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Hanna A. Langer

“I don’t want to be Tāhirih”

**Homosexuality in the Bahā’ī Religion
in Theology and Practice**



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“I don’t want to be Tāhirih”

Homosexuality in the Bahā’ī Religion in Theology and Practice

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zur Erlangung des Grades eines Magister Artium (M.A.)

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For him,
who inspired me to write this thesis
and
for all other LGBT Bahā'īs

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Preface

Almost all religions have an issue with same-sex relationships. While this is a well-known fact in the history of religions, it has not yet become an object of systematic research. In particular the question as to why religions decline homosexuality. The general male dominance of religion makes it a priori likely that gay activities arouse indignation against their challenging of the religious order of nature attributed to them. Concern for the basic principles of life, especially vis-à-vis the beginning and end of human existence, is probably even more important as to why all forms of sexuality, outside of the religiously sanctioned family and for other reasons than procreation, are met with disapproval. Having sex “just for fun” appears from a strict religious point of view not only as an evil sin that leads people away from their obedience to god’s law but to a contradiction of life itself.

It is, therefore, of little wonder that the dismissal of homosexuality lessens when religions become secularized. Christian westernised denominations have started to allow female clerics to move up to the highest ranks and do not hesitate to approve gay marriages these days. But their orientation towards the world is dearly bought by a decreasing religious impact on the majority of their followers and on society as such. Secularism comes along with the disintegration of traditional family structures and leads to a much greater degree of autonomy and individuality even among religious devotees. In its wake, sexual self-determination has become a matter of course and a positive value proposition shared by many believers as well. On the other hand, fundamentalists and the representatives of an orthodox understanding of religion usually call sexual liberty an expression of decadence and identify it as hotbed of vice. Aren’t they right, from their point of view, to uphold tradition and to brace themselves against the on-going demise of faith and moral? Isn’t it understandable that they reject extramarital sex as an assault against what has been appreciated as good and right on religious

grounds for such a long time? For them, the whole spectrum of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) conduct emerges as a sign that the end of the world is, indeed, nigh.

Whereas homosexuality causes trouble upon most religions, some even threatening with schism, a scientific occupation with religion and sexuality takes advantage of evading these kinds of internal conflicts. Since the academic study of religion is based on the principle of religious non-involvement, its research objects are transferred from theological discourses and the insider's view to the overarching framework of society, history and culture. Apart from a religious reasoning, it concentrates on historical contexts, on aspects of comparison and on the question of how the behaviour and rationale of religions change under the adjustment pressure they are exposed to. All so-called world religions originate from ancient times and revere Holy Scriptures written in fundamentally different circumstances. It is normal that these texts contain values and customs up to a certain point incompatible with a modern understanding of life. Especially religions without a particular class of theological exegetes like the Bahā'ī find it difficult to differentiate in the thicket of a given situation holding clear-cut demarcation lines, which are necessary, even vital, to distinguish between indispensable and non-negotiable doctrines on one side and teachings to be valued non-essential and therefore feasible to modification on the other. To which of these does homosexuality belong to?

The great strength of Hannah A. Langer's study is to liberate this question from its religious constraints and to address it on firm scientific grounds. It starts with the observation that even the cosmopolitan and open-minded Bahā'ī religion is trapped in an almost insoluble dilemma of tradition and modernity when it comes to sexuality. Traditionalist and contemporary views on "normal" sexual behaviour differ from each other on a large scale, sometimes to the extent of an insurmountable antagonism. Without ignoring the right of sexual self-determination, as stated, for instance, by the United Nations Human Rights Council, Langer

avoids projecting a modern understanding of human sexuality in a backwards manner. She focuses instead on a proper contextualization of same-sex relations by way of close reading the authoritative Bahā'ī writings over the course of time. Her profound knowledge both in historical and religious respect enables her to put the problem of "sodomy" into perspective, permitting new insights into the fundamental difference between the perception of anal intercourse in Persian 19th century and the conclusions of today's gender or queer studies. The Islamic notion *liwāṭ* describes gay relations usually occurring between higher-ranking and young men, often beardless juveniles, which originate from the hegemonic structures of that time. They depended on disparity and dominance and had nothing to do with the idea of an individual human right belonging to all people irrespective of their social and other status. Any literal application of an ancient perception of "sodomy" to the sexual manners of our time must inevitably lead to problems in its wake. Have religions, when political systems and prevailing opinions change, to follow suit? The answer is Yes and No.

At the end of the last century North American Bahā'ī members brought the issue of LGBT rights to the fore. In response, the Universal House of Justice in Haifa published an official communiqué in November 1995 to clarify its position. Though adopting a moderate language, the statement left no doubt about its disapproval of homosexuality. It condemned it as blatant act of immorality, a distortion of human nature and something to be dealt with like a handicap or cured like an illness. The rationale of this declaration was a religious one, being also applied to the argument that a rejection of homosexuality would not imply a rejection of homosexuals. However, what the Bahā'ī leadership might have intended as a compromise, fails to gratify those Bahā'īs, who want to be gay and regular members at the same time without impairment of their established rights. In the second part of her study Langer gives an illustrating description of the problems and harm caused by the ex cathedra pronouncement of

the Universal House of Justice. Since an honest religious commitment always affects social relations and is closely linked with cultural, political, economic and many other matters, the suggested splitting of religion and sexuality would, if embraced, unavoidably damage a person's life and integrity. Leaving a community that has proven to be important in numerous regards, surely causes pain, distress and cognitive dissonance. The same holds true for gay Bahā'īs remaining under these circumstances.

The book of Langer stands out not only due to the capability of its author for a reflected empathy scarcely to be found in academic theses but also due to its notable scientific findings. They shed new light on the intimate relationship of religion and sexuality and underline how closely religions are attached to their non-religious environment. The fact that religions usually refer to god's word and divine law does not release their representatives, leaders as well as followers, from the duty to interpret propagations from the beyond and to adequately adapt them to mundane circumstances. The problem, though, lies in the word "adequate".

Time will tell in which direction the discussion about same sex relations develops among Bahā'īs in the future. Homosexuality as a damnable sin and homosexuality as a human right seem to be mutual exclusive at the moment. A closer look into the history of religions and the number of dilemmas of this sort, provides evidence for the assumption that a way out is always possible. Thoroughly examining the adaptive responsiveness of a religion, as this excellent study does, raises in any case our awareness for the great complexity of religious behaviour patterns.

Prof Horst Junginger

1. Introduction

On the welcome page of the international Bahā'ī community's website it says that Bahā'īs believe, amongst others, that "All humanity is one family. [...] All prejudice [...] is destructive and must be overcome. [...] Science and religion are in harmony"¹. With statements like these, the Bahā'ī Faith, which was founded in 19th century Shi'ite Iran and since then spread to almost every country worldwide, presents itself to be potentially the most inclusive religious community of all which coincides with one of its most important principles promoting 'unity in diversity'. Accordingly, everyone is welcome to be a part of it. Nevertheless, there are laws the Bahā'īs need to obey - which is also a characteristic of many other religious communities - which are perceived as serving the (spiritual) development of both the community and the individual. These laws include the prohibition of certain behaviour or actions which may be challenging for some believers. One example which is highly controversial is the prohibition of homosexual behaviour by the current Bahā'ī administration order. Many persons concerned consider homosexuality as a question of identity instead of behaviour and refer to their own experiences in addition to scientific studies which prove that this identity cannot be changed. Nevertheless, there are homosexuals who grow up in Bahā'ī families or choose to become a Bahā'ī although they know the negative stance toward homosexual expression in Bahā'ī administration. This raises the question for the way those persons do or do not harmonise their religion and sexual orientation and for the resulting consequences.

The research subject of this thesis therefore is twofold: firstly, the subjective understanding and evaluation of statements in the Bahā'ī writings concerning homosexual behaviour, as well as their official interpretation, by homosexual Bahā'īs; and secondly, the

¹ Bahā'ī International Community: The Bahā'ī Faith. 2014. <http://www.bahai.org> (accessed March 21, 2014)

consequences for the individual conception of life of homosexual Bahā'is including their positioning in local Bahā'ī communities. In support of a better understanding of this issue it is necessary to analyse the official Bahā'ī stance towards homosexuality at first. From a theological point of view, a context in form of Bahā'ī ethics and the understanding of meaning of Bahā'ī laws in general would be required² but will not be included due to the limits of this thesis and its scholarly focus precisely on the analysis of individual cases and personal experiences. Furthermore, this thesis is set in the study of religion rather than theology and therefore does not deal with questions of either right or wrong nor true or false. For the same reasons scientific findings on homosexuality will not be included although some readers might feel that they are necessary because of the Bahā'ī principle of the harmony of religion and science. Besides one has to bear in mind that the "Bahā'ī faith is [...] not orthodox (insisting on right dogma) but orthoprax (insisting on right action). It is not what one believes in one's conscience that matters, but how one actually behaves"³ which is an issue to the second part of this thesis. The title "I don't want to be Tāhirih" corresponds to this chapter, especially when it comes to experiences in the Bahā'ī communities.

'Tāhirih' is the honorific title of Fātima Umm Salmā, better known as 'Qurrat al-'Ayn', who was one of the first followers who believed in the message of the Bāb who is recognised as the precursor of Bahā'u'llāh, the founder of the Bahā'ī Religion, and therefore an important part of the Bahā'ī history⁴. Furthermore she was well-known for her impressive "personality, theological

² A German Bahā'ī argues for this kind of approach and attempts to deal this way with Bahā'ī laws concerning sexuality in: Schaefer, Udo: Sexualethische Positionen in Bahā'u'llāhs Kitāb-i-Aqdas. Hofheim: Bahā'ī-Verlag 2011

³ Cole, Juan Ricardo: The Evolution of charismatic authority in the Bahā'ī Faith (1863 - 1921). In: Robert Gleave (ed.): Religion and society in Qajar Iran. Proceedings of the conference held on 4 - 6 September 2000 in Bristol. London/ New York: RoutledgeCurzon 2005, pp. 311-345, p. 335.

⁴ For more information on the Bahā'ī history and especially the two founders of the Bahā'ī Religion, see chapter 2.2.

knowledge, and mastery of Arabic”⁵ and is considered to be a pioneer for women’s rights in Muslim countries⁶ because she casted off her facial veil on some occasions when being among men⁷. Her opponents complained about her in a letter to the Bāb but he defended her and “significantly acknowledged the progressive tendency in the [Bābī] movement, even at the expense of losing some of the more traditionalist followers”⁸. Tāhirih at that time was already an important leader of the Bābī community in her region but often wrongly accused of unchastity also by non-Bābīs because there were males among her followers⁹. In 1852 she was sentenced to death for her beliefs including the equality of men and women.

Among homosexual Bahā’īs there is a mostly unspoken wish for a person who fights for them like Tāhirih did for women’s rights. So if one of them does something which is considered a brave act, e.g. coming-out in front of other Bahā’īs who might not welcome homosexuals, he or she is sometimes complimented with “You are our Tāhirih!”. On the other hand when someone is at a loss with being Bahā’ī and homosexual he or she might state “I don’t want to be Tāhirih”¹⁰ which is an expression of his or her dilemma, possibly including grief, being overextended or exhaustion. These feelings and the experiences which cause them are shared by many – yet not all – homosexual Bahā’ī, which is the reason for choosing this quote as a title, and they will be analysed in chapter 3.

⁵ Amanat, Abbas: Resurrection and renewal. The making of the Babi movement in Iran, 1844-1850. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1989, p. 330.

⁶ However, she did not see herself as a part of any feminist movement or something similar but acted only on the basis of her religious beliefs, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 330-331.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 305-306.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

¹⁰ I do not give a source for these quotes intentionally to safe the anonymity of their authors who agreed to the use of their statements in this thesis.

The material on which this thesis is based consists of primary literature including the 'sacred' writings of the Bahā'ī Faith by Bāb and Bahā'u'llāh as well as the authoritative interpretation by their successors 'Abdu'l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi and letters based on these by the current supreme authority, the Universal House of Justice, on the one hand and reports as well as theological statements by homosexual Bahā'īs and their supporters on the other hand. The latter include a core-question interview which I conducted with a homosexual Bahā'ī for this thesis. There will be no analyses of statements made in any closed groups on the Internet since these constitute safe spaces for the participants and their privacy needs to be protected. The specific selection of all these sources will be explained in the corresponding chapters. They are completed by secondary sources which (apart from a few theological exceptions) do not explicitly deal with the issue of homosexuality in the Bahā'ī Faith¹¹ since this was not yet subject to scholarly research. Concerning the notation of Arabic and Persian words including names and book titles there is no consensus among authors writing about the Bahā'ī Religion¹². Following a German standard work on the Bahā'ī Faith by Hutter¹³, I chose to base my transcription on the internal Bahā'ī notation with the exception of the use of lines over long vowels instead of accentuating and putting hyphens only where placed in Arabic/Persian transcription. This way both Bahā'īs can recognise the words and scholarly transcription is maintained at a satisfactory level.¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. chapter 1.2.

¹² Hutter, a German scholar of religion, shows the differences in detail by using the example of a chief work by Bahā'u'llāh which can be written in the following ways: *Kitāb-i Aqdas* (official Bahā'ī transcription), *al-kitāb al-aqdas* (Arabic transcription), *ketāb-e aqdas* (Persian transcription), cf. Hutter, Manfred: *Handbuch Bahā'ī. Geschichte - Theologie - Gesellschaftsbezug*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2009, p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 11-12.