The beliefs held by Bahais, and Bahai practices, have changed over time. Some of those labelled as "dissidents" by Moojan Momen, in an article published in 'Religion,' are just ahead of the curve in the changes taking place in the Bahai community.

To: XX, <TARIKH-LIST@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU>
Subject: Marginality and Apostasy in the Bahai Community
Date sent: Mon, 26 Nov 2007 16:32:41 +0100
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[I had previously written]:

> > As Moojan has noted, not a few of the "dissident" positions have
> > been taken up in some form by the mainstream community, not for
> > political reasons but simply because they were in accordance with
> > the Bahai Writings. In other words, some of the "dissidence" is
> > simply impatience, of people who are too far ahead of the
> > community's development trajectory for the mass of the community
> > to accept. I think a small part of the talisman9 discussion is
> > also fruitful and promising in this way

On 22 Nov 2007 at 21:21, XX wrote:

> Would you please elaborate by citing specific examples of the
> mainstreaming of formerly dissident positions?

On page 204 Momen notes two changes "in the direction suggested by some apostates" (note that I am quoting Momen here, I am not adopting his term or accepting his authority to designate people as 'apostates'). These are greater openness to society and the development of a 'community of interest' around the core membership. He does not show how these are 'apostate' positions, but that is precisely the point: what he labels apostate or marginal is in most cases simply common sense or a core Bahai belief which some members feel is not sufficiently emphasised or practiced in the community. Momen gives four examples of "openness" positions: study circles, devotionals, youth groups and children's classes which are open to non-members. Again, the openness of these meetings to non-members is a core belief, and in the case of devotionals (Mashriq) it is scripturally stipulated. If it took an "apostate" to point out that this is so, then the term apostate is being used far too loosely.

Over the past 40 or so years a number of positions that were at first contested or marginalised in the Bahai community have been adopted as acceptable or even normative. For instance, Dr. Muhajir's teaching methods at first met resistance, as noted in a biography (whose author and title I cannot recall), were later adopted, and have now fallen into disuse again. The emphasis on Baha'u'llah as a person, and devotion to him, and teaching work based on this rather than on the "12 principles" was a position that I and others advocated in the 70s and 80s, it was briefly in vogue with the publication of the "Baha'u'llah" statement and then passed out of vogue again -- 'back to Baha'u'llah' is now used as a negative label by Bahais (!!), as if it meant disloyalty to his institutions.

Another example of greater openness which Momen mentions, but without making the logical connection, is the "network of core members, peripheral members, ex-members and non-members" (page 194) enabled by internet. Internet-connected Bahais, including those of the first Talisman community, were naturally among the first to say that the internet was the kind of global communications system envisioned by Shoghi Effendi and leading the Bahai community and the world to open, discursive culture and structures: it would change the world and the Bahai community. I think this is presently a tolerated, but not accepted position today: Momen notes only the usefulness of the internet for spreading "dissident views" (194-5, also on p 196).

The questioning of the literal inerrancy of the Dawnbreakers -- or more broadly, the idea that sacred history is still history and can be examined as such -- at one time got one into very hot water. Later it became acceptable, and I hope some signs of reversion to the previous situation prove to be mere incidents. Note that MacEoin -- whose initial article did not attack the Bahai Faith but presented an alternative reading of Babi history -- is described by Momen as writing "apostate articles" published in Religion. This is mean-spirited in the extreme; it is thanks to the advance guard who break their heads on extreme orthodoxy, that those who follow can discuss what was previously forbidden subject without being accused of heresy or apostasy (at least officially), and even if there is no gratitude for what was achieved, to attack the author with negative labelling instead of critiquing his actual work deserves no toleration in academic fora, let alone publication. At the time, MacEoin's reexamination of Babi history was construed as an attack on the Bahai Faith, and it did evolve into a bitter dispute because of that response, but surely with the benefit of hindsight everyone can see

that there is a difference between attacking a community and questioning the facts in its own account of its history.

Peace movement activism is another position that was at first condemned, later to some extent adopted (remember the Bahai peace movement?) and is now out of favour again.

If we went further back, we could add the idea of mixed-race meetings and racial equality activism, and membership of women on the local and national Assemblies, which I think are accepted to normative now. Or further back, we could think of Tahireh as a controversial figure, scandalizing the more orthodox, whose radicalism nevertheless became acceptable thanks to the Bab's endorsement and Baha'u'llah's support.

In any religion whose ideals are not determined at will by the current leadership, but are set out and available to all in the religion's history and text, there will be gaps between that challenging ideal and the practice, and therefore there will be a kind of "dissidence" which Momen has not considered: people who far from leaving their religion, or hating it, love it and endorse it and want it to become all that it might be. And there will be people who label them, or worse. It's up to us what role we will play in this drama: labeller, libeller, leader or loonie, peacemaker or polariser, every time the curtain goes up, the same old roles 'return'

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