

***Millennialist Narrative and Apocalyptic Violence:  
The Case of the Babis of Iran***

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**ABSTRACT**

The Babi movement of Iran came to a society in the nineteenth century that had a set millennialist narrative, which included an apocalyptic battle between the forces of good (led by the Imam Mahdi) and evil. Its founder, the Bab, at first appeared to claim to be just the intermediary for the Imam Mahdi, but later claimed to be the Imam Mahdi himself. This set in train expectations that the apocalyptic narrative of violence would begin. The writings and actions of the Bab were provocative, but there was nothing in them to suggest an initiation of violence. Indeed, he specifically held back from calling for a *jihad*, which the Imam Mahdi was expected to do. Over a period of time, however, the Islamic clerics escalated matters, calling on the state to intervene to halt the spread of the movement. This led eventually to violent confrontations in three locations in Iran in 1848-1850 and an attempted assassination of the Shah in 1852. This paper looks at the events of 1848-50 and describes how the apocalyptic narrative played out. It frames the events that occurred within the theoretical schema of assaulted, fragile and revolutionary millennialist groups suggested by Wessinger and examines the stages in the escalation of the conflict, the narratives that informed this, and specifically at those factors that increased the likelihood of violence. It also examines developments after 1852 that moved the focus of the religion, now called the Baha'i religion, from catastrophic millennialism (pre-millennialism) to progressive millennialism (post-millennialism).

**KEYWORDS**

Baha'i, Shi'i, Babi Movement, Imam Madhi, Iran, millennialism, apocalyptic narrative

## Introduction

The study of violence and millennialism has tended to focus on recent dramatic episodes that have come to the public's attention because of the deaths caused: at Jonestown in 1978; the Branch Davidian tragedy in 1993; the Solar Temple in 1994, 1995 and 1997; Aum Shinrikyô's release of sarin gas in Matsumoto in 1994 and on the Tokyo subway in 1995; and the Heaven's Gate group suicide in 1997 (see papers in Wessinger, 2000a and also Zeller, 2014).<sup>1</sup> This paper, however, looks back at an episode in another century and another part of the world: Iran in the mid-nineteenth century. Also, in contrast to the charismatic leaders of some of these more recent groups, who orchestrated or were largely responsible for the group's movement towards violence – for example Asahara of Aum Shinrikyô (Wessinger, 2000b, 120-157; Reader, 2000), David Jones of the People's Temple (Moore, 2000) or Di Mambro of the Solar Temple (Introvigne, 2000), the Bab, the leader of the group that is the subject of this paper, was actively working to prevent the group moving towards violence. This paper seeks to understand how it was that, despite this, violence occurred.

Catherine Wessinger (1997, 47–59) has described two types of millennialism: catastrophic millennialism which anticipates a sudden and usually violent overthrow of the present order by a superhuman agency (usually God); and progressive millennialism which looks to a gradual improvement in human circumstances carried out by humans (albeit often under the guidance of a superhuman agency). These two categories approximate in their sociological features, although not in their theology, to pre-millennialism and post-millennialism respectively. In this paper, we see a religious leader, the Bab, trying to move his followers away from the catastrophic millennialism with which their culture is imbued. The paper also touches briefly on a later figure, Baha'u'llah, who completed the move to a progressive millennialism. This can be compared with the 'managed millennialism' that Jacqueline Stone (2000, 277-9) has described for Sokka Gakkai in Japan.

The Babi Movement, with which this paper is concerned, has its main historical importance today as the precursor of the Baha'i Faith, which has established itself as an independent religion in most countries of the world. But in the mid-nineteenth century, the Babi movement was important in its own right in Iran, where it succeeded in shaking the country both physically, in a number of bloody upheavals that occurred, and psychologically, in that it challenged the religious and political order.

In 1844, Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi put forward a claim in the southern Iranian city of Shiraz, took the title of the Bab and started the Babi movement (Amanat, 1989; Smith, 1987; MacEoin, 2009). For eight years, it caused a

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considerable stir in Iran. At their height, the Babis may have been as many as 100,000, constituting about two percent of the population (Smith, 1984). We will examine the exact nature of the claim later in this paper but for now it is sufficient to say that it challenged the religious and political institutions of the country. At first, opposition to the new movement came mainly from the religious leaders, who wrote treatises and issued *fatwas* against it. After four years, however, there was an escalation in the level of violence with bloody conflicts in several parts of Iran in which thousands died in the period 1848-50, culminating in the execution of the Bab himself in July 1850. After this there was a further escalation of violence in 1852, when an attempt was made on the life of the Shah by a small group of Babis, leading to the issuing of an order for a general massacre of the Babis throughout the country. The specific factors leading to the violence in 1852 have already been the subject of a separate paper (Momen, 2008). This paper will look at the more general factors that led up to the start of the violence in 1847-8 and how the violence was defused after 1852.

The majority of the population of Iran belong to the Ithna-`Ashari or Twelver school of Shi`i Islam. This means that they believe that after the Prophet Muhammad, leadership of the Islamic world rightfully belonged to Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law `Ali and eleven of his descendants one after the other, although, in fact, of these twelve only `Ali ruled the Islamic world (for five years) and his son Hasan (for a few months). All of the twelve Imams, except the last, are believed to have been martyred, most of them by poison, but the most dramatic and for Shi`is paradigmatic, was the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the third Imam in a battle at Karbala in 680 AD. The Twelfth of these Imams is believed by Shi`is to have gone into hiding because of fear of his enemies at the age of five in 874 AD. They believe that God has miraculously prolonged his life, that he is still alive and is the Imam, the legitimate political and religious leader of the world. Specific, then, to the Shi`i form of Islam is what has been called the 'sacramental state of messianic expectation' (Lawson, 2012, 136). Expectations of the return from hiding of the Twelfth Imam merged with expectations of another messianic figure in Islam, the Mahdi (who is expected in Sunni Islam as well), and so the Hidden Twelfth Imam is also often called the Imam Mahdi. In Twelver Shi`i belief, the Hidden Imam Mahdi will return at the Time of the End before the Day of Judgment, when he will then lead his forces in a final apocalyptic battle against his enemies. One of the titles of Imam Mahdi is *al-Qa'im bi'l-Sayf* (the one who will arise with the sword) and Shi`i traditions create an expectation of much bloodshed and violence before his final victory (Ghaemmaghami, 2017).

Since the Shi`is for most of their history have been a persecuted minority, the ethos of martyrdom and being oppressed has played very strongly throughout Shi`i history and Shi`is have concomitantly looked to the coming of the Imam Mahdi who will defeat the enemies of the Shi`is and put right the wrongs of the past one thousand four hundred years. Not unnaturally this millennialist expectation has peaked at various times in history. In the first three hundred years of Islamic history, there were many revolts in the name of the Mahdi among the Shi`is. After the first three hundred years, however, although millennialist expectation has peaked at times, there have been only a few

figures, who have claimed to be the appearance of Imam Mahdi, and none among the mainstream of Twelver Shi`ism until the advent of the Bab.

The year 1844 was, according to the Islamic lunar calendar, exactly one thousand years after the Twelfth Imam had gone into hiding. Not unsurprisingly, millennialist expectations reached a peak among the Twelver Shi`is at this time (Amanat, 1989, 70-105).<sup>2</sup> In that year, the Bab wrote a book called the *Qayyum al-Asma*. The outward claim, made in the very first chapter of the book, is that this book is sent by the Hidden Imam and the Bab is the agent (hence 'Bab' meaning 'gate') responsible for the delivery of the text. This book can be understood on many levels, however, and there is evidence (Momen, 1982) that it was clear to those who read the text of the book carefully – and this was both the followers of the Bab and his clerical opponents – that he was in fact claiming a far higher station. After about four years, the Bab brought out his full claim – that he was in fact the Hidden Imam and, not only that, but he was claiming the same station as the Prophet Muhammad, abrogating the religion of Islam and inaugurating a new religious dispensation (Shi`is expect the Imam Mahdi to propagate Shi`i Islam on his return, not to start a new religion).

Even the claim in 1844 that he was the agent of the Hidden Imam, however, put the Bab into confrontation with the Shi`i religious leaders who claimed that in the absence of the Hidden Imam, they were collectively the agents of the Imam. On the basis of this claim, the Shi`i religious leadership gained not just prestige but they were also able to collect the religious taxes due to the Imam and this formed much of their income. Thus, a great deal was at stake in this clash of claims. Once the Bab had issued his full claim to be the Imam Mahdi (in 1848), this was also a challenge to the secular government of Iran, since, for Shi`is, the Imam is both the political and religious leader of the Islamic world. At no point, however, did the Bab call for the religious taxes to be paid to him and he reassured the Shah in a letter that he had no desire to replace him as ruler: 'I have no desire to seize thy property, even to the extent of a grain of mustard, nor do I wish to occupy thy position' (The Bab, 1976, 26).

Immediately after he had gathered his first group of eighteen disciples, the Letters of the Living, the Bab departed on a pilgrimage to Mecca and ordered his followers to gather in Iraq, where he would join them after his pilgrimage and openly declare his mission (Mazandarani, n.d., 235). This was clearly along the lines of millennialist expectation in that Shi`i Traditions state that, upon his return, the Imam Mahdi will announce his mission in Mecca during the Hajj pilgrimage and then appear in Iraq to lead his army to victory. It seems to have been clear to everyone that the Bab's arrival in Iraq would signal the full appearance of the Imam, the start of his military campaign,

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<sup>2</sup> Qatil ibn Karbala'i (the pseudonym of a cleric of Karbala who became a Babi) also mentions the intense millennialist expectations and states that it went beyond just the Muslims and was present among the European Christians, Sabaeans, Zoroastrians and Jews as well as Ni`matullahi Sufis (Mazandarani, n.d., 514). Mrs Meer Hassan Ali (1832, 1:135) writes in 1832 that the Shi`is in Lucknow, India, were expecting the Imam Mahdi to arise in 1260 AH (1844 AD). The rise of the Sudanese Mahdi four decades later bears witness to the fact that such expectations also existed in the Sunni world in this period.

culminating in an apocalyptic battle in which the Shi'is would defeat their enemies. Many of the Bab's followers as they gathered at Kufa near Najaf were armed and expecting to fight alongside the Mahdi against his enemies. The commotion that they caused in the shrine cities of Iraq (Najaf and Karbala) was noted even by the British Consul in Baghdad.<sup>3</sup>

The Bab's emissary to Iraq was however rejected by the senior Shi'i clerics in Najaf, arrested, put on trial in Baghdad before a court of the senior Sunni and Shi'i clerics and condemned to death, although this was then commuted to hard labour in the naval dockyards in Istanbul, where he died shortly afterwards (Momen, 1980, 87-90). The Bab heard of the reception that had been accorded his emissary to Iraq while he was on pilgrimage in Mecca. While travelling back, he wrote letters to try to achieve the release of his emissary. He then decided not to proceed to Karbala. He has given his reason for this in a prayer addressed to God (in the following, the 'day of my return' could also be translated as the 'Day of the Return' [of the Hidden Imam]):

Thou knowest full well of my orders to the divines [the Bab's leading disciples] that they should go to the Holy Land [Karbala] where, on the day of my return, we would openly reveal Thy concealed Covenant, to which all would submit. Thou art aware of the news that reached me in Umm al-Qura [Mecca] of the repudiation of the clerics and rejection by those in the Holy Land [Karbala] who are remote from Thee. Therefore I gave up my intention and did not travel in that direction, so that conflict and dissension may not be stirred up and the people who are obedient to Thee may not be humiliated and not a hair of anyone's head be harmed through injustice or tyranny. (Afnan, 2000, 183-6, 184; Mazandarani, n.d., 280-81; see alternative translation in Amanat, 1989, 252)

This episode, occurring as it did at the very beginning of his mission, is important in giving an insight into the Bab's attitude towards any hint of violence occurring. He was fully aware that some of those awaiting him in Iraq would be disappointed and feel betrayed by his not going and would form the opinion that he cannot be whom he said that he was – and this is indeed what happened. Yet the paramount consideration for him was to avoid confrontation, conflict and violence. The six years of his leadership of the Babi movement were an exercise in managing the potential violence inherent in his claim.

In Shi'i legal theory, the right to call for a *jihad* rests solely with the Imam. With his claim to be the agent of the Imam Mahdi and later the Imam Mahdi himself, the Bab was also claiming the sole right to declare *jihad*. Having claimed this right, he then refrained from doing so, even when his followers were under attack. Although the Bab never annulled the Islamic ordinance of

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<sup>3</sup> 'I understand that considerable uneasiness is beginning to display itself at Kerbela and Nejef, in regard to the expected manifestation of the Imam.' Dispatch of Henry Rawlinson to Sir Justin Sheil, British Minister in Tehran, 16 January 1845; Public Record Office: F0 248 114 (quoted in Momen, 1981, 87).

*jihad*, he effectively cancelled its impact in his book of laws, the Persian Bayan by extending the right to call for *jihad* only to future Babi kings. Thus, none of the Babis of that time, nor for the foreseeable future had the right to call for *jihad*.

MacEoin (1982, 101-105) has highlighted the fact that the Bab writes in favour of *jihad* in the *Qayyum al-Asma*, the book he wrote at the start of his mission and has concluded that the Bab advocated *jihad*. But he has missed the main point of that book. The book itself is a paraphrastic Qur'an. Although nominally it is a commentary on one chapter of the Qur'an, folded into the text are numerous passages from the rest of the Qur'an into which the Bab intertwines his own words in order to reveal to the reader the true meaning of the Qur'an. Thus the texts relating to *jihad* which MacEoin quotes are reworkings of the statements of the Qur'an on this subject and commentaries on this. They are the Qur'anic teachings on *jihad*. At this stage in the Bab's mission, he had not yet claimed to be inaugurating a new religion and was urging his followers to follow strictly the Islamic laws. The Bab's own views on violence are more accurately captured in his actions and the above quotation from his writings. The Bab later explained in his book *Dala'il al-Sab`a* that he had at first called on his followers to follow the laws of Islam:

...so that the people might not be seized with perturbation by reason of a new Book and a new Revelation and might regard His Faith as similar to their own, perchance they would not turn away from the Truth and ignore the thing for which they had been called into being. (trans. in Bab, 1976, 119)

Hence MacEoin's attempt to cast the Babi upheavals in terms of a paradigm of *jihad* runs up against two insuperable obstacles: that Babi theory did not allow for the Babis of that time to wage *jihad* (without the permission of the Bab, which he did not give) and that there is no evidence that any of the local leaders where these episodes occurred ever called for *jihad*. This was, in effect, the Bab's first method of managing the expectations of violence surrounding his claim.

The Bab's second method of managing the expectations of violence surrounding his claim emerged over the years. As the level of violence against his followers increased, the Bab became ever clearer in his explicit calls for non-violence. This is most clearly expressed in Persian Bayan where the Bab states no-one should be the cause of grief to another (n.d., 143) or cause fear in another (n.d., 245) and most clearly and emphatically that:

The ruling on killing others is that it has been forbidden in the Bayan more strongly than any other matter and nothing is more emphatically prohibited – to such an extent that if even the mere thought of killing someone should enter a person's heart, that person is outside the religion of God . . . (Bab, n.d., 117-8)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> MacEoin (1982, 108) has arbitrarily stated that this passage relates only to the killing of believers, but there is nothing in the passage or its context to substantiate that. Saiedi

## Events in 1845-1850

The fact remains however that, despite these efforts of the Bab to counteract and nullify the violence inherent in his claim to be the Imam Mahdi, violence did nevertheless break out. The rest of this paper briefly describes what occurred and tries to establish why this violence occurred.

After his pilgrimage, the Bab did not, as stated above go to Karbala but rather landed at Bushehr in early 1845. From there he instructed his leading disciple Quddus, who had accompanied him on the pilgrimage, to go ahead to Shiraz. Quddus carried a letter that instructed one of the leading Babis to ascend the minaret of a mosque close to the house of Bab and to sound the call to prayer (*adhān*) with an additional formula referring to the advent of the Bab. This caused a stir, four of his followers were arrested, beaten and expelled from the city, and soldiers were sent to bring the Bab from Bushehr. The Bab was brought to the court of the governor in June 1845 and in the course of the interview, the governor ordered one of his footmen to strike the Bab. The Bab was put under house arrest in the custody of his uncle.

In September 1846, with the governor preparing to move against the Bab again and an outbreak of cholera in the city, the Bab left Shiraz for Isfahan. Here he found an ally in the governor Mu`tamid ud-Dawlih. Eventually, a number of the senior clerics of the city issued a *fatwa* declaring the Bab an infidel worthy of death. The Bab was hidden and protected by Mu`tamid ud-Dawlih, who died however in February 1847. At this time, the shah, curious to meet the prophet who had won over both his trusted governor of Isfahan, Mu`tamid ud-Dawlih, and one of the most learned of the court clerics, Sayyid Yahya Darabi, ordered the Bab to be sent to Tehran. Muhammad Shah's prime minister Haji Mirza Aqasi, however, did not want this to occur. He owed his position not to any skills of statesmanship that he had displayed but rather to the hold that he had over the shah as his religious mentor. Fearing the arrival of the Bab in Tehran might mean his own displacement, Haji Mirza Aqasi schemed to get the Bab removed to Maku, a fortress in the remote north-west of the country, the heartland of the prime minister's support. Finding that the Bab was still able to communicate with his followers, the government transferred him to another fortress in northwest Iran, Chihriq, in April 1848.

A number of significant events for the subject of this paper occurred in 1848. In the early part of this year before leaving Maku, the Bab wrote the Bayan, his book of laws, replacing the laws of Islam, thus making clear that his was a new religious dispensation (and not just a reform or renewal of Islam). News of this development was, however, slow to reach his followers because of his isolation in Maku. Also, in this book, the Bab interpreted many of the Shi'i apocalyptic prophecies as having a spiritual meaning relating to the advent of the Bab. In this way, he was trying to move the Babis away from the

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(2008, 357-71) has analyzed MacEoin's paper from the viewpoint of Babi doctrine and Zabihi-Moghaddam (2002) from a historical viewpoint.

catastrophic millennialism of Wessinger's classification. In June 1848, a conference of some leading Babis was held at a place called Badasht between Tehran and Mashhad. At this conference, it was announced that the abrogation of Islamic law and the start of a new religious dispensation had occurred. This was signalled by the appearance at the conference of the Bab's leading female disciple Tahirih Qurrat ul-`Ayn without the customary Islamic veil. There were also discussions about how to free the Bab from his detention. A month later in July 1848, the Bab was brought from Chihriq to the provincial capital Tabriz. There at an interrogation in front of the Crown Prince, Nasir ud-Din Mirza (soon to be Nasir ud-Din Shah), and the leading clerics of the city, he announced his claim to be the Imam Mahdi. At almost the same time on the instructions of the Bab, Mulla Husayn, one of the Bab's leading disciples, had raised a black flag near Mashhad in Khurasan and began a march westwards with a few hundred Babis. This raising a black flag was considered the fulfilment of a well-known prophecy regarding the coming of the Imam Mahdi (Momen, 1985, 168).

On 4 September Muhammad Shah died and Nasir ud-Din, now Shah, travelled to Tehran and replaced Haji Mirza Aqasi with Mirza Taqi Khan as Prime Minister. On 12 October, just a week before Nasir ud-Din's official enthronement, Mulla Husayn and his companions, having been attacked in Barfurush, entered the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsi and built defensive fortifications around it. The leading cleric of Barfurush as well as some of the notables of the area addressed an appeal to the new shah to act against the Babis. The new shah and newly appointed prime minister sent thousands of troops and many cannon against the lightly fortified positions and the few hundred lightly armed Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi. The siege lasted five months with several major reversals for the shah's troops, until the Prince Commander of the besieging forces sent a Qur'an into the Babi camp inscribed with a promise of safe passage. Once the Babis came out they were massacred, with only a handful of survivors.

Two further episodes occurred in 1850 in which the Babis were surrounded by government troops and succeeded in defying these. One episode in Nayriz in the south of Iran ended after one month with another act of trickery and deceit, this time by the governor of Nayriz; while the other siege at Zanzan on the road between Tehran and Tabriz was ended after eight months of gradual attrition of the Babi forces and a final assault. Many thousands of Babis and government troops were killed in these three episodes.

The actions of the Babis may have been provocative in the events preceding these three episodes, but in none of them did the Babis initiate the violence. In all three cases, local forces began an action against the Babis, and in the case of Shaykh Tabarsi and Zanzan, there is clear evidence that this was at the instigation of the local clerics. They then appealed to the central government or provincial government for support. In none of the three episodes is there any evidence that the Babis thought of themselves as engaged in an offensive *jihad*. If any religious paradigm was being invoked, it was more that of the episode in early Islamic history when the third Shi`i Imam, Husayn, and his small band of supporters was surrounded at Karbala



by a large Umayyad army and all eventually killed after nine days of battle. (Nabil, 1970, 326, 343, 413n., 471, 494, 495)

Catherine Wessinger (2000a, 16-38; 2000b, 18-23) has described those millennialist movements that result in violence as being of three types: first, 'assaulted millennialist groups', which are misunderstood and considered deviant by the wider society, which persecutes them and initiates violence against them, to which they may or may not respond violently; second, 'fragile millennialist groups' where internal and/or external pressures lead to a situation where the group feels that they have to initiate violence in order to preserve their 'ultimate concern'; and third, 'revolutionary millennialist groups' where the violence is the direct result of the doctrines of the group or the orders of its leader. While the culture in which the Babis existed expected them to be a 'revolutionary millennialist group', in that the Imam Mahdi was expected to lead his forces into battle against the forces of evil (their opponents), the Bab did nothing to encourage that view among his followers and acted to forestall violence (in his message to his followers gathered at Karbala to disperse, for example) and even kept to this when his followers were being attacked in 1848-1850. The Babi movement at this stage fits best into the 'assaulted millennialist movement' category insofar as the religious leadership of the country campaigned to vilify it and succeeded in drawing the forces of the state into attacking it.

### **The Attempt on the Life of the Shah 1852**

A separate paper has already dealt in detail with the events of 1852, when a failed attempted assassination of the shah by a small group of Babis in Tehran unleashed a nationwide general massacre of the Babis (Momen, 2008). For the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to summarize that after the execution of the Bab and the loss of most of the leading Babis by 1850, the Babi movement was disorganized through the removal of its leadership and dispirited at the disconfirmation of the prophecies of victory that their culture told them should accompany the Imam Mahdi. One faction of the Babis in Tehran began to meet under a charismatic leader, Husayn Jan, who began to plot a dramatic move that would exact vengeance for the execution of the Bab by assassinating the Shah which would in turn be the apocalyptic event that would initiate the intervention of supernatural forces to bring about their victory and the establishment of a Babi state. Part of the reason that the attempt to assassinate the shah occurred was that the state's removal through exile of a moderate leader Mirza Husayn `Ali Nuri, who had the title Baha' and would become known as Baha'u'llah, had left the field free for the more extremist charismatic leader to take control and move the Babis towards violence. The enterprise failed and, after the resulting massacre, the movement went underground and its cohesiveness was lost for a time.

We can summarize this phase of Babi history by saying that, with the loss of the Bab and the movement led by weak competing leaders, this group of Babis in Tehran under a charismatic but impractical leader pinned their hopes for the attainment of their 'ultimate concern', the establishment of a Babi state, on a wildly improbable plan that they hoped would set the world to rights by

both eliminating their enemies and establishing their rule in one violent apocalyptic event. They thus fitted the description of a 'fragile millennialist movement'.

### After 1852

After the failed attempted assassination of the shah in 1852, most of the leadership of the movement was killed, but Baha'u'llah, although he was captured and imprisoned for four months, was eventually exiled to Baghdad in the Ottoman domains in January 1853, partly because no evidence could be found against him (as he was in the custody of the prime minister's brother at the time of the assassination attempt). Baha'u'llah's half-brother Mirza Yahya Azal, who claimed that he had been invested with leadership by the Bab, also fled Iran to Baghdad. Here there was a conflict between the two brothers with Mirza Yahya favouring a radical violent approach (at one stage he dispatched one of his followers to Iran to see if he could assassinate the shah), and Baha'u'llah favouring a rebuilding of the shattered community by concentrating on improving its moral and spiritual qualities as the best way to attract new recruits.

The Bab in many of his later writings had repeatedly written of the appearance of a messianic figure whom he named 'Him whom God shall make manifest'. Baha'u'llah announced that he was 'He whom God shall make manifest' to a small group of his close followers in 1863 in Baghdad and more openly in 1866-8, by which time he had been exiled to Edirne in the Ottoman Empire's European domains. He later went on to assert that he was the messianic figure promised in the scriptures of all religions; for example: 'Say: O people! The Day, promised unto you in all the Scriptures, is now come. Fear ye God, and withhold not yourselves from recognizing the One Who is the Object of your creation' (Baha'u'llah, 1983, 314; cf 1983, 12; 2002, 75). The vast majority of the Babis followed Baha'u'llah and became known as Baha'is.

While the Bab had tried to move his followers away from catastrophic millennialism (see above), his efforts were hindered by his imprisonment and he cannot be said to have built a vision of a progressive millennialism in his writings. It was Baha'u'llah who completed this process of moving from catastrophic millennialism to progressive millennialism in his writings. Even before he put forward any claim, he wrote a book in 1861, in which he reinterpreted the sovereignty that the Imam Mahdi would have from being an earthly sovereignty to be acquired through battle and the force of arms to being a spiritual sovereignty achieved by winning over hearts and minds (Baha'u'llah, 1974, 106-34). At the time that he first announced his claim in 1863, Baha'u'llah prohibited *jihād*. The word *mujāhid*, which in Islamic culture means 'the religiously motivated warrior' came to mean in Baha'u'llah's works 'the true seeker after spiritual truth' (Lawson, 2012, 144-8). Later Baha'u'llah went further and said that even defensive military action was wrong: 'It is better to be killed than to kill' (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, 1974, 198; see also Baha'u'llah, 2002, 110). In his later years, he repeatedly enjoined his followers not to engage in seditious activity: 'We exhorted all men, and particularly this

people, through Our wise counsels and loving admonitions, and forbade them to engage in sedition, quarrels, disputes and conflict' (Baha'u'llah, 1988, 22).

Baha'u'llah moved his followers on to a progressive millennialism through the promise of a peaceful united world, which it was the duty of all humanity to build gradually and in stages: 'It is incumbent upon all the peoples of the world to reconcile their differences, and, with perfect unity and peace, abide beneath the shadow of the Tree of His care and loving-kindness' (Baha'u'llah, 1983, 6). And he outlined the processes necessary to achieve this. Such a change in culture could not of course be achieved immediately. There is some evidence of some movement in this direction even in the time of Baha'u'llah; in the actions of the Baha'is of Ashkhabad (Russian Turkmenistan) in 1889, for example, in petitioning the Russian authorities to have the death sentence removed from two Shi'is who had assassinated a leading Baha'i in broad daylight in the centre of the city. However, it was left to Baha'u'llah's successors, his son `Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921) and his great-grandson Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), to advance this process further psychologically in the individual and culturally in the community.

### **The Causes of the Movement towards Violence**

For the first four years of the Babi movement, the confrontation between the Bab and the religious and secular authorities was mainly at the level of polemic and debate. The level of violence was minimal – the Bab was struck on the orders of the governor of Shiraz and put under house arrest; several of his followers were whipped and exiled from Shiraz; and there was a serious outbreak of violence in Qazvin in 1847 (see below) but it did not last for long. So despite the potential for violence it did not occur on any large and prolonged scale until 1848.

There are thus two questions that require an answer. What were the factors leading to violence? What was the reason that serious levels of violence only broke out in October 1848 four years after the start of the Bab's mission? A number of answers can be suggested to the first question:

First, in Shi'i culture, there is a strong yearning for the appearance of the Imam Mahdi who will lead Shi'is to victory over their enemies. Many Shi'is long to live in the day of the Mahdi and to be able to join his army and fight alongside him in a *jihad* (holy war) that would result, after much violence and mass killing, in victory and the Imam would then rule over the earth and fill it with justice. Thus, any claim to be the Imam Mahdi carried with it expectations of an imminent apocalyptic battle. Many Babis may have acted on this assumption at least for the initial gathering that the Bab called for in Karbala in 1844. Later, as the Babis accompanied the black flag westwards from Khurasan, such ideas may well have come to the minds of some of them, although there is no indication that it was the main concept in the minds of the Babi leadership.

Second, although this theme of the Imam Mahdi leading his forces into an apocalyptic battle from which he would emerge victorious may have been in

the minds of some in the period 1848-1850 when the main Babi upheavals in Iran were going on, the imagery in the reported rhetoric of the Babi leaders tended to be more about the Imam Husayn going to the field of martyrdom at Karbala. This trope of martyrdom dominates Shi'i popular religious practices in Iran. All of the Shi'i Imams except for the Twelfth are popularly believed to have been martyred and are mourned accordingly. The martyrdom of Imam Husayn at the end of a battle in which the Imam was surrounded by vastly superior forces at Karbala is however the episode that raises the emotions of the people most. So when the Babi leaders invoked the imagery of Karbala in addressing the Babis, they were evoking an imagery not of aggressive violence but one of defeat and martyrdom. This trope plays into a conceptualization of the world in black and white terms – a radical dualism, which Wessinger identifies as a factor leading to violence, especially if a group experiences opposition or persecution (Wessinger, 2000a, 15-17, 24-36; Wessinger, 2000b, 17–21, 39-41, 265, 271–73).

Third, the opponents of the Babis were of course equally steeped in this dualist view of the world and saw the Babis as the embodiments of evil, fit only to be put to the sword. The predominant faction among the Twelver Shi'i clerics of Iran was the Usuli school. During the preceding two centuries, there had been an increasing trend among the Usuli clerics in Iran and Iraq to resort to the issuing of *takfirs* (declaration that someone is an infidel, worthy of death) resulting in violence when they were confronted with those who challenged their authority and threatened their position in society. At first this tendency to violent suppression was turned outwards to the Sunnis in Iran but once they were no longer a threat in most parts of Iran, it was turned to groups within the Twelver community who were perceived as deviating from the norms that the Usuli clerics wished to impose upon the people. At the end of the seventeenth century it was the Sufis and mystical philosophers who suffered from this pressure to conform. A judgement of *takfir* (being infidels) was issued against them and many were killed or forced to leave Iran. Then in the late eighteenth century, the Usulis turned their attention to a rival group within the Twelver clerical establishment, the Akhbaris. Up to that time, there had been a lively debate between these two schools. Then a declaration of *takfir* was made against the Akhbaris and debate was transformed into violent suppression. When the leader of the Akhbaris was set upon by an Usuli mob and killed in 1817 (Tunukabuni, n.d., 180; Heern, 2015, 71-86), the Akhbaris were effectively eliminated as a significant force (Heern, 2015, 168-79; Algar, 1969, 35-6, 61, 64-66). Then in the early nineteenth century, Usuli attention switched to another Twelver Shi'i school, the Shaykhis, and there were numerous episodes of Usuli violence against the Shaykhis. Given this history of violent suppression, when the Babis began to compete with the Usulis for the people's religious affections, there was thus a likelihood that this would be countered by violence.

Thus far, these are factors leading towards violence that operated throughout the period of the Bab and other factors need to be looked at to understand why the violence specifically began in late 1848:

First, the Bab's claim appeared initially to be just that of being the agent of the Hidden Imam. At this level, it was only a challenge to the religious establishment, who felt threatened by this both with regard to their position in society and their income. Once the Bab openly claimed in 1848 to be the Imam Mahdi himself, this also implicitly challenged the authority of the state and the clerics found it easier to involve the state in their persecution of the Babis. Thus, for example, the first episode of a severe level of violence was the murder of Mulla Taqi Baraghani, the Usuli leader in Qazvin, in September 1847. Although the perpetrator was a Shaykhi (who later became a Babi), the Babis were blamed for this and it was the first time that Babis were killed on Iranian soil. However, at this stage while Muhammad Shah was still alive and, before the Bab had made an overt claim to being the Imam Mahdi, the clerics found it difficult to drag the state into the dispute and the episode fizzled out after a time. After the Bab's declaration in 1848 that he was the Mahdi, the clerics found no difficulty in dragging the state into the conflict, thus leading to an escalation in the level of violence.

Second, certain actions of the Babis in 1848-50 probably provoked violence; for example, the action of raising a black standard in Khurasan by some of the Bab's leading disciples in July 1848. The raising of a black standard in Khurasan in 747 CE had resulted in the overthrow of the first Islamic dynastic caliphate, the Umayyads, and the significance of this was doubtless not lost upon the state.

Third, the fact that the westward march of the Babis from Khurasan under the black standard happened at the time of the death of Muhammad Shah and the instability that tended to occur in Iran upon the death of a monarch added to the likelihood that there would be a swift and violent reaction on the part of the state. Muhammad Shah died 4 September 1848 and his son and successor Nasir ud-Din Shah appointed an energetic and wilful Prime Minister Mirza Taqi Khan. The latter was determined to impose order on the country as part of his reforms of the administration. He seems to have accepted the clerics' view, regarding the Babis as disturbers of the peace and disruptors of the social order. He therefore reacted severely when told that a group of Babis had taken up arms in Mazandaran (Shaykh Tabarsi) and immediately sent troops and cannon without any real investigation of the causes of the situation there. He acted similarly in the case of Zanjan and Nayriz.

Fourth, the isolation of the Bab was probably an important factor in facilitating violence. As we have noted, the Bab was very much against violence, but from July 1847 onwards, he was imprisoned in remote fortresses in the far north-west corner of Iran. This was on the orders of the Prime Minister, Haji Mirza Aqasi and was designed to isolate the Bab from contact with his followers. In this situation, the Bab's ability to control his followers was severely diminished and the potential for violence increased. Similarly, the exiling of Baha'u'llah, a leading moderate Babi, from Iran shortly after the execution of the Bab in 1850 left the field free for more extreme leaders to operate without hindrance, leading eventually to the attempted assassination of the shah in 1852.

## Conclusion

Having surveyed the events of the Babi movement from 1844 to 1850 and looked at the factors that tended towards violence, we can now compare some of these factors with those found by scholars who have worked on violence in other millennialist movements:

**Conceptual factors.** We have already noted that Wessinger has found that a belief in radical dualism facilitates the move towards violence. In a millennialist group, this can result in a rhetoric that sees those who oppose and persecute the group as the embodiments of evil and worthy of death. Iran was of course the home of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, which many consider to be the origins of dualism in human intellectual history. Thus Iranian culture was imbued with a radical dualism long before the advent of Shi'i Islam. It may be that part of the reason that Shi'i Islam was able to gain a strong base in Iran was the ease with which this dualism could be transferred to the story of the Twelve Imams and their suffering and martyrdom at the hands of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs. Popular religious practices such as recitals and theatrical performances (passion plays) of the story of Imam Husayn at Karbala as well as ritual chanting and self-flagellation deepened the impact of this dualistic vision. In the specific context of the Babis, when surrounded by the shah's troops at Shaykh Tabarsi, Nayriz and Zanzan, it was easy for the Babis (and some Muslim Iranians) to identify those who besieged and attacked them with those who had surrounded and attacked the Imam Husayn at Karbala.

**Charismatic Leadership.** Michael Barkun (1974) and Lorne Dawson (2002 and 2006) have both drawn attention to the importance of the devotion shown to leaders believed to have charismatic authority (such as Jim Jones of the Peoples Temple and Asahara of Aum Shinrikyô) as a factor in millennialist movements that have become violent. In the case of the Babi movement, the relevant factor was not so much the presence of a charismatic leader inciting his followers to violence as the absence (through imprisonment in a remote locality) of a charismatic leader (the Bab), who was against violence. In the 1852 assassination of the Shah however, Husayn Jan, a charismatic leader in Tehran, played an important role in creating the movement towards violence among a small group of Tehran Babis.

**Social and economic dislocation.** Norman Cohn (1970) has highlighted the role of social and economic dislocation in the rise of militant millennialist movements. He gives the example of the poor created by the break-up of traditional structures during the Middle Ages in Europe, who were roused by populist preachers to join the First Crusade in the expectation of a life of wealth and ease in Jerusalem (see also Baumgartner, 1999). There were certainly great economic and social dislocations in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century. The country was beginning to feel the full force of the military,

economic and industrial superiority of the West. It lost large amounts of territory to Russia in two wars at the start of the nineteenth century and was threatened with colonization. The markets of Iran were being flooded by cheap goods produced in the factories of Europe, putting local craftsmen and artisans out of work. Iran had little it could export and so it paid for imports with gold and silver – leading to drain of these from the country, debasement of the coinage and inflation (Momen, 1983, 158–59). It is however, difficult to make out a case for the Babi movement being the result of these factors. First, as we have seen, the Babi movement was not inherently militant in its ideology, and second, an analysis of its leaders does not show a preponderance of those who were most affected by these social and economic dislocations (Momen, 1983, 176–78).

The Babi movement can at first be seen as what Wessinger has called an 'assaulted millennialist group', in that they were misunderstood and considered deviant by the wider society and assaulted but did not respond violently. The experience of severe (or perceived severe) persecution can turn millennialist group into a 'fragile millennialist group', at which time the leader of the group turns to violent solutions to deal with the wall of opposition that confronts them on every side and to preserve their ultimate concern, solutions that involve harm to others (as with the Aum Shinrikyô sarin gas attacks in Tokyo) or harm to the members of the group (as with the suicides and murders of the members of the Solar Temple and the People's Temple). In the case of the Babi movement, however, the leader, the Bab, strove hard to avoid violence and constantly counseled his followers not to play out the violent narrative for the return of the Hidden Imam that was part of their culture. The local Babi leaders seem to have largely followed this counsel only taking to arms when they had been attacked and were defending themselves.

The events of 1850, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Babis and the execution of the Bab himself, seems to have created the situation of a 'fragile millennialist group' at least among some of the Babis of Tehran. These met and plotted vengeance against the Shah for the execution of the Bab. There followed the attempt on the life of the shah and the killing of a large number of Babis in 1852. The movement then went underground and emerged decades later as the Baha'i religion under the leadership of Baha'u'llah whose writings created the vision of peace and unity necessary to move his followers away from the catastrophic millennialism of their culture towards a progressive millennialism.

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