CHAPTER EIGHT

BAHA’IS OF IRAN: POWER, PREJUDICES AND PERSECUTIONS

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This chapter presents and analyses the position of the Baha’is of Iran and their relationship with Iranian society, including the State and the Iranian ulama. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979, the Baha’i minority has suffered from intensified persecutions, and the analysis deals primarily with these persecutions as seen in the light of the Baha’is’ historical relationship with the Iranian State and the ulama, respectively. The analysis includes the issue of the position of the Baha’i minority in Iran, the doctrinal tensions between the Baha’is and the ulama, and the different prejudices about the Baha’is, which fuel the popular support to the persecutions.

The Baha’is

The Baha’is constitute the largest religious minority group in Iran, with more than 300,000 followers by 1979 (Smith 1984; Smith 2000: 208). The religion has its background in heterodox movements in Shi’a Islam in nineteenth-century Iran. In 1844 this milieu gave rise to an important millenarian movement, Babism. The leader of the movement, called the Bab (born 1821, executed 1850), saw himself as the gate to the Hidden Imam, and he succeeded in attracting quite a number of followers. In the following years the movement radicalised in religious terms, and in the summer of 1848 the Babis abrogated the shari’a officially and declared that the era of Islam was over and a new revelation had dawned (MacEoin 1986).

The Babi movement was soon perceived as a revolutionary threat, and the government attempted to suppress the movement by military force. The government’s fear of the Babis was not totally unfounded, because

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1 The number of Baha’is in Iran must have decreased to some extent since the revolution in 1979, because many Baha’is have fled from Iran, but no reliable census is available.
2 For an overview of the rise and development of the Babi and Baha’i religions see Smith 1987 or Warburg 2006: 6–15.
already in a circulatory letter early in 1848, the Bab declared himself to be
the Hidden Imam (MacEoin 1986; MacEoin 1992: 82). According to Shi‘ite
tinking, this announcement meant that the power of the ulama was
nullified, and the shah himself should subordinate to the Bab, who was to
lead the faithful in the final battle against the unbelievers (MacEoin 1982;

In 1852–53 after several years of irregular battles between the Babis and
the governmental troops, all the main Babi leaders had been killed or exiled,
and the Babi movement lost its impetus and went underground. In the
1860s, the remnants of the movement developed into the Baha‘i religion
under the exiled Babi leader, Mirza Husayn-Alı Nuri (1817–1892), called
Baha’u’llah. He attempted to uphold the delicate position of being in non-
vviolent opposition to the Iranian State wishing to change the perception of
the Babis as religious revolutionaries. Instead, both Baha’u’llah and his son
and successor Abdu’l-Baha (1844–1921) advocated in writing for political
reform in Iran (Cole 1992; Cole 1998: 79–108). Apparently this policy helped,
and in the 1880s and 1890s a number of Baha‘is held high positions in the
government (Cole 1998: 97). However, the improved relations with the
State did not prevent the occasional eruption of mob riots with lootings
of Baha‘i property and killings of Baha‘is. These local persecutions had a
seedbed in the widespread public animosity against the Baha‘is and were
often encouraged from ulama circles (Amanat 2008).

In the same period, the religion began to spread outside Iran: in the
beginning by mission among the expatriate Iranian communities in Iraq,
Turkey, Syria, Egypt and India, especially in Bombay. A flourishing Baha‘i
community was established in Ashkabad in Russian Turkestan during the
1880s by Iranian emigrants (Momen 1991). Baha‘i missionaries also went
to the USA and Canada in the 1890s, and to Western Europe around 1900.
Effective growth in Europe did not occur, however, until after World War II,
when Abdu’l-Baha’s grandson and successor, Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957),
organised a Baha‘i mission in Europe, assisted by American Baha‘is who
came to Europe as Baha‘i missionaries. During the 1960s and 1970s the
Baha‘is of the USA grew to become a wealthy and most influential com-

3 The American Baha‘i community grew from around 10,000 members in the beginning