I.  
Continuity and Transformation:  
Martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith
The Birth of a Monotheistic Religion in Modernity
On Jihad and Martyrdom in the Bahā’ī Faith

Sasha Dehghani (Berlin)

I. Religion, Modernity and Violence


At the beginning of the 1920s Marianne Weber edited Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, a posthumously published compilation of research materials written by her husband Max Weber (d. 1920), one of the founding figures of German sociology. In a brief remark at the beginning of this work we learn how he viewed the Bahā’ī Faith. Weber writes: “By harmonising religion with Modernity and reclaiming its place in the modern world, the Bahā’ī Faith and the Salafiyya intend to infuse a disenchanted world with a new spirit. In their visions of a future world order based on divine principles, they dream of a return from society (Gesellschaft) to community (Gemeinschaft).”

Weber’s statement is multilayered and lends itself to the discussion of two different points with respect to the Bahā’ī Faith. The first relates to Weber’s enumeration of the Bahā’ī Faith alongside the Muslim Salafiyya, a comparison which requires consideration of an accurate classification of the Bahā’ī Faith. The second concerns the relationship of the Bahā’ī Faith to Modernity, the context within which the subject of monotheism and violence will be looked at.

Weber’s lumping of the Bahā’ī Faith with the Salafiyya would be seriously misleading unless read in light of Ignaz Goldziher’s Vorlesungen über den Islam, Weber’s main source on developments then taking place in the Islamic world. Goldziher’s Vorlesungen, which were published in 1910, included a relatively detailed account of the Muslim Salafiyya, strongly focusing on the Wahhabiyya movement formed in the late 18th century on the Arabian Peninsula, as well as some information on the Bahā’ī Faith. During Goldziher’s lifetime the Sunni Salafiyya movement had become famous due to the Islamic reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh (1905) and his friend and teacher Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1897), both of whom believed that the Koranic revelation was to be considered

---


the main source for the happiness of civilisation in every age of humanity. Furthermore, al-Kawākibī (1902), another proponent of the Ṣalafīyya, had integrated particular teachings of the Wāḥhābiyya into the Egyptian Ṣalafīyya ideology, thereby adding to its publicity. Thus a reader of Weber’s comment, who is aware that “Ṣalafīyya” here either refers to ʿAbduh and Afghānī or to the Pietistic Wāḥhābiyya movement, could be tempted to classify the Bahāʾī Faith as just another contemporary Islamic reformist movement. Reading Weber’s statement in light of Goldziher’s Vorlesungen however helps to correct such a view.

While the reformation of the Islamic world could be regarded as one goal of the Bahāʾī Faith, its chief objective went far beyond that of a Muslim reformist enterprise. The messianic renewal claimed and envisaged by the central figures of the Bahāʾī Faith transcended Islam and was universal in nature. Consequently, the prophetic claim of Bahāʾu’llāh (d. 1892), the central founding figure of the Bahāʾī Faith – as well as the claim of his herald, the Bāb (d. 1850), and the role of his eldest son and authorised interpreter ʿAbdu'l-Bahā (d. 1921) – differed immensely from the ijtihād of an Egyptian al-Azhar scholar or the conspiring mindset of a pan-Islamic Iranian activist. It left the confines of Islamic doctrine based on the belief of the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood and led to the foundation of a new world religion, as Goldziher had discerned in his Vorlesungen when he wrote that Bahāʾu’llāh had laid down the “design for a new world religion.”

Moreover, unlike Weber, Goldziher accentuated another key difference between the Ṣalafīyya and the Bahāʾī Faith. Whereas the Islamic reformers yearned for a return to the classical order of their pious ancestors (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ), the Bahāʾī religion offered the idea of a progressively advancing human civilisation. To reach the state of a Golden Age the Salafists looked to the past, while the Bahāʾī vision was oriented on the future. For the Bahāʾī Faith, the concept of a Golden Age included the construction of a world order in the future – as Weber correctly noted – understood in terms of a world civilisation representing the fruit of a new monotheistic revelation, a concept that would have been inconceivable for a classical Muslim reformist movement.

Indeed, the extent to which the differences between the Bahāʾī Faith and the Muslim Ṣalafīyya outweighed their similarities became glaringly clear in 1925,

3 Whereas in his Vorlesungen Goldziher dealt with ʿAbduh in a rather superficial way, in his later work, Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung, he analyzed ʿAbduh’s teachings in greater detail; see Ignaz Goldziher, Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung: An der Universität Upsala gehaltene Olaus-Petri-Vorlesungen, Leiden 1920, 344.
6 Ibid. 271.
7 For the concept of a Golden Age in Bahāʾī writings, see Ali Nakhjavani, Towards World Order, Acuto 2004, chapter 1.
when Egyptian Muftis issued a historical fatwa stating that “the Bahá’í religion is a new religion standing on its own” (din jadid qa’im bi-dháthihi) with “beliefs, principles and laws” (aqa’id wa usül wa akhâm) differing entirely from those of the Islamic religion. Furthermore: “In the same way as you do not call a Buddhist, a Brahman or a Christian a Muslim and vice versa, you do not call a Bahá’í a Muslim and vice versa.”

Hence, Bahá’ís and Muslim clerics agreed on the independent nature of the Bahá’í religion, and, up to a certain extent, Goldziher’s Vorlesungen were in line with this classification. Nevertheless, Western academic scholars contemporary to Weber and Goldziher continued to interpret the Bahá’ís as a new Muslim reformist group or a new division of Twelver Shiism for some years. It was only after the experience of the Third Reich — during which the Nazi government dissolved the German Bahá’í community — that leading German theologians and professors of religious studies, such as Friedrich Heiler, Helmut Glasenapp and Gerhard Rosenkranz, finally emphasised the independence of the Bahá’í Faith from its Islamic mother religion.

2. The matryoshka effect

The second notable aspect of Weber’s statement is the positioning of the Bahá’í Faith in the context of Modernity. But since Weber did not give a substantive explanation of why the Bahá’í Faith should be seen as a religion in harmony with Modernity, intending to infuse a new spirit into a “disenchanted world”, we must move a century forward to the German historian Jürgen Osterhammel. In his impressive study on 19th-century global history, Die Verwandlung der Welt (The Transformation of the World), Osterhammel presents the ‘derivation’ missing in Weber’s work.

Osterhammel maintains that the Bahá’í Faith should be regarded as one of the rare modern religious creations that have lasted to our day. He speaks of Bahá’u’lláh as one of the great “lateral thinkers” (Querdenker) of his time, who went far beyond the patterns of thought common to his age, and attributes a spirit of Modernity to the religion of Bahá’u’lláh because of its main principles.

---

8 Extracts of the original text are cited in Shoghi Effendi, Taṣqíʿát-i Mubárakih (1927-1939), Tehran 1973, 16. I would like to thank Dr. Omid Ghaemmaghami for bringing this letter to my attention.
12 Ibid.
According to him, the following teachings of the Bahá’í Faith can be designated as modern:¹³

- acceptance of a constitutional state and parliamentary democracy;
- promotion of women’s rights;
- rejection of religious nationalism;
- concern for the idea of world peace;
- annulment of the doctrine of Holy War; and
- open-mindedness toward science¹⁴

Osterhammel’s brief reference to the Bahá’í Faith is significant, and not simply because he connects the Bahá’í religion to the complex phenomenon of Modernity. Much more important, especially for an examination of the Bahá’í understanding of martyrdom and jihād, is the fact that his portrayal conveys more than just an impression of the nonviolent and peaceful spirit animating the young monotheistic religion. In addition, a glimpse at some of the above-mentioned principles calls into question the assumption, advocated by some antireligious public intellectuals, that the phenomenon of religious monotheism is necessarily violent and intolerant. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, the neuroscientist Sam Harris and the late journalist Christopher Hitchens have asserted, time and again, that violence and monotheism are inextricably wedded, indeed, that violence must be seen as a quasi-genetic constituent of all monotheistic religions.

In this context a word about the method of such anti-monotheistic authors seems necessary. These writers often tend to focus on one specific religion and epoch instead of undertaking the extensive and careful research required to adequately address the general phenomenon of religious monotheism. The subject of religion and monotheism is treated like a Russian matryoshka — the well-known set of wooden dolls of decreasing size nesting one inside the other. The first and largest doll is usually the focus of an observer’s attention, while all the others nesting inside are presumed to be miniature replicas of the first. Similarly, the entire phenomenon of monotheism is judged by the impression of one — in many instances the first — monotheistic religion, while all the other subsequent religions are examined in a cursory way. Such a methodological approach leads to more than just a distorted view of monotheism; it also results in a fixation on the epoch of Early Antiquity, thereby ignoring the possibility that post-Antiquity monotheism might be more than just another echo of an Urszene.

Such a matryoshka effect can be observed, for example, in Dawkins’s The God Delusion, which for the most part speaks of all monotheistic religions but predominantly refers to the Bible. His preoccupation with this source is evident when he quotes the American novelist Gore Vidal: “The great unmentionable evil

¹³ Ibid, 1271f.
¹⁴ According to Osterhammel, this final principle is possibly the most important criterion for religious modernity. See ibid, 1272.
at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved – Judaism, Christianity and Islam […]”. And again, only a few lines later, Dawkins admits: “For most of my purposes, all three Abrahamic religions can be treated as indistinguishable. Unless otherwise stated, I shall have Christianity mostly in mind, but only because it is the version with which I happen to be most familiar.”

Of course, the presumed connection between monotheism and Antiquity, on the one hand, and monotheism and violence, on the other, is not new. Sigmund Freud’s *Der Mann Moses und der Monotheismus (Moses and Monotheism)*, for instance, works along similar lines. In his search for the true origins of monotheism, Freud applied his psychoanalytical tools to unearth the truth hidden in the Hebrew Bible, interpreting the post-Jewish monotheism of Christianity and Islam as a miniature repetition of a bygone and repressed past. To him, messianic Christianity and Christ’s martyrdom were to be read in terms of a return of the “violent end” of Moses, who was allegedly killed by the Jewish people guided by Yahweh, “a rude, narrow-minded local god, violent and bloodthirsty.”

About Islam, similar to Dawkins, but in a more sophisticated way, Freud writes:

> The author regretfully has to admit that he cannot give more than one sample, that he has not the expert knowledge necessary to complete the investigation. This limited knowledge will allow him perhaps to add that the founding of the Mohammedan religion seems to him to be an abbreviated repetition of the Jewish one, in imitation of which it made its appearance. There is reason to believe that the Prophet originally intended to accept the Jewish religion in full for himself and his people.

Freud and Dawkins are just two representatives of a class of scholars whose perception of the object of study is distorted by this *matryoshka* effect. If such generalisations about monotheism and violence are to be formulated, then not only should the historical context of the classical monotheistic religions be examined more carefully. Of even greater importance is that all monotheistic religions need
to be examined. Treating the origins of monotheism might be an important primary step, but it cannot be the final one. To avoid distortions, it is not only mandatory to study the concept of monotheism as articulated and practiced in Late or Early Antiquity, but also to move forward to the Middle and Modern Ages.

A very different view, for example, is offered by the British historian of religion, Karen Armstrong, who notes in her *History of God*:

The idea of God formed in one generation by one set of human beings could be meaningless in another. Indeed, the statement ‘I believe in God’ has no objective meaning as such, but like any other statement it only means something in context, when proclaimed by a particular community. Consequently there is not one unchanging idea continued in the word ‘God’ but the word contains a whole spectrum of meanings, some of which are contradictory or even mutually exclusive. Had the notion of God not had this flexibility, it would not have survived to become one of the great human ideas.”

Although Armstrong might have put too strong an emphasis on the notion of human subjectivity, her understanding reflects a crucial awareness of time and relativity. Up until now, such a differentiated approach to the phenomenon of religion has proven rare, and in general the examination of post-Biblical monotheistic religions leaves much to be desired. While Islam is treated somewhat superficially, a monotheistic religion emerging in times of Modernity, such as the Bahá’í Faith, is hardly taken into consideration. This neglect, however, can be seen as a natural consequence of a widespread secular scepticism. After all, Modernity’s secular heroes passionately questioned the existence of God and the prophet — to Nietzsche God was dead, to Weber the true prophet was regretfully absent, while for Carlyle the absent prophet had been substituted by modern men of letters.

3. The birth pangs of a new religion

Be that as it may, the main purpose of the previous discussion was not to create a naive or pacifistic counter-image of monotheism. A differentiated way of looking at the history of religions would surely acknowledge that the main monotheistic religions which emerged in pre-Modernity are familiar with the phenomenon of violence. But they experience it in different ways and contexts. In some periods they engage in violence, in others they endure violence. It is notable that the latter is to be observed in the emerging period of monotheistic religions. In other

---

words, it is during the time of birth and infancy that all monotheistic religions have to endure violence, although this situation changes over the course of time.

Reuven Firestone, a scholar of Jewish and Islamic Studies, observes that new monotheistic religions always emerge in a polemical environment filled with “mimetic tension.” The established religion feels threatened by the emergence of the new religion, which preaches that the established religions are failing to meet the spiritual and social needs of the current generation. As a result, the established religion is perceived as attempting to delegitimise the new religion. Firestone writes that established religions can never really countenance the new religion and concludes: “They inevitably attempt to do away with them.”

In a similar vein, Bernard Lewis in Islam and the West writes about the tense relationship that exists between the main monotheistic traditions. According to him, a major trigger of conflict between these religions is their point of “similarity.” The resemblance of their claims and teachings leads to rivalry between them. Another point to be considered, simple yet of great importance, is the factor of time. Lewis writes that all monotheistic traditions can, at least to some degree, tolerate their religious predecessors, but the same rule is not valid for their subsequent counterparts or successors. Lewis correctly recognises that Judaism felt threatened by Christianity, while Christianity could integrate parts of Jewish reality but rejected Islam, and Islam, in turn, could tolerate previous religions of the Book (abl al-kitāb), like the Jews, the Christians or Zoroastrians, but not post-Islamic book religions such as the Bahā’ī Faith. Lewis concludes that established religions – or more accurately, their particular religious institutions – fear the new religion and that their fear generates the urge to discriminate and even persecute the new religious community.

At this point the concept of martyrdom comes into play. The newborn religious community, which in the early stage of its history is always in a minority position, has to face up to persecution, and so asks itself how can it deal with the forces of oppression. Since the adherents of monotheistic traditions usually hold the belief that their faith is universally true and valid, the majority of them will not be willing to give up their position. They will accept death rather than deny their belief. The historical examples of pre-hijra Meccan Islam and pre-Constan-

---

29 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 As the German constitutional law scholar Carl Schmitt pointed out, a conflict takes place between instances and not between substances. Cf. Silvia Horsch, Tod im Kampf. Figurationen des Märtyrers in frühen sunnitischen Schriften, Berlin 2011, 45.
33 Lewis, Islam and the West, 7.
34 Explaining the opposition the newborn Islamic religion had to face, the German Islamicist Marco Schöller describes the Koran itself as “a document that shows the struggle of a new
tinian Christianity, as well as the context of the Jewish exodus narrative, demonstrate that all major monotheistic religions have to suffer violence at first. In this context martyrdom should be seen as the consequence of the persecution an emerging religious community suffers during its earliest phase. The case of the Bahāʾī community demonstrates that such a phenomenon is not only confined to historical Antiquity or the Middle Ages but also exists in the Modern era.

II. The Bahāʾī Faith: A Case of Nonviolent Monotheism

1. From weapons of war to instruments of peace

Lewis’s analysis ends with the emergence of the Bahāʾī Faith, a religion — as Osterhammel has indicated — with a serious concern for the idea of world peace. Certainly, hardly any other subject could provide a more appropriate lens through which to examine the attitude toward violence within the Bahāʾī Faith than its concepts of martyrdom and jihad. Since these two concepts, in turn, will be better understood when explained in light of the historical birth process of the Bahāʾī religion, it is necessary to undertake a brief summary of its history, focusing on the different types of reactions to the persecution which the heralding movement of the Bahāʾī Faith had to suffer.

The Bāb, who was a forerunner to Bahāʾu’ llāh, claimed in 1260/1844 to be a prophetic figure fulfilling the messianic expectation of (Twelver Shiite) Islam. Within a short period many people accepted his claim, among them a number of Iranian Shiite clerics, who had been tutored in Iraq by the two founders of the

35 Historian Patrick Collinson emphasises that persecution and martyrdom should be seen as the two main contrapuntal themes of early Christian church history. The persecution of the early Christians was therefore closely linked to the concept of human rights, since the most fundamental human right, the right to live, was endangered. See Patrick Collinson, “Religion und Menschenrechte: Die Rolle des Protestantismus”, in: Menschenrechte in der Geschichte ed. by Oliver Hutten, Frankfurt 1988, 36f.

36 The Pharaonic oppression, which Moses and the Jewish people had to overcome through their exodus to the Holy Land, has entered into the collective consciousness of humanity in such a paradigmatic way that it has not only been of importance to all post-Mosaic founders of monotheistic religions but also, as we may assume on the basis of the political theorist Michael Walzer’s study Exodus and Revolution, the whole of modern revolutionary political philosophy, which in one way or another is modelled on the figure of Mosaic redemption and the deliverance of the Hebrew people from the Egyptian tyrant. See Michael Walzer, Exodus and Revolution, New York 1985, chapter 1.
Shaykhi School — Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥṣāʾī and Siyyid Kāẓim al-Rashtī. The Bābī community grew rapidly and its growth, in turn, caused the enmity of some influential ‘ulamā’, who eventually instigated the Persian Shah, Nāṣir al-Din Qājār (d. 1896), to attempt to eradicate this new religious movement from the pages of Iranian history. In less than a decade thousands of Bābis had been killed, including the Bāb, who was shot by a large firing squad in Tabriz, in the seventh year of his ministry, leaving the movement almost collectively destroyed and virtually erased.

During this first decade of its existence, i.e. between 1844 and 1853, the Bābī community reacted to the persecution of the Iranian government in at least four different ways. Some individuals withstood the pressure of persecution steadfastly and accepted death without defending themselves. Such a passive form of martyrdom took place, for example, in the case of the first Bābi martyr Mullā ʿAli Baštāmi, the Bāb himself — whose execution was ordered by the chief Minister Amir Kabīr (d. 1852) — and his prominent female apostle, Ṭāhirih Qurrat al-ʿĀyn, who was strangled to death about two years after the martyrdom of the Bāb. This type of martyrdom was well known to the early Christians, many of whom accepted being killed during pre-Constantinian Roman persecution.\(^{37}\) But some Bābis decided to practice dissimulation of their belief, often because they could not withstand the pressure of persecution.\(^ {38}\) Such a practice was endorsed in the culture of Shiīte Islam as taqiyyiyib;\(^ {39}\) whereas the early Christian church discouraged this attitude and named those believers who denied their faith in times of persecution fallen ones (Lat., lapsi).\(^ {40}\) Other Bābis fought against the army of the Shah and died in a defensive jihad.\(^ {41}\) This type of Bābi martyr resembles the Islamic battlefield martyr (shahīd al-mārāka) of the Muhammadan era in Medina or the Shiīte martyrs of Karbalā’ in 680.\(^ {42}\) And there was also a small number of individuals who actively used violence without being in a defensive situation,

\(^{37}\) For the concept of martyrdom in early Christianity, see Glen Bowersock, Martyrdom and Rome, Cambridge 1995.

\(^{38}\) The secretary of the Bāb, Siyyid Ḥusayn Kātib, practiced dissimulation at the time when the Bāb was martyred in Tabriz in July 1850, but later he accepted to be killed for his belief, see ʿAli Muhammad Fayzi, Ḥadrat-i Nuqtih-yi Ulā, Hofheim 1994, 332ff.

\(^{39}\) On the practice of taqiyyiyib in Shiīte Islam, see Ethan Kohlberg, Belief and Law in Imami Shi‘ism, Hampshire 1991, chapter 3.

\(^{40}\) See Friedhelm Winkelman, Geschichte des frühen Christentums, München 2005, 96.

\(^{41}\) Many of the apostles of the Bāb, including Quddūs and Mullā Husayn, died during an armed conflict while defending themselves against the royal army, which far outnumbered them. Cf. Siyamak Zabihi-Moghadam, “The Bābi-State conflict in Māzandarān,” in: Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements and the Bābī-Bahāʾī Faiths, ed. by Moshe Sharon, Leiden 2004, 179ff. In the writings of the Bāb the subject of jihad is quite complex. Whereas in his early and central Taṣfīr on the Sura of Joseph the doctrine of jihad seems to be of relative importance, in his later and no less central Persian Bayān, the same term hardly even appears. In any case, although it is difficult to conclude that the Bāb had explicitly forbidden the doctrine of jihad, Saiedi argues that he “effectively eliminated it”. Nader Saiedi, Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Bāb, Waterloo 2009, 368.

\(^{42}\) On the concept of martyrdom in early Islam, see David Cook, Martyrdom in Islam, Cambridge 2007.
with the awareness that their actions would lead to their death. This occurred after the martyrdom of the Báb, when a group of Bábís wanted to take revenge for the death of the Báb and attempted to assassinate the Shah in 1852. The failed plot led not only to their immediate execution, but also to the unjustified killing of a very large number of Bábís who had not been involved. To some Western contemporaries this deed bore similarities to the methods of the Ismāʿīlite assassins in medieval Islam.⁴³

Bahá’u’lláh, who in the time of the Báb was seen as a prominent figure in the Bábí movement and later founded the independent Bahá’í religion with laws differing not only from Shiism but also from the Bábí religion itself,⁴⁴ strongly criticised those Bábís who attempted to assassinate the Shah in his Epistle to the Son of the Wolf;⁴⁵ The first part of the Epistle suggests that Bahá’u’lláh not only condemned the instances of violence on the part of members of the contemporary Bábí community, but also went a step further and reinterpreted the concept of jihad in favour of a solely ethical and spiritual struggle. Through this Epistle, written in 1891 one year before his death, we can reconstruct Bahá’u’lláh’s attitude towards those Bábís who tried to assassinate the Shah:

Day and night, while confined in that dungeon, We meditated upon the deeds, the condition, and the conduct of the Bábís, wondering what could have led a people so high-minded, so noble, and of such intelligence, to perpetrate such an audacious and outrageous act against the person of His Majesty. This Wronged One, thereupon, decided to arise, after His release from prison, and undertake, with the utmost vigour, the task of regenerating this people. (…) 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. As a result of this, and by the grace of God, waywardness and folly were changed into piety and understanding, and weapons converted into instruments of peace (badai‘ gashī‘ silāḥ bi-islāḥ).⁴⁶

Bahá’u’lláh then explains his vision of converting weapons of war into instruments of peace — a formulation bringing to mind Isaiah’s vision of the eschaton, when the nations shall gather on the holy mountain of God and “beat their swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks” (2:4) — to Shaykh Bāqir Najafi, a hostile Shiite cleric of Isfahān to whom the treatise was addressed. Bahá’u’lláh cites passages from his earlier writings to prove that the Bábís’ assassination attempt was antagonistic to the main values of the Bahá’í Faith and stood in no connection to himself:

This Wronged One enjoineth on you honesty and piety [...]. Through them man is exalted, and the door of security is unlocked before the face of all creation. Happy the

---

⁴³ After the attempt on the life of the Shah, Lady Sheil, the wife of a British Ambassador to Persia, compared the Bábís to Ḥasan Ṣabbāh; cf. Moojan Momen, The Bábí and Bahá’í Religions. 1844-1944 Some Contemporary Western Accounts, Oxford 1981, 9.
⁴⁵ See Bahá’u’lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, Wilmette 1988.
⁴⁶ Ibid, 21.
man that cleaveth fast unto them, and recognizeth their virtue, and woe betide him that
denieth their station. [...] O peoples of the earth! Haste ye to do the pleasure of God,
and war ye valiantly (jāhidū ḥaqq al-jihād), as it behooveth you to war, for the sake
of proclaiming His resistless and immovable Cause.47

Bahā’u’llāh states: “We have decreed that war shall be waged in the path of God
(qadarnā al-jihād fī sabīl allāh) with the armies of wisdom and utterance, and of a
goodly character and praiseworthy deeds (bi-junūd al-hikmat wa’l-bayān wa bi’l-
akhlāq wa’l’-a’mal)”. “Revile ye not one another,” he continues,

We, verily, have come to unite and weld together all that dwell on earth [...] In the
Book of God, the Mighty, the Great, ye have been forbidden to engage in contention
and conflict. Lay fast hold on whatever will profit you, and profit the peoples of the
world. [...] Beware lest ye shed the blood of any one. Unsheathe the sword of your
tongue (sayf al-lisān) from the scabbard of utterance (an ghamd al-bayān), for therewith
ye can conquer the citadels of men’s hearts. We have abolished the law to wage holy war
(rafwānā ḥukm al-qatl) against each other. God’s mercy hath, verily, encompassed all cre-
ated things [...] Every cause needeth a helper (nāṣir). In this Revelation the hosts which
can render it victorious (junūd-i mansūrīh) are the hosts of praiseworthy deeds and up-
right character. The leader and commander (qā’id wa sardār) of these hosts hath ever
been the fear of God [...].48

We can see how the term jihād appears in the writings of Bahā’u’llāh: the entire
passage is infused with pre-modern warfare imagery, the sword, the scabbard, the
shield, the citadel, the hosts of an army that fights for victory (naṣr/nasrāt).49 Yet none of these terms is employed to encourage a militant jihād or a real holy war.
Instead, they symbolise the willingness of a believer to struggle through an ethi-
cal and spiritual fight. In Bahā’u’llāh’s Epistle the concept of jihād is intentionally
divorced from its aspect of militancy and physical fighting, that is, the doctrine of jihād is separated from the notion of qitāl as found in the Koran and entirely
transformed into a nonviolent and spiritual concept.50

2. The annulment of militant jihād and the sword

This transformation can be seen as the necessary consequence of the annulment
of militant jihād — a principle that Bahā’u’llāh had explicitly abrogated a few
years earlier in his Laawh-i Bishārāt (Glad Tidings). There Bahā’u’llāh writes that
“the law of holy war hath been blotted out (māhā-r-i ḥukm-i jihād) from the

47  Ibid.
48  Ibid, 22ff.
49  For the importance of the notion of victory (naṣr/nasrāt) in the writings of Bahā’u’llāh, see
Nader Saiedi, Logos and Civilization. Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahā’u’llāh,
Bethesda 2000, 243.
50  For the Koranic connection of jihād to qitāl and the difference between these two terms,
See also Bassam Tibi, Der Wahre Imam. Der Islam von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart, Munich
1996, 93ff.
This abrogation in itself should be seen as the amplification of an earlier statement that Bahá’u’lláh proclaimed during the time of his residency in 1863 in the garden of Ridwán in Baghdad. It is reported that during the days of his disclosure to some of his companions of his claim to be the one foretold by the Báb, he announced three main principles of the new religion to the Bahá’í community, the first of them being that “the use of the sword is abolished in this revelation” (sayf dar in zubúr muttafi’ ast). Hence, in the Bahá’í writings the physical sword can be read as a synonym for religiously motivated jihad.

Commenting on the detrimental effects of the physical sword, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in his The Secret of Divine Civilization, also emphasised that humanity has entered a modern era wherein salvation of the human race at the point of the sword must be seen as an antiquated idea. He writes that “in this day and age the sword is not a suitable means for promulgating the Faith (dar in ‘asr sayf wāsiṭih-yi tarwīj nab), for it would only fill peoples’ hearts with revulsion and terror.” Addressed to the radical believers willing to propagate their religious conviction violently, he explains that neither Islam nor Christianity—even though their Holy Scriptures did not explicitly prohibit the exercise of violence—won their main victories through coercion or the sword. “According the Divine Law of Muḥammad,” he continues, “it is not permissible to compel the People of the Book to acknowledge and accept the Faith. While it is a sacred obligation devolving on every conscientious believer in the unity of God to guide mankind to the truth, the Traditions ‘I am a Prophet by the sword’ (anā nabī bi’l-sayf) and ‘I am commanded to threaten the lives of the people until they say, ‘There is none other God but God’ referred to the idolaters of the Days of Ignorance, who in their blindness and bestiality had sunk below the level of human beings. A faith born of sword thrusts (bi-ḍarb-i sayf ḥāṣīl) could hardly be relied upon, and would for any trifling cause revert to error and unbelief. After the ascension of Muḥammad, and His passing to ‘the seat of truth, in the presence of the potent

---

51 Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Chatham 1978, 21. For the original see Bahá’u’lláh, Majmú‘a min Alwáḥ Ḥadrat Bahá’u’lláh, Brussels 1980, 37.
52 In the Bahá’í writings the principle is upheld that all major prophets and founders of monotheistic religions function as lawgivers who are permitted to cancel or alter the legal enactments of previous religious dispensations. This can be deduced when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, for example, states that Jesus abrogated (naskh nimūd) the religious law of the Jewish people that had lasted up to his time for about a millennium and half. See ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, Wilmette 1984, 16. For the original, see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Mufāwidhāt, Karachi, n.d., 13. This concept is similar to the Islamic understanding which holds that abrogation (naskh) can either be “internal”, pertaining to one and the same revelation, or “external”, implying that the younger monotheistic religion can substitute the laws of the older ones. See John Burton, “Abrogation”, in Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān, vol. 1, Leiden 2001, 11-14.
King,’ the tribes around Medina apostatised from their Faith, turning back to the idolatry of pagan times.” Then he turns to the example of early Christianity and states that “after the ascension of Jesus to the Realm of Glory, these few souls stood up with their spiritual qualities and with deeds that were pure and holy, and they arose by the power of God and the life-giving breaths of the Messiah to save all the peoples of the earth. Then all the idolatrous nations as well as the Jews rose up in their might to kill the Divine fire that had been lit in the lamp of Jerusalem (...). Under the fiercest tortures, they did every one of these holy souls to death; with butchers’ cleavers, they chopped the pure and undefiled bodies of some of them to pieces and burned them in furnaces, and they stretched some of the followers on the rack and then buried them alive. In spite of this agonizing requital, the Christians continued to teach the Cause of God, and they never drew a sword from its scabbard or even so much as grazed a cheek (bidūn-i sill-i sayf wa kharāshīdan rīy-i nafsī). Then in the end the Faith of Christ encompassed the whole earth (...).” He then concludes:

It has now by the above irrefutable proofs been fully established that the Faith of God must be propagated through human perfections, through qualities that are excellent and pleasing, and spiritual behavior. As for the sword, it will only produce a man who is outwardly a believer (bi-darb-i sayf bi-zābir muqbil), and inwardly a traitor and apostate.⁵⁵

Such texts undoubtedly had a huge impact on the Bahā’ī community and ultimately how the concept of martyrdom was deeply transformed, especially when compared to the notion of martyrdom as it existed in the first decade of Bāb history or in the history of Twelver Shiism.

3. The greater martyrdom: al-shahādat al-kubrā

Of the four above-mentioned reactions of the early Bābī community, only the first — to die a passive and nonviolent death in a situation of persecution — was considered acceptable in the Bahā’ī writings.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Bahā’u’llāh seems to

---


⁵⁶ Through the writings of Bahā’u’llāh and his successors the Bahā’ī community gradually learned to abandon the practice of taqīyyih. See for example Bahā’u’llāh’s dissuasion of “the fearful who seeketh to disseminate his faith” (khā’if-i mastūr) or his praise of Ashraf’s mother encouraging her son not to back down because of the threats of the enemies and to offer up his life for the new religion in Bahā’u’llāh, Muntakhab āthār-i Ḥaḍrat-i Bahā’u’llāh, Hofheim 2006, no. 64:4 and no. 69. See also Bahā’u’llāh’s emphatic denial of press reports falsely stating that out of fear he had fled from Tehran to Baghdad in order to “conceal” (pinhān) himself. Only a few passages later Bahā’u’llāh rebukes Mirzā Hādī Dawlatbādī, who converted to the Bābī religion yet arbitrarily changed his religious identity whenever he deemed it necessary (Tablets of Bahā’u’llāh Revealed after the Kitāb-i-Aqdas, 40-44). Already in the Persian Hidden Words we find the general attitude of concealing or dissembling (mastūr or pinhān) being discouraged by Bahā’u’llāh. See Bahā’u’llāh, The Hidden Words. Persian-Arabic-English, Bundoora 2001, nos. 59, 60, 72. Also see ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s praise of Siyyid Muṣṭafā Baghdādī, who—in the early years of Bahā’u’llāh’s exile in Bagh-
have preferred yet a different type of martyrdom. In one of his letters to an early believer named Kāẓim (possibly Shaykh Kāẓim Samandar), we come across the term “Greater Martyrdom” (shahādat-i kubrā): a form of martyrdom not necessarily involving the physical death of the believer for the sake of his religion, but rather demanding that the individual strive to submit one’s own will to the higher will of God and dedicate one’s life entirely to the service of God’s cause and to humanity.57 Similarly, in another letter Bahā’u’llāh writes that “today the greatest of all deeds is service to the Cause,” adding: “martyrdom is not confined to the destruction of life and the shedding of blood. A person enjoying the bounty of life may yet be recorded a martyr in the Book of the Sovereign Lord.”58

Thus, although passive and nonviolent blood martyrdom (Blutzeugnis) is acceptable in the Bahā’ī religion, one might reasonably argue that the nobler form of martyrdom is the living martyrdom of offering up one’s self in the path of service.59 Indeed, during his early years of exile and banishment in Baghdad, Bahā’u’llāh had already alluded to modes of self-sacrifice more commendable than physical death in the path of God. In the last of the Arabic Hidden Words he writes:

O Son of Man! Write all that We have revealed unto thee with the ink of light (middād al-nūr) upon the tablet of thy spirit ('ala lavāb al-rūḥ). Should this not be in thy power, then make thine ink (al-middād) of the essence of thy heart (min jawhar al-fuʾād). If this thou canst not do, then write with that crimson ink (al-middād al-aḥmar) that has been shed in My path (sufika fi sabīlī). Sweeter indeed is this to Me than all else, that its light may endure forever.60

This passage reveals that physical martyrdom, i.e., to write with the red ink that has been shed in the path of God,61 is not the only way to bear witness. This Hidden Word even suggests that physical martyrdom could be seen as the lowest act of

---

59 For the concept of martyrdom and servitude, see the article of P.O. Akerdahl in this volume.
60 See Bahā’u’llāh, The Hidden Words, 48f, 55.
61 The passive form of the Arabic verb sufika implies that the shedding of one’s own blood is intended, not the shedding of someone else’s blood. Thus the Bahā’ī concept of martyrdom differs completely from the type of self-inflicted martyrdom observable in the recent phenomenon of suicide bombers. See Khan, The Heritage of Light, 35ff.
bearing witness. According to Bahá'u'lláh, two higher testimonial acts of witnessing exist, which we can associate with the concept of *al-shahadat al-kubrā*. In this regard it is worth mentioning that a relationship between blood and ink is already familiar from Shiite traditions, for example, the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, is reported to have said that the ink of the scholars (*midād al-ʿulamā*) will outweigh the blood of the martyrs (*dimā al-shuhadā*) on the Day of Judgment.\textsuperscript{62}

In accordance with the three alternatives of written testimonies mentioned in the *Hidden Words*, some decades later, during the earliest years of the ministry of Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957), a short commentary on the multiple aspects of the concept of martyrdom was published in the leading international Bahá'í magazine *Star of the West*. The first aspect described was “to stand bravely and meet death unflinchingly in the path of God, as those wonderful souls have recently done in Persia, without wavering for an instant in constancy nor for a single moment denying their faith.” The second aspect was “to little by little detach one’s heart entirely from this world, laying aside, deliberately, all vanities, worldly seductions, and devoting oneself to the vineyard of God in whatever capacity he is fitted to serve, letting action, word and deed become a telling monument, a fitting praise and an everlasting glory for His Holy Name.” The third aspect was portrayed as “doing the hardest and most difficult things with such willingness and self-sacrifice that all behold it as your pleasure”; accepting one’s lot, be it poverty or wealth, with the same attitude; seeking the company of those who suffer rather than that of the frivolous and pleasure-seeking; dressing simply and plainly such “that your appearance becomes a comfort to the poor and an example to the rich”; accepting “the decree of God” and rejoicing “at the most violent calamities, even when the suffering is beyond endurance” – the fulfilment of the last of these conditions qualified one to become a true martyr.\textsuperscript{63}

Although the commentary is a personal opinion and not an authoritative Bahá'í statement, the threefold concept of martyrdom helps us to reflect on the aforementioned *Hidden Word*, and also to understand why the title of “martyr” could be bestowed on Bahá'ís — in the time of Bahá'u'lláh on Eastern believers\textsuperscript{64} and in the time of Shoghi Effendi on Westerners\textsuperscript{65} — who were not physically killed by enemies of the Bahá'í community and had obviously died a natural death.


\textsuperscript{63} See *Star of the West*, vol. 8, Oxford 1978, 377 (vol. 14, January 1924, No. 10).

\textsuperscript{64} In the years after the martyrdom in 1869 of Badi', a young Bahá'í who was killed after he personally delivered a letter of Bahá'u'lláh to the Persian Shah, Bahá'u'lláh wrote to another Bahá'í known as Ibn Aṣdaq, who yearned for martyrdom, that he should not actively seek physical martyrdom in the path of God. It would be better to strive for the station of the Greater Martyrdom. Since Ibn Aṣdaq’s wish to die for his religion was judged as pure in its motivation, Bahá'u'lláh gave him the title of “martyr, son of a martyr” (*shabīd ibn shabīd*). See Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 4, Oxford 2000, 303.

\textsuperscript{65} Shoghi Effendi bestowed the title of martyr also upon Bahá'ís of the West. Keith Ransom Kehler was titled “the first martyr” of the American Bahá'í community. She died in 1933
The Greater Martyrdom in the Bahá’í Faith may be said to find its religious prototype in early Christianity and in mystical Islam. To be sure, early Christianity was dominated by passive blood martyrdom, a phenomenon that early Christians called “red martyrdom.” Nonetheless, they also held a concept of “white martyrdom” imparting the idea of an almost unreservedly ascetic life dedicated to service to Christ and the needs of the Church. Since the submission of one’s lower carnal self was intended, the Christians’ white martyrdom can be compared to the station of a human soul’s annihilation (fanāʾ) as we know it from mystical Islam. At the same time, it resembles to some extent the al-shahādat al-kubrā of the Bahá’í writings, a term that in turn evokes the notion of al-jihād al-akbar (the Greater Jihad) – Sufi Islam’s fight against the lower ego and hence its main tool to achieve the elevated station of fanāʾ.

4. Munā and the crucifixion of Christ

With regard to similarities to Christianity, it may be of importance to add that in Bahá’í scripture the crucifixion of Christ – setting aside his bodily resurrection – is seen as a historical event, whereas the majority of the leading Sunni and Twelver Shiíte Koran exegetes do not accept it as such. Therefore the “red martyrdom” of the Bahá’ís not only finds its paradigmatic role model in the martyrdom of the Báb and the tragedy of Imam Ḥusayn, but also in the sacrificial death of Jesus. Christ’s sufferings surely encouraged many Bahá’ís to accept a nonviolent “red martyrdom” in the face of the severe persecutions that afflicted the Bahá’í community during the late Qájár and Pahlavi eras and which, with the establishment of the Islamic state of Iran, have intensified in varied ways.
Appertaining to Christ’s example for persecuted Bahá’ís, it is notable that a short time ago a set of photographs appeared on the worldwide web. These pictures show the apartment of the family of a young Iranian woman named Muná MaḥmūdNižād. The then seventeen-year-old Muná was one of more than two hundred Bahá’ís killed for religious reasons during the first years of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Some of these photographs show that Muná and her family had images of Christ in their apartment. In the photograph of Muná’s bedroom below a drawing of the crucified Christ can be seen on her bed (see. fig.1).

Muná and many other Bahá’ís practiced, as did the early Christians, an entirely nonviolent form of religious belief, willing to die but not to kill for their beliefs.

---

74 She was hanged for giving Bahá’í children classes that were regarded by the Islamic government of Iran as propaganda activities of a “dangerous sectarian movement”. For more information about her life, see the webpage: “Omid: A Memorial in Defense of Human Rights” a project of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, URL: http://www.iranrights.org/english/memorial-case--2990.php, retrieved 15.04.2012.


76 See ibid, photo no. 11. Mina Yazdani, who knew Muná’s family personally, informed me that the Mahmūdnižād family had these images of Christ in their home because to Muná’s father the unity of religions was one of the essential principles of the Bahá’í Faith and he made no distinction between Bahá’u’lláh and the divine messengers of the past.
religion. However, in view of Lewis’s analysis and with reference to a thought-provoking statement of Christoph Bürgel, a professor emeritus of Islamic Studies from Switzerland, one could argue that the nonviolent character of the Bahā’ī religion is due to its own historical stage of early childhood. Bürgel states that while the peaceful character of the Bahā’ī Faith is admirable, its real attitude towards violence can only be manifested when the Bahā’ī community leaves the stage of being an oppressed minority and finds itself in a majority position. Should such a day arrive it is assumed that the Bahā’ī community will have learned the lessons of religious history, as abundantly reinforced within its own scriptures, and will not follow the example of post-Constantinian Christianity or post-Ṣafawid Shiism, both religious confessions which – after becoming majorities and subsequently state religions – turned from nonviolent and oppressed to violent and oppressing religious cultures.