

## **The Conversion of Religious Minorities to the Bahá'í Faith in Iran Some Preliminary Observations**

Susan Stiles Maneck

### **Abstract**

In the period between 1877–1921 significant numbers of non-Muslims converted to the Bahá'í Faith in Iran. This was an essential development, for the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion possessing a distinct identity apart from Islam. These conversions were largely confined to the Zoroastrian and Jewish communities and did not involve Iran's largest religious minority, the Christians. This study attempts to address some of the factors that were involved in this conversion process. These will include the manner in which Bahá'ís made the transition from Islamic particularism to a universalism that would attract non-Muslims, as well as the manner in which actual conversions took place and the factors surrounding them. Major emphasis will be placed upon examining what factors may have inclined certain minorities rather than others to convert.

### **Résumé**

Entre 1877 et 1921 un nombre significatif de non-musulmans se convertirent à la foi bahá'íe en Iran. Ce fait joua un rôle important dans l'émergence de la foi bahá'íe comme religion indépendante et possédant une identité distincte et séparée de l'Islam. Ces conversions furent limitées aux communautés zoroastre et juive et n'ont pas touché la plus large minorité iranienne: les chrétiens. Cette étude essaye de localiser certains facteurs importants du processus de cette conversion. Ils expliqueront la manière dont les bahá'ís ont fait la transition entre les particularités de l'Islam et l'universalité qui toucha les non-musulmans et la façon dont les conversions eurent lieu dans leur contexte. L'examen des facteurs qui ont poussé certaines minorités plutôt que d'autres à se convertir occupera une place importante dans cette étude.

### **Resumen**

En el transcurso de los años 1877–1921 se convirtieron a la Fe Bahá'í en Irán personas no-musulmanas en numeros de consideración. Esto fue un acontecimiento clave para que la Fe Bahá'í surgiera como religión independiente en posesión de una identidad diferente y aparte del Islám. Estas conversiones mayormente fueron limitadas a las comunidades judías y zoroástricas, y no involucró a la minoría mas grande de Irán los cristianos. Este estudio procura referirse a algunos de los factores que formaron parte de este proceso de conversión. Entre éstos se incluirán la manera en que los bahá'ís hicieron la transición del particularismo islámico a aquel universalismo que atraería a los no-musulmanes y también la forma precisa en que ocurrieron las conversiones y las circunstancias que rodearon estos acontecimientos. Se le dará importancia especial a la investigación de las razones por las cuales ciertas minorías se convirtieron y otras no.

**T**he Jewish conversion movement began in Hamadan around 1877, and by 1884, according to the historian of Persian Jewry Habib Levy, involved some one hundred and fifty of the eight-hundred Jewish households there (Levy, *Tarikh-i-Yahud-i-Iran* 657). From there, the Bahá'í Faith spread to the Jewish communities of other Iranian cities, including Kashan (where half of the Bahá'í community was of Jewish origin), Tehran, Isfahan, Bukhara, and Gulpaygan (where seventy-five percent of the Jewish community was said to have converted) (Curzon, *Persia* 500). According to Dastur Dhalla, the eminent Zoroastrian theologian, roughly 4000 Zoroastrians converted to the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, with an additional 1000 in India (cited in Dhalla, *Dastur Dhalla* 703). This conversion movement involved a significant portion of the educated merchant elite of the Zoroastrians in Yard (Stiles, "Early Zoroastrian"), all of the Zoroastrians of Qazvin (Dhalla, *Dastur Dhalla* 726), and a significant number in Kashan and Tehran as well. The accuracy of all these figures, being based largely on the impressions of outside observers, is open to question. Neither the Bahá'ís nor the minorities from which the conversions were occurring kept membership records at this time.

### **From Particularism to Universalism**

A cursory examination of Bahá'í scriptures reveals that from early on, both the Báb and Baha'u'llah were consciously formulating a new religious system. Yet the paradigms by which Bahá'ís sought to establish their independence from Islam were largely Islamic ones. Bahá'ís based their distinctiveness on the claim that Bahá'u'lláh, the founder, had received a revelation direct from God, and that He had promulgated new scriptures and ordinances to supersede those of past religions. These criteria for what constitutes an independent religion—namely, a prophet, a hook, a new law—are peculiarly Islamic. Where other religions have categorized themselves similarly, they have done so only in response to Islamic contacts.

The early Bahá'í community, as it had developed directly from that of the Bábís, was made up almost entirely of former Muslims. Of these, a significant portion had been 'ulamá. Under the conditions of persecution that existed at the time, these Bahá'ís were careful not to draw attention to themselves by behaving differently from the Muslims. In any case, most of their perceptions were drawn from the Muslim milieu in which they lived. As long as the Bahá'í Faith remained entirely within the Iranian-Muslim context, its theological assertion of its own independent nature could not hope to become a sociological reality. While the initial changes were theological, proceeding from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís still had to cease to identify psychologically with Islam before non-Muslims would be attracted to the Bahá'í Faith.

During the Bábí period there were few minority conversions. The only account I have found is the lone instance of a Zoroastrian who witnessed a Bábí being beaten, stripped naked, and paraded through the streets. This persecution induced the Zoroastrian to examine the religion, and he soon became a Bábí ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Traveller's* 21). According to the Bahá'í historian Hasan Balyuzi, Táhirih was instrumental in converting a number of Jews to the Bábí Faith in Hamadan (Balyuzi, *The Báb* 165).<sup>1</sup> These conversions do not appear to have had any connection with later Bahá'í conversions. It should be noted, however, that of all the Bábí leaders, Táhirih was the most outspoken in departing from Islamic norms.<sup>2</sup>

Harsh persecutions also caused some Bahá'ís to seek the protection and assistance of those of other religions. Many Bahá'ís associated closely with European missionaries, accepting employment from them, and in some cases feigning conversion to Christianity. This happened often enough that one missionary urged others to insist that any candidate for church membership be required to specifically deny Bahá'u'lláh as the "return of Christ" before being accepted for baptism.<sup>3</sup> This disavowal was deemed necessary since Bahá'ís regarded that each prophet was the "return" of the preceding prophet in a manner analogous to the way in which Christians understood John the Baptist to be the "return" of Elijah. "Return" in this sense involved not transmigration, but the symbolic fulfilment of the apocalyptic prophecies of another religion by one whose spiritual station was identical to that of the past prophet. Since all prophets were then regarded as identical, all of the religions They founded were essentially one. By this means, early Bahá'ís could justify "conversion" to Christianity so long as it did not directly entail denying Bahá'u'lláh.

Christians were not the only religious group to offer assistance to Bahá'ís in difficult situations. When Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl, the great Bahá'í scholar, was expelled from his position as a teacher in a religious school after it became known he was a Bahá'í in 1876, he was able to obtain employment from the Parsi agent Manakji Limji Hatari, who had been sent by the Zoroastrian community in India to assist the Zoroastrians of Iran. Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl taught Persian literature to Zoroastrian children in Manakji's new school and served as Manakji's personal secretary. Some of the earliest Zoroastrian conversions to the Bahá'í Faith resulted from Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl's association with the Zoroastrian community (Míhrabkhani, *Sharh Ahval-i* 19–23).

Among the theological doctrines introduced by Bahá'u'lláh that prepared the Bahá'í community to receive non-Muslims as converts was his injunction to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship" (Tablets 22). Islamic and Bábí doctrines relating to the ritual impurity of non-believers were discarded. Most important, Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be not only the One foretold by the Báb but also the Promised One of all religions: the return of Christ to the Christians, the Messiah to the Jews, Shah Bahram to the Zoroastrians. Because of this, Bahá'ís came to regard all religions as essentially true and believed religions all could find their ultimate culmination in Bahá'u'lláh. They approached other religions determined to fulfil and not destroy.

### **Early Contacts and Conversions**

While the psychological and theological changes that occurred within the Bábí-Bahá'í communities between 1850 and 1875 prepared Bahá'ís to receive non-Muslims, those changes did not in themselves cause the conversions. Were this the case, we might expect a close correspondence between conversion and Bahá'í outreach to certain groups. This does not seem to have been the case. Bahá'u'lláh's writings addressed Christians more than any other non-Muslim religious groups and addressed them at an earlier date. Early Bahá'ís often approached European

Christians and requested their scriptures,<sup>4</sup> and missionaries were often dismayed to find Bahá'ís using the missions as bases for their own conversion efforts.<sup>5</sup> Yet Christian response to the Bahá'ís revelation was negligible. The conversion of Jews and Zoroastrians to the Bahá'í Faith occurred almost accidentally. Bahá'ís did not, at first, make any concerted efforts to reach these people, who were attracted by association rather than active proselytizing. The actual conversions took many Bahá'ís by surprise. Hájí Muhammad Táhir, a Bahá'í from a Muslim background, observing this phenomenon, wrote:

Up to that time [1882–83] no one from among the Zoroastrians [in Yazd] had accepted the Faith. Indeed, the Bahá'ís could not imagine that these people would embrace the Faith, because they were not involved in the early history and events associated with the Manifestations of God and were not included in any discussions concerning the Faith, (Quoted in Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 103–4)

The conversions of the first Jews of Hamadan were equally unexpected. In 1877 a Jewish physician Hakim Aqa Jan was called upon to treat the malaria-stricken wife of Muhammad Baqir, a prominent Bahá'í of Hamadan. Accidentally, Aqa Jan gave her strychnine pills instead of quinine. When she nearly died, Aqa Jan became panic stricken, expecting violent repercussions, not only for himself but towards the entire Jewish community as well. Seeing his consternation, Muhammad Baqir assured him that he would not hold him responsible for what was obviously a mistake. The wife recovered, but Aqa Jan was so impressed by Muhammad Baqir's kindness that he assumed Baqir could not be a Muslim and asked him regarding his religion. Muhammad Baqir then informed him that “a new religion has appeared in the world by the name of Bahá'í” (quoted in Sulaymani, *Masabih-i* 4:452–53). Aqa Jan made a thorough investigation of the tenets of the Bahá'í religion and eventually embraced it along with some forty friends and family members, including his father, a leading rabbi of the town.

Early Jewish and Zoroastrian converts carried out most of the actual teaching work themselves within their respective communities, relying on Muslim Bahá'ís for support. Neither the theology, attitudes, nor the efforts of the Bahá'ís themselves adequately explain why conversion occurred among Jews and Zoroastrians, but not Christians in Iran.

### **Factors Underlying Conversions**

Various Jewish scholars have suggested reasons why the Iranian Jews might have been attracted to the Bahá'í Faith. We might see how many of these can be shown to apply both to Jewish and Zoroastrian converts.

Habib Levy suggests that the poor economic and social conditions under which Jews lived induced many of them to convert (*Tarikh-i-Yahud-i-Iran* 781–82). If this were the case, we might expect the conversions to occur mostly among the poorer classes of Jews and in areas where the Jewish community was the most depressed. This does not seem to have been the case. Bahá'í biographies indicate that the Jews who first converted were often doctors or educated artisans.<sup>6</sup> Poorer Jews seem to have converted somewhat later.

At the time Jewish conversions began in 1877 in Hamadan, the economic position of the Jews there had improved considerably due to a shift in trade routes. In 1862, the British established regular steamer service between Basrah and Baghdad. This placed Hamadan on the major artery linking Baghdad and Europe with Tehran. Jews were prominent in the trade of cotton textiles from England that were transported on this route. By the end of the century, eighty percent of that trade was in their hands (Issawi, *Economic History* 62). The Jews of Yazd, however, were dependent on the declining silk trade and experienced the greatest economic deprivation during this period. Yet, Yazd did not experience a significant number of Jewish conversions to the Bahá'í religion at that time.

However, the condition of the Zoroastrian community in Yazd began steadily improving in the latter half of the nineteenth century when representatives from the Parsi community in Bombay were sent to Iran to ameliorate the oppression and poverty under which the Zoroastrians lived. Besides establishing schools, influencing government regulations, and introducing internal reforms into the Zoroastrian community, the contacts with the Parsis of India led to the establishment of trade relations between Bombay and Yazd in which Zoroastrians played a prominent role. Out of this relationship arose a mercantile and professional class that had been hitherto absent among the Zoroastrian community of Iran. The early conversions to the Bahá'í Faith occurred among this group and again followed or accompanied economic improvement. The upwardly mobile were often the first to convert.

Habib Levy also suggests that Jews sometimes converted to the Bahá'í Faith to obtain relief from persecution (*Tarikh-i-Yahud-i-Iran* 626–31). Evidence does not support this view. Bahá'ís lacked even the secondary legal status accorded to other religious minorities within the Islamic state as “People of the Book.” Attacks against Bahá'ís were usually the more virulent, and they could hardly offer anyone else protection. Converts to the Bahá'í Faith remained within their ancestral community as long as they were tolerated there and could avoid persecution by doing so. In the event of expulsion, they found themselves in the precarious position of belonging to no

recognized religious community. In Hamadan, many Jewish Bahá'ís pretended to convert to Protestantism in order to obtain the protection of the Presbyterian missionaries (Mihrabkhani, *Sharh Ahval-i* 130). In Yazd, Zoroastrian Bahá'ís had better success maintaining their position within the Zoroastrian community and thereby remained relatively immune to the persecutions that afflicted Bahá'ís of Muslim background (Stiles, "Early Zoroastrian").

Walter Fischel, another historian of Middle Eastern Jewry, sees the general ignorance that existed among the Jews of Iran regarding the basic tenets of their religion as a primary determinant of the conversions:

Had Persian Jews possessed the spiritual leaders of a high cultural standing in the last century, had the rabbis and the schools taught and asserted a Judaism free from superstitious notions, empty formalism and medieval prejudices, had they shown a true sense for Judaism and its ethics, the conception of God, its ideas of the messiah, its national aspirations, its contributions to world culture. Baháism would hardly have won any Jewish hearts. (Fischel, "Jews in Persia" 156)

Contemporary Western accounts of the Jewish community would tend to support Fischel's evaluation. Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, the Bible was read in Hebrew, often without any understanding. The earliest translations of the Bible into Persian and Judeo-Persian were made and distributed by the Christians. Even Hebrew Bibles were generally obtained through missionaries. The Talmud was virtually unknown, and the Jewish clergy had little education (Spector, "A History" 226-52). The converts, however, judging from their literature, had a good knowledge of scripture, as well as of rabbinical exegesis (cf. Arjumand, *Gulshan Haqayiq*). One Bahá'í of Jewish background stated that his father carefully taught all of his apprentices "the trade, the Torah, and the Bahá'í Faith" (personal interview with the author). But in none of these accounts have I found any reference to the Talmud.

Like the Jewish clergy, the Zoroastrian priests in Iran were poorly educated, entrenched in ritualism, and unable to respond to social change. Parsi agents sent to assist the Iranian Zoroastrians often found their efforts frustrated by intransigent priests. When one Parsi agent, Kay-Khusraw Ji Sahib, established a body of elected laymen to oversee the activities of the Zoroastrian community, including those previously regulated by the clergy, the Zoroastrian priests were said to have poisoned him (Sulaymani, *Masabih-i* 4:404-6).

Several other factors seem to have encouraged conversion. Fischel notes that the universality displayed by the Bahá'ís in contrast to the insularity of the Jewish community also provided a strong inducement to conversion ("Jews in Persia" 154). Levy also noted the profound impression Bahá'ís made upon the Jews by their kindness and tolerance:

The Jews observed that the very Muslims [Bahá'ís] who yesterday had regarded Jews as unclean and infidels and who tormented them even unto death, today, with the utmost affection, showed respect to them. If a Jew went to a Baha'is' place of worship there was no danger, the Baha'i would even invite him and regard him as having the same rank as himself; for the leader of the new religion [Bahá'u'lláh] had said that all humanity are the servants of God and there is no difference between them. (Levy, *Tarikh-iYahud-i-Iran* 627)

The biographies of Bahá'í converts confirm this factor. Sulaymani tells the story of a Zoroastrian youth named Ardishir who visited the home of a prominent Bahá'í Mulla 'Abdu'l-Qani. The host graciously received him, serving him tea with his own hand, then, deliberately ignoring the strictures of ritual uncleanliness, drank out of the same glass after him without washing it. Turning to his surprised guest, Mulla 'Abdu'l-Qani remarked, "You must have heard how, in the days of the advent of the Promised Lord, the lamb and the wolf will drink from the same stream and graze in the same meadow. Do you still doubt that we are living in that Day?" (Sulaymani, *Masabih-i* 3:79).

While these factors seem to have been important to the Jewish and Zoroastrian conversions, Christian conversions were nearly nonexistent. I will now examine the communal experience and identity of each minority to determine what factors might account for the differences in response to the Bahá'í revelation.

### **Communal Experience and Identity**

Christian missionaries noted a profound difference between the way in which Armenians were perceived and perceived themselves in contrast to the Jews. Samuel Wilson, a Presbyterian missionary writing in 1896, described the Armenians as highly westernized, materialistic, and with strong nationalistic attachment to the Gregorian Church despite their skepticism in matters of faith.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he describes the Jews as despised and persecuted, forced to submit to the vilest insults on the part of both Muslims and Christians.<sup>8</sup> Zoroastrians seemed to have experienced mistreatment similar to the Jews. Napier Malcolm, a missionary living in Yazd at the turn of

the century, noted how Zoroastrians were subjected to petty humiliations and previously had been excluded from trade and education.<sup>9</sup>

Two major groups of Christians reside in Iran, the Nestorians or Assyrians, who in the nineteenth century resided principally in parts of Kurdistan and Urumiyeh, and the Armenians, many of whom were settled in New Julfa just outside of Isfahan. The areas in which the Nestorians resided were largely rural and formed a part of what they believed to be their national homeland. They possessed a glorious past and a strong identity based on their Language and liturgy. In the missionary schools they learned Assyrian and European languages but remained ignorant of Persian. They saw themselves as the remnant of Assyrian as well as Christian glory. So strong was their sense of ethnic pride that they sought independence at the Versailles Peace Conference. Their rural status and relative isolation allowed them greater autonomy than other minorities; they remained aloof from Iranian Muslims. From the 1840s on they cultivated close relations with the American Presbyterians and other missionaries who offered economic aid and political protection. While Nestorians had experienced little outside interference, from the 1870s on Kurdish incursions into their territory became more frequent. Through the missionaries, Nestorians made frequent appeals to the central government which was afraid to offend Western powers by not acceding to their demands.<sup>10</sup> Although the efforts of the missionaries did not result in the reform of that church as they had envisioned, they reinforced the positive self image and pride of the Assyrian Christians. Their ethnic identity as Assyrians prevailed over Iranian nationalism.

The Armenian situation was similar in many respects. Although an urban minority, they were not subject to all the disabilities suffered by Jews and Zoroastrians. The Armenians had been forcibly settled in New Julfa in the early part of the seventeenth century as a result of Shah Abbas' policy of depopulating the border areas between Persia and the Ottoman Empire. Shah Abbas greatly admired the craftsmanship and merchant abilities of his Armenian subjects, and so he settled them next to the Safavid capital, Isfahan, in hopes that their activities would stimulate the Persian economy. Like Armenians elsewhere in the Middle East, they played an intermediary role between Europe and the Muslim world, both in trade and ideology. Yet, as the fortunes of the Safavid dynasty waned, so did the privileged position of the Armenians. They frequently became scapegoats and were subjected to persecutions and heavy taxation. The decline of the silk trade added to their misfortunes. Still, the high level of education, culture, and ethnic pride that they attained during the Safavid period carried over into the nineteenth century. With an ingrained sense of superiority over other Persians, Armenians jealously guarded their language and culture. Often they knew only enough Persian to engage in their trade relations. Like Assyrians, Armenians could look to the West for political protection and for models of reform.

### **Persecution and Shí'í Paradigms**

Through the centuries, Jews and Zoroastrians in Iran had few contacts with their co-religionists outside the country and lived in closer contact with the Muslim majority. Because of this, the identity of Jews and Zoroastrians and the boundaries that distinguished their communities from others were determined by their relationship with the Shí'í Muslims. As anthropologist Judith Goldstein discovered in her study of religious groups in Yazd, Muslims and minorities "use similar forms from what can be seen to be one cultural repertoire to define themselves as different and as mutually exclusive" (*Interwoven Identities* 44). The cultural repertoire from which their distinctive identity was drawn was largely determined by the categories established by the Shí'í majority.

Among the values which Jews and Zoroastrians adopted from Shí'í Muslims was the attitude they held towards suffering, persecution, and oppression. The Shí'í perceived of themselves as dispossessed.. They maintained that self-perception despite their dominance in Iran by representing the meaning of their sacred history in terms of the sufferings endured by Muhammad's descendants, the Imams, at the hands of the oppressive Sunní state. The Shí'í rejected the triumphalism sometimes associated with Sunní Islam and instead regarded persecution in the path of God as an indication of legitimacy. The Jews and Zoroastrians found this motif uniquely suited to their own situation and came to interpret their own sacred history in similar terms, for if suffering and persecution lent legitimacy to a religion, then their own legitimacy was proven. But, by the same token, the Bahá'ís could be seen as even more legitimate. No single factor proved more impressive to those who converted than the persecution that Bahá'ís endured at the hands of Muslims, The reply given by Mulla Bahram, one of the first Bahá'ís of Zoroastrian background, to a mulla who asked by what proof Mulla Bahram had accepted the Bahá'í revelation indicates to what extent Zoroastrians had accepted Muslim paradigms. Mulla Bahram told the mulla:

The proof of the truth of Zoroaster is that this man arose to make his claim and the Zend and the Avesta which contains divine laws were revealed to him, When he arose for the propagation of his religion a group came under the shadow of his word, in the propagation of which pure blood was spilt and luminous souls were sacrificed. Acceptance of such trials and difficulties in the path of religion is proof of its truth. Knowing these

things, I was confirmed in the Zoroastrian religion. These same proofs I had accepted for Zoroastrianism I saw demonstrated with my own eyes in this blessed Cause. For holy souls to sacrifice their very lives is the greatest act in the world, and this miracle is higher than all miracles and this reason stronger than all reasons. (Sulaymani, *Masabih-i* 4:412–16)

Mulla Bahram's self-understanding of his conversion is not an untypical one for Iranian Bahá'ís. He claims that the Bahá'í religion confirms the beliefs he held prior to becoming a Bahá'í. Yet the proofs he adduces to support this are not Zoroastrian in origin but rather are drawn from Shí'í paradigms. A prophet arises, he makes a claim, reveals a book, and is received by those pure ones willing to suffer in the path of God.

### **Eschatology**

Iran may be considered the birthplace of eschatology, which arose first in Zoroastrianism and later influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Bahá'í Faith grew out of the millennial expectations of the Shí'í Muslims of the nineteenth century who awaited the coming of the Hidden Imam. The conversion narratives I have studied suggest that those Jews and Zoroastrians who became Bahá'ís had, before their conversion, diligently searched through their respective scriptures for signs of the advent of the promised one. Eschatology provided one of the primary bridges between the Bahá'ís and those of other communities. Bahá'u'lláh was consistently presented as the fulfilment of all the apocalyptic prophecies. Virtually all Bahá'í literature written by the Jewish and Zoroastrian converts revolves around this theme.<sup>11</sup>

In Hamadan, where Bahá'ís and Presbyterian missionaries vied for the Jewish community, both groups endeavored to present their respective founder as the Messiah. Organized debates on biblical prophesy took place between Jewish Bahá'ís and the missionaries. Missionaries used the fundamentalist methodology of the Princeton theology, while Bahá'ís relied more on rabbinical exegesis.<sup>12</sup> In the end, the Bahá'í claim was probably more persuasive because it presented less cultural dissonance than did Western Christianity.

For Bahá'ís of Zoroastrian background, Bahá'u'lláh was considered Shah Bahram, an apocalyptic figure who had been the focus of Zoroastrian hopes for a restoration of their religion after the Arab invasions. Great use was made of Bahá'u'lláh's genealogy, which traced his descent from Yazdigird III, last of the Sassanian monarchs. When Bahá'u'lláh wrote to Zoroastrians, he used pure Persian with no admixture of Arabic words (Stiles, "Early Zoroastrian").

By presenting the Bahá'í Faith as the culmination of all religious traditions, Bahá'ís were able effectively to present their religion to minorities, both as an affirmation of their own past as well as a new possibility for facing the future. But this tool could only be effective to those whose hopes lay in a radical change. For Christians in Iran hope lay in the extension of European hegemony, not in the Second Coming.

Unlike Jews and Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís had a few contacts among the Christians outside of the context of the Protestant missions. The Bahá'ís could not speak their language, and those Christians who knew Persian often had the strongest identification with the West, were the most secularized, and generally were uninterested in religion.

### **Conclusion**

The major factors that distinguished Jews and Zoroastrians from native Christians were the nature of their association with the Muslim majority and the extent to which their identities were intertwined with that of the Muslims. The fact that Christians maintained a distinct language from other Iranians and rarely learned Persian meant they were able to maintain an identity apart from Muslim paradigms and to isolate themselves from other influences. The only such influences that were welcomed were those emanating from the West.

Jews and Zoroastrians viewed themselves as Persians and drew their identity from within the Iranian context. In contrast, the Christians saw themselves as Armenians or Assyrians first and identified strongly with the West. For Iranians, persecution lent legitimacy to a religion. Christians assumed the triumphal posture of their Western co-religionists who assumed the religion of that culture which now dominated the world was the righteous one, Jews and Zoroastrians drew their poor self-image from the attitudes of Muslim Iranians. The Christians derived a much more positive image from sources outside of Iran. When Jews, through the influence of European Jewry, began to identify themselves with the West as well, the incidence of conversion slowed considerably.

The despised and poor economic position of Jews and Zoroastrians did not cause their conversions. Rather, conversions occurred as conditions were greatly improving. With social and economic progress, new self-perceptions and ideologies were needed. When the old religion failed to keep pace with the changing circumstances, many embraced the religion that best allowed them to progress into the future while affirming their past with the least amount of dissonance.

This study has examined the manner in which the Bahá'í Faith began to leave its Islamic context and appeal to those outside the Muslim fold. In attracting Jews and Zoroastrians, the Bahá'í Faith succeeded in divorcing itself from Islamic particularism but not Persian culture. This latter step would only be achieved in the twentieth century when the Bahá'í Faith left its Iranian homeland and found acceptance in the West.

## Notes

1. There is also the case of about sixty Jews who became Bábís or Bahá'ís in the late 1860s or early 1870s in Mashád. These conversions, however, were among Jadidí'l-Islam, part of a community of Jews who had been forcibly converted to Islam a generation earlier.

2. Táhirih was the most prominent female adherent to the Bábí religion, Her audacious act of publicly removing her veil irrevocably severed the Bábís from the Islamic community. She was executed in 1853.

3. The “confession” of faith recommended or baptismal candidates went as follows: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; that He really died on the cross for our salvation; that He really and truly rose from the dead, leaving behind an empty tomb; that He alone is the Savior of the World. I deny the doctrine of *rij'at* (return), by which I am to believe that Jesus was Moses returned, and that Mohammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were ‘returns’ of Jesus, and I declare it to be false teaching. Accepting Jesus as my Lord and Savior I declare Mohammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh to have been false prophets and false guides, leading men away from the truth” (Richards, *The Religion* 235–36).

4. Dr. Robert Bruce, a minister of the Church Missionary Society, noted the interest in Christianity in the town of Nayríz, which he visited in 1885: “The people are more enlightened than in the purely Mohammedan towns through which we passed on the road as many of them are babís. And many of them disputed with us; but they did not dispute like the people in other places, but only for not selling more Testaments to them. Having sold twenty-five copies, we told them we must keep some for other towns. They said, ‘do you think other people will have more desire to buy these books than we have?’” (Quoted in Wilson, *Persia* 332).

5. See Moojan Momen, “Early Relations between Christian Missionaries and the Bábí and Bahá'í Communities” in *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History* 1: 49–82.

6. About forty converts are listed in *Masabih-i Hidayat*, vol. 4. The listings generally include their professions.

7. Wilson writes of the Armenians: “They are progressive, ready to accept new methods in education and business, and all the amenities of civilization, In their dress, house furniture and social customs they are following close upon their foreign models, In truth the young men seem entirely too apt disciples of advanced thoughtlessness. They have heard or read of French infidelity and are tintured with it. . . . Another characteristic of the Armenians is their intense patriotism. Next to their desire for education and acquisition of wealth, this is the most remarkable. The feeling is intense, fervid, overpowering. . . . It entwines itself around the Gregorian Church as the only visible embodiment of national unity, the bond of race, its representative. The skeptic joins the devotee, the enlightened scholar joins the superstitious and ignorant in snppoting, though not approving of priest and bishop and their formal rites, not from love of religion or care of its ceremonies (which are despised), but because the church is the recognized and only organization of race” (*Persian* 108–10).

8. Wilson quotes one missionary as writing: ‘Despised and persecuted, they are unable to command respect or arouse feelings of humanity in the breasts of their oppressors. They passively submit to the vilest insults, while petty acts of persecution gradually become habitual. A Mussulman child may with impunity pull a Jew’s beard and spit in his face. The word “Jew” is considered a term of disgrace and is never used by the Persian without an apology for giving it utterance. . . . Even the native Christian, I am sorry to say, join the Mussulmans in abhorring the Jews. The Jews, in turn, hold themselves apart from all and probably in their hearts despise and hate all others” (*Persian* 108–10).

9. “Up to 1895 no Parsi was allowed to carry an umbrella. Even during the time I was in Yazd they could not carry one in town. Up to 1895 there was a strong prohibition upon eye-glasses and spectacles; up to 1885 they were prevented from wearing rings; their girdles had to be made of rough canvas, but after 1885 any white material was permitted. Up to 1886 the Parsis were obliged to twist their turbans instead of folding them. . . . Up to 1891 all Zoroastrians had to walk in town, and even in the desert they had to dismount if they met a big Mussulman. . . . Up to about 1860 Parsis could not engage in trade. They used to hide things in their cellar rooms, and sell them but not in bazaars nor may they trade in linen drapery. Up to 1870 they were not permitted to have a school for their children” (Malcolm, *Five Years* 45–46).

10. Besides Kurdish raids, most of the Nestorian complaints centered around landlord–tenant relations rather than on communal disputes. The intervention of the missionaries disrupted the balance of power in that region and created resentments among the neighboring Muslims. By exciting unrealistic hopes and dangerous prejudices

among the Nestorians, the actions of the missionaries served, along with the political instability of the times, to create a situation of communal tension that had not existed before and that led to senseless massacres on both sides and finally to the tragic exodus of the bulk of Nestorians from Urumiyeh in 1918. While some would later return, others emigrated from Iran entirely. Still others assimilated into the large urban areas. A full discussion of Nestorian and Muslim relations in the nineteenth century can be found in *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors* by John Joseph (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1961).

11. *Shah Bahram Varjavand* by Firuz Ruzbehyan and *Gulshan Haqayiq* by Haji Mahdi Arjumand are examples of this kind of literature.

12. Part of these debates are reproduced in *Gulshan Haqayiq*.

## Works Cited

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *A Traveller’s Narrative*. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1980.

Arjumand, Haji Mahdi. *Gulshan Haqayiq*. Los Angeles: Kalimát, 1982.

Bahá’u’lláh. *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*. Comp. Research Department. Trans. H. Taherzadeh et al, 2d ed. Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978.

Balyuzi, H.M. *The Báb*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1973.

Curzon, George. *Persia and the Persian Question*. Volume 1. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1882.

Dhalla, Maneckji Nuservanji. *Dastur Dhalla: The Saga of a Soul*. Karachi: Dastur Dhalla Memorial Institute, 1975.

*Economic History of Iran 1800–1914, The*. Ed. Charles Issawi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.

Fischel, Walter. “Jews in Persia” in *Jewish Social Studies* 12 (April 1950): 156.

Goldstein, Judith. “Interwoven Identities: Religious Communities in Yazd, Iran.” Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1975.

Joseph, John. *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

Levy, Habib. *Tarikh-i-Yahud-i-Iran*. Volume 3. Tehran: 1960.

Mihrabkhani, Ruhullah. *Sharh Ahval-i Jinab-i Abu’l-Fadl-i Gulpaygani*. Tehran, 1976.

Momen, Moojan. “Early Relations between Christian Missionaries and the Bábí and Bahá’í Communities” in *Studies in Bábí and Bahá’í History*. Volume 1. Los Angeles: Kalimát, 1982: 49–82.

Napier, Malcolm. *Five Years in a Persian Town*. New York: Dutton and Co., 1907. Richards, J.R. *The Religion of the Bahá’ís*. New York: Macmillan, 1932.

Spector, Daniel Earl. “A History of the Persian Jews.” Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1975.

Stiles, Susan. “Early Zoroastrian Conversions to the Bahá’í Faith in Yazd, Iran” in *From Iran East and West*. Ed. Juan R. Cole and Moojan Momen. Los Angeles: Kalimát, 1984.

Sulaymani, ‘Aziz’u’lláh. *Masabih-i Hidayat*. Volume 4. Tehran: n.p., 1959.

Taherzadeh, Adib. *The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*. Volume 2. Oxford: George Ronald, 1977.

Wilson, Samuel G. *Persia: Western Mission*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board, 1896.