheki, and Nakhchyvan. Baku and Balakhany were the two largest Bahai centers: by the 1880s, they had already attracted several hundred followers. There is a document confirming purchase of house No. 216 in Chadrovaia (now Mirzaaga Aliev) Street dated to 1887 in the archives of the Baku Bahai community. In Balakhany, there is still an old Bahai cemetery with old tombstones still bearing Kurrat-ul Ain verses and other sacred Bahai texts.

On the whole, the early history of Bahaism in Northern Azerbaijan was free from complications; the local authorities and the clergy did not try to check its progress. Clashes and other petty incidences were of a limited nature. The murder of Molla Sadykh in 1901, son of prominent Islamic theologian Akhund Ibrahimkhalil who, enraged by his son's conversion to Bahaism, issued a fatwa on the murder of his son, was described in literature as an exception rather than the rule.

This is explained by the Russian authorities' benevolence toward the Bahais mainly living in Russian Turkestan. This was the natural choice on their part: in Ashghabad the local people were Sunni Muslims; in Shi'a Azerbaijan, on the other hand, geographically a more logical choice, their presence could have created tension with unpredictable results. At that time, Northern Azerbaijan was part of the Russian Empire, which explains the relative loyalty of the local authorities and the clergy to the Bahais.

Historical writings mention another fact that testifies, albeit indirectly, to the status of Bahaism in Baku early in the 20th century. In 1909 and 1910, Leo Tolstoy corresponded with engineer Mirza Alekper Mamedkhanov, a Bahai. It was through him that the great Russian writer received Bahai publications and communicated with Abd-ul-Bakh; Azeri writings speak of him as Mirza Ali Akper of Nakhchyvan; his son Aliullah Nakhchyvan, born in 1919, served for 40 years, from its very first day in 1963, as a member of the Universal House of Justice, the Bahais' highest administrative structure.

Bahaism in Public and Spiritual Life of Azeri Society at the Beginning of the 20th Century

At the turn of the century, when the oil industry of Azerbaijan began earning big money, Bahaism, a faith well adjusted to bourgeois society, turned to the newly rich in Baku and drew many of

⁴ See: S.I. Umanets, *Sovremennyy Babism*, Tiflis, 1904, p. 31.

⁵ See: G. Mamedli, "Shekh ul-Islam Akhundzade," *Azerbaijan*, 2 November, 1990, p. 4 (in Azeri).

⁶ See: S.I. Umanets, op. cit., p. 31.

them to its side. For several years, Musa Nagiev (1849-1919), a rich oil industrialist and patron of arts, was a member of the Spiritual Meeting of Baku. His personal authority raised the Bahai community prestige as well.⁷

This was a time when the idea of social changes by destroying obsolete dogmas looked very attractive, especially in the context of the acute crisis of the traditional religious ideas. For this reason many progressive-minded people found Bahaism attractive. Azerbaijan was no exception in this respect.

Bahai sources allege many outstanding cultural figures of Azerbaijan to be Bahais. They even name Mirza Abdulgadir Ismailzade, father of poet Mikail Mushfig, as one of the early propagandists (since 1860) of Bahaism in the village of Khyzy and in Baku; teacher of poet Aliaga Vakhid was also a Bahai. Some people insist that Mirza Alekper Sabir (1862-1911), the great poet of Azerbaijan, was also a Bahai; at least he was in close contact with the Bahai community of Balakhany and took part in religious disputes. Another well-known poet Seyyd Azim Shirvani (1835-1888), poet and playwright Huseyn Javid (1884-1941), founder of professional musical art in Azerbaijan Academician Uzeir Gadjibekov (1885-1948), and others were also Bahais.

This information cannot be accepted at face value—neither can it be disproved. The religious and spiritual atmosphere of Azerbaijan at the turn of the 20th century suggests that the educated and creative part of the Azeri society could not reconcile itself to ignorant mullahs and the obscurantism of a Muslim society torn apart by inner contradictions. The poetry of Mirza Alekper Sabir, well known for his satirical writings, reflects the attitude to enlightenment and to everything progressive. Not without irony, he described a talk between two philistines who looked at those striving for knowledge, be it in the form of a university course or reading of the *Mollah Nasreddin* magazine, as apostasy readily identified with Babism.⁸

The Azeri literature of the early 20th century amply covered the relations between Bahaism and Azeri society of the time seen from all angles, a phenomenon that deserves special investigation.

Careful investigation of the prose and poetry of this period disproves what the contemporary Azeri Bahais say. Indeed, the poem “Shamakhy babiliari khaggynda” (On Shemakha Babis) by one of the best Azeri poets Seyyd Azim Shirvani could hardly have been written by a Bahai. The poem reads like a biting satire of Bahaism as a force hostile to Islam that disorients the already morally disoriented common people. The poet spared no words to criticize the very conception of the prophetic cycles and some other elements of the religious and philosophical platform of Babism-Bahaism. To sound more convincing, the poet deliberately distorted some of them and condemned all Bahais.⁹

At that time, Bahaism stood little chance of becoming a popular movement: in the early 20th century, the Azeri enlighteners were brought together by the idea of cultural resurrection of the Islamic world (which was in deep crisis at that time). Later their ideas assumed political overtones and became the national-liberation ideas realized in 1918-1920 in the form of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR). Those who started the movement needed an attractive mobilizing ideology rooted in Islamic traditions; at the early stages the progressive-minded people could have been attracted by Bahaism's Islamic roots, which could have served as the reformist basis. Closer scrutiny, however, revealed principles (cosmopolitanism, public alienation from Islam, and obvious orientation toward the colonial world) absolutely alien to the national intelligentsia and its aims.

Later, thanks to the sympathies of part of the progressive-minded intelligentsia, Bahaism in Azerbaijan assumed certain traits of religious modernism.

The press of that time accused writer and playwright Huseyn Javid of attempting to carry out religious modernization. The memoirs of his relatives confirm that he had shared certain Bahai ideas: at critical moments he used to say “Allahu Abha!” to warn that an outsider was present. The marginalia on his poem “In the Mosque,” which appeared in the *Azer* collection, testify that he was familiar

⁷ See: A. Jafarov, *Bahai Faith in Azerbaijan*, Baku, 2004, p. 21 (in Azeri).

⁸ See: M.A. Sabir, *Hophopname*, Yazychi Publishers, Baku, 1992, pp. 251-216 (in Azeri).

⁹ See: S.A. Shirvani, *Poems*, Azerneshr Publishers, Baku, 1963, pp. 118-120 (in Azeri).

with the Bahai conception of progressive divine revelation. He interpreted the religion in his own way and believed that life itself was the supreme expression of philosophy and religion.¹⁰

Bahaism under Soviet Power

For some time, before the Bolsheviks came to power and afterwards, the Bahai community of Azerbaijan developed under favorable conditions. In 1929-1930, there were 5 merchants, 2 handicraftsmen, 1 civil servant, and 1 broker among the nine members of the Spiritual Meeting of Baku. According to the academic publications, the Baku and Balakhany Bahais actively promoted their own religious publications.¹¹

As the Soviet regime was tightening its grip on society during the Stalin period, the Soviet press described Bahaism as an anti-socialist teaching alien to Soviet ideology. Azerbaijan was no exception in this respect. Azeri periodicals described the Bahais as “wolves in sheep’s clothing, instruments used by capitalists to exploit the working people.”¹²

In the mid-1920s, some of the Bahais were deported along with huge numbers of people of Iranian extraction. From that time on, the community was operating under strict control; meetings were no longer allowed, and their verbatim reports and religious literature were confiscated. Proof of this can be found in the archives of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the Azerbaijanian S.S.R. For example, the file dated 17 July, 1926 contains information “about the charter and lists of the executive structures of the Bahai community in the prayer house in Balakhany, Ramany-Sabunchinskiy District, Baku Uezd.” The document says that the commune had 14 members: 3 peasants, 3 handicraftsmen, 1 hairdresser, while the others were workers.

Mirzaaga Kerimov, drilling foreman born in 1901, was the community’s head. The community lived by its Charter, which outlined its key goals and tasks as: “...gather every day or regularly for collective prayer; manage the property received under contracts from the local Soviet structures; enter into private legal deals; elect clergy to perform religious rites; participate in congresses of various confessional communities; spread the Bahai teaching only among adults,” etc. The commune had the right to collect voluntary donations for everyday needs and banned regular membership dues. It should seek permission from state structures every time the community intended to publish a book or start a periodical or deliver a lecture; the same rule applied to changing and amending the community’s Charter.¹³

Another document that contains “Information about Non-Profit Societies, Unions, and Alliances Registered in the Azerbaijanian S.S.R. (as of 1 September, 1926)” mentions three Bahai communities, with 23 members from the governing bodies: there were 3 workers, 11 peasants, 3 civil servants, and 6 people engaged in other spheres in them.¹⁴ The document entitled “Information about Sects” provides much more exact information about the number of Bahais: 153, in Baku; 58, in Balakhany, and 73, in Ganja.¹⁵

The letter of 29 March, 1927 the Bahais sent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan provides a complete picture about the state of affairs in the Bahai community of Soviet Azerbaijan in the late 1920s. The authors, speaking in the name of “all Caucasian Bahais,” asked the government to annul the decision on deportation of the “preacher of the teaching of Bahaism Mirza Mamed Perzevi,” who had been living in Baku for four years and who was the only Bahai preacher in the

¹⁰ See: R. Huseynov, *Above Our Time*, Ishyg Publishers, Baku, 1988, pp. 210, 344 (in Azeri).

¹¹ See: B. Rizaev, *Who are Bahais*, Azerneshr Publishers, Baku, 1930, pp. 22-23 (in Azeri).

¹² B. Rizaev, op. cit., pp. 24-25; *Revolution and Culture* (No. 2-3), Azerneshr Publishers, Baku, 1930 (in Azeri).

¹³ The Central State Archives of Political Parties and Public Movements of Azerbaijan, rec. gr. 27, inv. 1, f. 287, sheets 1-2.

¹⁴ Ibid., rec. gr. 27, inv. 1, f. 357, sheet 1.

¹⁵ Ibid., rec. gr. 27, inv. 1, f. 342, sheets 183-1-184 (rev.).

Caucasus. He had been instructed "to leave the U.S.S.R. in a week's time." The letter also said: "The Soviet country did not allow us (the Bahais.—*M.L.*) to study the international language Esperanto... The permission the Spiritual Council had received several months earlier to call the annual conference of the Caucasian Bahais was annulled and the conference banned without explanation." The letter was signed by A. Zargarov, the community's chairman, and M. Kiazim-Zade, its secretary.¹⁶

A week later, on 7 April, 1927, the C.C. All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) issued a classified document entitled "On Sectarianism," which outlined special treatment of the religious groups and communities. The document, which envisaged numerous bans and limitations, suggested that those religious communities, "the charters of which speak of their positive attitude toward all state duties, military service in particular,"¹⁷ should be treated loyally. The Bahai community, which refused to interfere into political processes and made universal peace and harmony one of its major principles, did not fit the document's conditions.

This explains why the new circular the Extraordinary Commission of the Council of the People's Commissars of Azerbaijan "On the Need to Force the Sects to Accept Conscription" issued in July 1926 created numerous problems for the Bahais. The document ordered that "the question of obligatory and unquestioned acceptance of armed military service be raised" before all religious communities. The document pointed out that the "departments of Internal Administrations should refrain from pressure and should limit themselves to communal meetings and verbatim reports." Special instructions would follow, said the document. "It is a combat mission not to be postponed."¹⁸

In 1929, when the real estate of all religious organizations was transferred to the state under a special decree, the Baku community had to lease building No. 216 on Chadrovaia Street from the state. In the 1930s, the authorities demanded that the community discontinue its activities. The Bahais had to obey: activities remained suspended until 1934, when collective meetings and conferences were permitted all of a sudden. In April 1934, elections to the Local Spiritual Meetings were held in fourteen cities across the Soviet Union; the Baku, Ganja, Barga, Balakhany, and Salyan communities resumed their activities.¹⁹

In the mid-1930s, the Baku Bahai community had over 200 members; it was headed by Faraj Kasumov, a well-known and highly respected expert in world religions with good command of Arabic and Farsi. In the small hours of 14 October, 1937, the wave of Stalin terror engulfed the Bahais: arrests, deportations, and executions became common features of their everyday life. Faraj Kasumov, nephew of the already arrested in Leningrad Iusif Kasumov, who had filled an important post in the C.C. Communist Party of Azerbaijan, was arrested and executed not because he belonged to the family of an "enemy of the people." He died together with other Bahais accused of "undermining and anti-state activities."²⁰

The accusations of fascist propaganda were absurd: the Bahais preached pacifism, universal harmony, and peace. The document dated 12 May, 1938 mentions: "The File on the Bahai Spying Organization" (allegedly headed by engineer Bagban Zade Javad) opened during the deportation of Iranian subjects out of the Soviet Union. He was accused of spying in favor of Iran, fascist propaganda, and contacts with the Bahai organizations in Great Britain, Germany, Palestine, and Iran. Seven people were arrested.²¹

The arrests in Baku, Balakhany, Bard, Ganja, Salyan, Khyly (today Neftchala), and Nakhchivan crippled some of the communities forever. Repressions did not stop until 1949.

¹⁶ The State Archives of Azerbaijan (formerly the State Archives of the October Revolution), rec. gr. 1, inv. 74, f. 216, sheet 41.

¹⁷ Ibid., rec. gr. 1, inv. 74, f. 224, sheet 62.

¹⁸ The Central State Archives of Political Parties and Public Movements of Azerbaijan, rec. gr. 27, inv. 1, f. 343, sheet 92.

¹⁹ See: A. Jafarov, op. cit., p. 24.

²⁰ *The Wave*, 3-9 June, 1992, p. 3 (in Azeri).

²¹ The State Archives of Azerbaijan, rec. gr. 1, inv. 88, f. 400, sheet 3.

After 1956 all the repressed Bahais were rehabilitated and the political tension slackened, but until the late 1980s the movement remained fairly passive in Azerbaijan for several reasons: first, Bahais had been exterminated en masse; second, those who survived lived under strict state control. In the 1950s, the Local Spiritual Meetings had to cut down the number of its members from 9 to 5 or 6. It was not until the mid-1960s that the Bahais were given a chance to contact, at least sporadically, Bahais abroad. Religious holidays concealed as jubilees and birthday parties were held on weekdays.²²

This went on until the late 1980s when, encouraged by the democratic changes, the Bahais resumed their activities. At the end of 1990, they elected the Baku Spiritual Meeting; the Ganja, Balakhany and later Sumgayit, Nakhchyvan, and Salyan communities returned to the scene. In 1992 they elected the National Spiritual Meeting. The 1992 Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Freedom of Conscience permitted the Bahai Community of Baku to function with the approval of the Ministry of Justice; in 2001 it was repeatedly registered with the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations; the Sumgayit community was registered at that time too. Today, Bahais live in the republic's 18 settlements (half of them have Bahai communities), in the others there are not enough Bahais to form communities.²³

Bahaism Today in Azerbaijan: Present and Future

The Bahais feel very much at home in Azerbaijan, which is well known for its religious tolerance. Their community is well-organized and rich enough to help its followers survive personal and financial crises. The materials accumulated from personal talks with Bahais testify that they only ask for help on rare occasions: illnesses, surgery, deaths in the family, and special occasions such as marriages. This possibility will inevitably attract even more supporters.

According to experts, in some countries (Russia among them) the correlation between secular and religious ideologies is of different dimensions because some of the new religions are concerned with world problems (such as Bahaism), while the traditional religions prefer to address them indirectly by dealing with national and regional issues. This places the new religions apart from the traditional religious and ideological structures when it comes to addressing the most important and urgent social problems. In this context, the new religions look preferable. People side with them because they feel disappointed with the official ideology, either secular or religious, and its approach to spiritual and material problems. Those who turn to the new religions, Bahaism in our case, hope that, if realized, the utopian program of spiritual perfection of the individual and society will resolve all problems which pester contemporary civilization and each of its members separately.

Throughout its history Bahaism has invariably attracted progressive-minded people in Azerbaijan and elsewhere. Bahaism came to Azerbaijan in the 1860s. Since 1863, its communities have been functioning in Baku, Ganja, Bard, Salyan, and Geychay; until the 1930s they developed under relatively favorable conditions. Today, after a long interval caused by political circumstances, Bahaism is rapidly regaining its lost position.

Since ancient times Azerbaijan has been a Muslim country—the position of Islam remain as strong as ever, but we should admit that today Islam is represented there by Shi'a and Sunni, which, in turn, consist of various madhabs (Shafiite and Hanafi) divided into several Tariqahs (Wahhabism, all kinds of Sufi brotherhoods, followers of Seyyd Nursi and Fethullah Gülen, etc.). We can hardly expect ethno-confessional unity in a country where there is any number of non-traditional cults, sects, and new religious movements.

²² See: A. Jafarov, op. cit., p. 25.

²³ [http://www.bahai.az/links_ru.shtml].

It would be wrong to ascribe the spread of Bahaism in Azerbaijan to internal factors. We should bear in mind that the Bahais rely on rich proselytizing experience. On top of this, there are always those who see the meaning of life in “God-seeking” and who are unable to merely accept traditional religious beliefs. Such people should not be dismissed as a passive group unable to decide for themselves and prone to be tempted by illusory spiritual prospects. These people seek another God for themselves in the hope of realizing their new ideas about the meaning of life and about themselves. This is especially true of the recent converts as distinct from a large group of Bahais who inherited the religion from their families.

It seems that in the future too, Islam, even divided into several madhabs, will remain firmly rooted in Azerbaijan; Bahaism stands no chance of replacing it.

C o n c l u s i o n

Today, the consolidation of people within Bahai public reorganization has already demonstrated its usefulness in many countries and regions, Azerbaijan being no exception in this respect. Bahaism can be described as a new religion, the term being partly accepted by the academic community with respect to the religious universalist movements.

Its geographic scope makes Bahaism an interesting example of trans-cultural processes and trends caused by the fact that its ranks are swelling with representatives from all kinds of religious and cultural traditions. We are in fact watching an inter-civilizational and inter-religious dialog.
