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The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in Middle Eastern Modernity
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Middle East

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Middle Eastern religion is seldom mentioned in the same breath with modernism, at least in the West. However, the Baha'i faith, which originated in nineteenth-century Iran, poses key conundrums to our understanding of the relationship between modernity and religion in the global South.

Modernity was conceived in binary oppositions, between superstition and reason, absolutism and liberty, nation and Other, civilized and barbarian, and male and female. Proponents of modernity, as Edward Said demonstrated in his masterful *Orientalism*,¹ managed to range a number of such oppositions together, coding reason, liberty, nation, civilization and maleness as European, whereas both Europe's medieval ('immature') past and Europe's Oriental Others, especially Islam, were painted as possessing the opposite and inferior characteristics. European modernity tended to hide from itself its own darker traits, including chauvinist hatreds, industrialized warfare, racism, colonialism and male chauvinism, and the degree to which the modern form of these phenomena was inextricably intertwined with the entire modernist project.

From a postmodern point of view, modernity has lacked a sense of ambiguity and irony, and suffers from limiting its typologies to mere binary oppositions, when in fact social phenomena come in three's, four's, and even higher ordinals, not just in two's. North Atlantic modernists have also privileged the European experience of modernity in ways that seem peculiar to anyone who knows something about world history. Anthony Giddens in *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, 1990), argues that modernity is not a static matter of binary oppositions, but is rather dialectical. Movements against absolutism give rise not only to parliamentary regimes, but also to national security states that appear to many citizens to deprive them of liberties instead of bestowing them, thus generating oppositional grassroots movements campaigning for democracy (as opposed to elitist Liberalism) and for workers' rights. That is, he challenges modernists' insistence that the contenders in political battles can be neatly divided into 'reactionaries' and 'progressives'. Giddens gives the name 'utopian realist' to the movements, such as those of workers, women, peace groups and others, that challenge the industrial, militant nation-states of bourgeois modernity.

Islam's encounter with nineteenth-century modernity produced not only reactionary, revivalist, millenarian, liberal and fundamentalist responses, as some have argued, but in the form of the Baha'i faith it produced a mixture of millenarianism, liberalism and utopian realism that later turned sharply toward a sort of fundamentalism. The latter turn has tended to obscure the original emphases of the religion's founder, which can only be recovered through reading his voluminous letters in their nineteenth-century political and cultural context.

The Baha'i faith developed out of the esoteric, kabbalistic Shaykhi movement of Shi'ite Islam, founded by Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i (1753-1826), and out of the apocalyptic and messianic Babi movement, founded by 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi, the 'Bab' or door to the divine, in 1844, which racked Iran with religious ferment and turmoil, leading to the Bab's execution in 1850 and a retaliatory attempt on the life of Nasiru'd-

Din Shah by radical Babis in 1852, and thence to a nation-wide pogrom against the new religion.² Out of this maelstrom emerged an entirely different sort of messianic movement, the Baha'i faith, founded in Baghdad in 1863 by Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri, Baha'u'llah (1817-1892).

Baha'u'llah, a high notable born in Tehran whose father had been a provincial governor married into the royal family, had emerged after the Bab's execution as a prominent Babi leader, though his more radical younger half-brother, Mirza Yahya Subh-i Azal, was more widely recognized as the vicar of the Bab in the 1850s and early 1860s. Baha'u'llah was exiled first to Ottoman Baghdad (1853), then to Istanbul (1863), Edirne (1863-1868) and finally in 1868 to Akka on the coast of Ottoman Syria, where he lived until his death. In 1867 he had broken decisively with Azal, proclaiming himself the messianic successor of the Bab and founding a new religion, the Baha'i faith. Partly due to his exiles to the Ottoman Empire, which was more directly imbricated in European modernity than Qajar Iran, Baha'u'llah turned Babism from a millenarian protest movement into one that mixed modernist and utopian realist themes. He expressed approval of some aspects of modernity, whereby he critiqued the absolutist Ottoman and Qajar states, including a call for parliamentary democracy, some separation of religion and state, a guarantee of freedom of conscience and expression, greater rights for women, and an end to arbitrary decrees, which should be replaced by tribunals. At the same time, however, he critiqued nineteenth-century modernity itself, condemning chauvinist nationalism (whether religious, linguistic or ethnic in character), European colonialism, industrialized warfare paid for by high taxes on the poor, the anarchy of international relations based upon the absolute sovereignty of nation-states (which he wished to curb through international peace conferences), and what he thought of as overdeveloped civilization, by which he appears to have meant materialism, pollution and massively destructive weaponry.

Baha'u'llah's mixture of rationalization (e.g. parliamentary institutions and due process), appeal to human rights, and yet his communitarian emphasis on the creation of a new, revealed missionary religion, prefigured some of the convergences between the old Right and Left that French sociologist Alain Touraine perceives as characteristic of the turn of the twentieth century. In a fascinating about-face, the later Baha'i faith's leaders turned increasingly to the Right, condemning multi-party democracy as factious and plutocratic, advocating theocracy, and curbing individual freedom of conscience and expression within the community. This right wing shell has preserved the utopian realist core of Baha'u'llah's own emphases, however, creating a unique sectarian community that has remained tiny in the literate world, in part because of its strict controls on discourse, but which has had some success missionizing in India and elsewhere in the global South. The Babi-Bahai movements underwent an odyssey from militancy in the

1840s to pacifist, liberal globalism under Baha'u'llah and thence in the twentieth century to two contending emphases: a liberal stream that maintains a universalist and tolerant outlook and a conservative one that dreams of theocratic domination and insistence on scriptural literalism. The movement thus defies any easy teleology of modernity, and in many ways parallels the major reformist intellectual currents of modern Iran's Shi'ite majority. ♦

Modernity & the Millennium

THE GENESIS OF THE BAHAI FAITH IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY MIDDLE EAST



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Notes

1. New York: Vintage, 1978.
2. Abbas Amanat (1989), *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.