

A Comparison of Two Influential Characters of Faith with Implications for Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

Ongoing violence, discrimination, war and crimes against minority religious groups and women must be eradicated. Both Christianity and the Bahá'í faith are minority religions in Iran where religion and tradition (e.g., wearing of a hijab [veil]) are still the cause of violence and bloodshed. The lives of Christians in the Gaza Strip (also known simply as Gaza) are threatened by the war between Radical Islam and Judaism. Through interfaith dialogue intended to overcome stereotyping and historical grievances, religious, cultural and political open-mindedness pave the way for positive transformation. Comparative historical research showcases the shared experiences, theology, ideals and fates of two early converts from two global religions. Christianity was founded by Jesus, who proclaimed a new interpretation of the Yahwistic religion of Israel. The Babi faith was founded by the Báb, a merchant who proclaimed a new interpretation of Shia Islam in 1844. Christianity and Islam are the largest world religions with 31.11% and 24.9% of the world population, respectively, while Judaism (0,18%) and Bahá'í faith (0,07%) are minority global religions. Despite huge differences in time, place, religion and social status, the lasting impact that Paul the Apostle had and still has on Christianity and the effect that Jenab-i Táhirih had and still has on the Babi faith serve as an example of how religious historical research can find common ground as a foundation for initial interaction between members of opposing religions to stop and eradicate current conflict situations.

Keywords: Paul the Apostle; Jenab-i Táhirih; Christianity; Bahá'í; Judaism; Islam; gender-based violence; religion history; interfaith dialogue; Iran

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Introduction

The protests in Iran where chaos broke out and many lives were lost were triggered by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022 following her arrest by the Moslem “morality police” for wearing the hijab “incorrectly” (Shirazi 2022). The protest that followed this incident is still ongoing. Another public incident resulted in death when a teenage girl, not wearing a hijab, died on Tehran’s Metro on 1 October 2023 (Associated Press 2023). At least 690 prisoners were executed in 2023. Numerous unreported executions continue to take place in what is called “state murder for revenge” to intimidate through violence (Von Hein 2023b).

Iran, also known as Persia,¹ is one of only two countries, together with neighbouring Afghanistan, where the wearing of the hijab is mandatory (Gambrell 2023). In stark contrast to this law, these two countries are each home to a specific symbol that serves to inspire women globally towards empowerment and equality. Ironically, both these symbols are linked to the removal of the hijab. In Iran, Jenab-i Táhirih (born as Fatimah Baraghani but commonly known as, and from here on referred to as Táhirih [the pure one]), one of the founding apostles of the now independent and global Bahá’í faith, formally broke from the traditional Shia Islam faith by unveiling herself to promote gender equality. The statue of a “liberated women” (BWNS 2017) in Baku in Azerbaijan² portrays a woman removing her veil that symbolises the emancipation of Azerbaijani women, as this was the first Muslim-majority country where women could vote in 1918 (Geybulla 2019).

The overarching problem causing the current unrest in Iran is not about women’s attire but rather the result of religious intolerance and persecution mixed with cultural tradition including gender-based violence. There are 8 million Bahá’ís worldwide of whom approximately 300 000 are in Iran where this religion originated from the second largest branch of Islam during the 19th century. The Bahá’í community is the largest religious minority in Iran. However, unlike other religious minorities, such as Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, the Bahá’ís are neither recognised nor protected by the country’s constitution. Therefore, Bahá’í believers constantly face harassment, such as being banned from receiving education and working in certain jobs and having their actions monitored. They are often arrested, their property and assets confiscated, and many times they are tortured and killed (UN 2022). Currently, informers and technology, such as drones and apps, are used to identify and persecute women who are not wearing hijabs (*The Guardian* 2025). This is, unfortunately, only one example of

1 The name of the country was changed from Persia to Iran in 1935 and since 1959 it can be referred to as Persia or Iran, and the spoken language is Persian or Farsi (Yarshater 1989).

2 The “Statue of a Liberated Woman” by Fuad Abdurahmanov was created in 1960 and can be seen on the Public Square in Baku, Azerbaijan. Inspired by the 1928 play, *Sevil*, the removal of the veil commemorates the right to vote granted to Azerbaijani women in 1918.

the religious biasness, intolerance and persecution that globally haunt believers of all faiths: A problem probably as old as religious consciousness itself.

Less than 2 000 kilometres to the west of Iran, the Christian minority in the Gaza Strip (hereafter Gaza) fears “extinction” amid the Israeli-Hamas war (Marsi and Amer 2023). Israel is home to some of the most sacred places of Islam, Judaism, Christianity and the Babi faith. Apart from all the holy sites of Judaism and Christianity, which both originated in Israel, Jerusalem is one of the three holy cities of Islam, while one of the three pilgrimage sites for Bahá’í believers is the Bahá’í World Centre in Northwest Israel. The 77-year-long Israel-Palestinian conflict flared up on 7 October 2023, when Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, killed 1 200 people during a surprise attack on Israeli towns. Caught up in the fighting and suffering without an escape from the besieged Gaza, also called the “world’s largest open-air prison” (Mallinder 2023), is the dwindling number of Christians (less than 1 000), many of whom were seeking shelter in the oldest church, that of Saint Porphyrius, when it was bombed and 18 people, including children were killed (Marsi and Amer 2023). Christians were also among the casualties when an explosion rocked the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital – an Anglican institution – and killed more than 500 people (Marsi and Amer 2023). Palestinian Christians, whose legacy traces back to the first century, and who are sometimes referred to as “living stones” (Mallinder 2023) – a title that links them with their status as custodians of the faith born in their country – may well be the last generation of Christians in Gaza if the religious-political war does not end soon.

One way to counter religious fanaticism is through interfaith dialogue. The aim of such interaction is to remove communication barriers and to promote understanding and mutual respect for all religious convictions. Seeking common ground and acknowledging similar trends and historical developments in religions can promote cooperation and allow for peaceful co-existence and collaboration towards positive transformation. Knitter (2012, 112–113) identifies three bridges that connect all religions, namely: the philosophical-historical aspect that focuses on the Divine reality in religion; the religious-mystical aspect of religious and mystical experiences; and the ethical-practical aspect of religion that focuses on the concern all religions share for the suffering of people and the earth. When focusing on the two cases mentioned above (Iran and Gaza), the starting point of interfaith dialogue between Christians and Bahá’ís could focus on the concern for and commitment to ending human suffering and promoting equality.

The current study focused on the similarities between two main apostles of two diverse religions that originated centuries apart to serve as an example of how interfaith dialogue, focusing on common ground, can promote religious understanding and tolerance, as well as cultural and political open mindedness. The same religion-based fundamentalist justification that caused these apostles and early believers of these religions to suffer martyrdom is the underlying cause for the current war and persecutions in Iran, Gaza and several other countries and regions worldwide. Thus, the

comparative historical research could provide knowledge and insight that could in turn prove to be useful starters for negotiations to stop the ongoing religion-based rivalry, war and oppression.

After explaining comparative historical analysis (CHA) as the research method used, background to the study is provided and a short summary shows the major lines of opinion about the two religious leaders. The main focus falls on the remarkable list of similarities that they shared in life and legacy. In conclusion a few recommendations are drawn from this example towards inter-religious dialogue, especially as these two religions are both minorities in Iran.³

Methodology

Comparative historical analysis (CHA) (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003) aims to identify similarities and differences between two or more cases from different contexts (Finkelstein 2015, 405) including religion, tradition, culture and society (Shahrokh and Miri 2019, 1). This method tends to be optimistic, and researchers must be aware of the danger of biasness in data analysis and interpretations. Caution should also be taken when comparisons are involving difference in time, space and context to avoid misinterpretations of findings. On the positive side, CHA promotes the use of primary sources, stimulates knowledge sharing, broadens understanding, and enables the recognition of patterns that allows for generalisation.

Using the distancing comparison lens to investigate different religions,⁴ CHA provides opportunities to become aware of similarities and differences between seemingly unrelated events, people, their spiritual experiences, and geographical spaces. Religious CHA stimulates discovery, challenges assumptions, and promotes a broad understanding of history and spirituality beyond dogmatic boundaries. Broadening the traditional narrow focus of religion, comparisons identify the shared human and environmental challenges that religions search to address while opening opportunities to cooperate through projects to fight poverty, violence, crimes and injustice, on the one hand, and provide education, improved living conditions, and hope on the other hand, without having to compromise their religious convictions or be in competition with each other.

3 Although Christianity is recognised as a minority religion in Iran, the Bahá'í faith, which is the largest religious minority in Iran, is regarded as heretic and its followers continuously suffer from severe persecution as this religion is neither legally recognised nor protected (UN 2022; Von Hein 2023a).

4 Finkelstein (2015, 407) distinguishes between the heuristic, contrastive, analytical and distancing functions of historical comparisons in CHA.

In this descriptive comparative study, we compared Paul the Apostle from first-century Christianity,⁵ with Táhirih from the 19th-century Babi faith.⁶ The study aimed to trigger an awareness of the “narrowness of our minds” and to recognise the “shortcomings and harmful consequences” of biasness and assumptions, especially when it comes to religious issues (Azarian and Petrusenko 2010, 44).

Background of Paul and Táhirih

At first glance, these two “apostles” – Paul and Táhirih – seemingly did not have much in common: They lived in different eras, belonged to different cultural and ethnic groups, and their religious and social roles were determined by their gender. Paul, as a male, enjoyed privileges that women in the Roman world could not dream of. Patriarchy is still, two thousand years later, a characteristic of Christianity. We acknowledge that the comparison between Paul and Táhirih cannot be done on a level field, but the focus here is more on their theologically radical views and actions.

Táhirih, who was a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad’s daughter (Momen 2003, 36), played the pivotal role in the split from Shi’ah Islam to develop the Babi faith. Her father was from a Turkish tribe, but she grew up in Persia, a devoted Islam country characterised by intolerance to other belief systems and where females lived under severe restrictions. Despised, humiliated and rejected by the Islam religion because of her controversial actions and words, but inspired by the Báb (*The Gate* – he was the founder of the Babi faith) whom she never personally met (Root 1938, 7), became an outcast, was imprisoned, stoned, exiled, and eventually died as a martyr (Root 1938, 1) after which her books, clothing and even the book with her birth record were burnt (Root 1938, 5). Despite these attempts to eradicate any evidence of her existence, she made such a huge impact as a role model to her contemporaries that she became a source of inspiration for generations of females globally.

5 Christianity, based on the life, teaching and work of Jesus of Nazareth who reinterpreted the Jewish religion, developed from the Abrahamic Jewish monotheistic religion. Christianity originated in Israel from where it spread to become one of the largest world religions.

6 The Bahá’í faith was started by the Báb, a merchant and a direct descendant of Muhammad who proclaimed a new interpretation of Shia Islam in 1844 and was executed in 1850. The Báb and two authoritative interpreters of the Bahá’í Scriptures, Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, formed the three central figures of the religion (Braybrook 2017). After 1960, the religion spread rapidly outside Iran and Turkey to become a global religion, while the adherents in Iran were persecuted since 1979 (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2022). The Bábí faith is an independent religious movement that originated in Iran in 1844, heralded by the Manifestation of God, the Báb. The Báb, literally meaning “the Gate”, declared the Bábí faith a religion which designated the commencement of an entirely new religious dispensation. This religious dispensation, which has come to be known as the Bahá’í Dispensation, is composed of two twin Manifestations: the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. In essence, the Báb announced the coming of Bahá’u’lláh. Bahá’u’lláh is the central Manifestation of God for the Bahá’í faith. Now acknowledged as a universal religion, the Bahá’í faith has an estimated total of 7.3 million believers in some 191 countries.

Paul, born in Tarsus,⁷ the capital of the province of Cilicia in the Roman Empire (Durant 1944, 294), was a male Roman citizen who enjoyed many privileges, such as the possibility to serve in government posts, join the Roman legion, and vote and serve as a member of senate (Wallace 2002). Due to its privileged position – such as tax exemption (Picirilli 1986, 3) – Tarsus was an important educational centre that even rivalled Athens and Rome (Duling 2003, 151), with people from all over the Roman Empire, including the Grecian, Egyptian, African and Roman territories, who brought their cultures and philosophies (particularly Stoic philosophy which is evident in the writings of Paul to the city) (Key and Young 1958). Paul was also a member of a respected cleric group within Judaism, who, after conversion through a vision of Jesus whom he assumably never personally met, revolutionised Christianity in such a way with his inclusive theology that it eventually helped to make Christianity a world religion.

Both Paul and Táhirih are labelled as revolutionaries that caused division and controversy not only among insiders and outsiders of their original faiths but also within the independent religions they helped to establish. These controversies still continue today, centuries after their deaths.

Perspectives Regarding the Authority of Paul and Táhirih

As both Christianity and the Bahá'í faith are rooted in older religious traditions, it can be expected that from these orthodox perspectives, both Paul and Táhirih would be labelled as heretics and schismatics who have misled others to divert from the “true” religion.

Most Jewish authors share a negative view of Paul (Gray 2016, 117–123; Harrington 2010, 1; Langton 2009), while Muslim authors, such as Beheshti (1979), Fakhrol Eslam (2012) and Farhat (2011), regard Paul as an apostate who invented his own gospel and therefore have labelled him as the real founder of Christianity. Because of the more Hellenistic approach to religion, other scholars like Pfleiderer, are also of the opinion that Paul's gospel was a radical departure from the teaching of Jesus (Smith 2013, 4). In contrast to Islamic authors, Bahá'í authors like Abdu'l-Bahá, confirm Paul's righteousness, his inspiration, and the validity of the Old and New Testament as holy Scriptures (Borovicka 2016, 40).

Within the Christian tradition itself, stark difference of opinion exists about the work and influence of Paul. He is either regarded as an exemplary leader who played a prominent role in developing Christianity (Dunn 2011; 2015; Taylor 2012, 3; Wright 2018), or he is accused of infecting the pure stream of Christian teachings (Grant 1914, 375). Gray (2016, 125) provides a thorough survey of these contrasting opinions regarding Paul and his teachings that stretch from the first century up to the current

7 The exact year of his birth is unclear. Durant (1944, 294) puts it as early as before 10 BCE, while others estimate it to be in the early years of the Christian era (Bruce 1980, 234; Montague 1966).

“New Perspective on Paul” movement that attempts to reconcile Paul with his Jewishness. Longenecker (2020) also informs and questions both the positive and negative perceptions about Paul within Christianity.

Non-Bahá’í sources, particularly the Islamic and Azali documents, portray Táhirih as a person who followed her personal passion and deviated from the true religious path (Mottahedeh 1997, 72). Several Islamic historians, including Muhammad Taqi Lassan-al Mulk Sepehr (1958) and Mohammad Ja’far ibn Muhammad Ali Khormuji (1965), attack and question the Báb’s validity and disgrace his followers, including Táhirih, although others, like Za’im al-Dawlah Tabrizi (1903), acknowledge her courage, dignity and positive influence on the progression of women’s rights and freedom.

The references within the Babi/Bahá’í documentation on Táhirih are mostly positive. Effendi (1971, 33–34) portrays her as follows: “The trumpeter was a lone woman, the noblest of her sex in that dispensation, whom even some of her co-religionists pronounced a heretic.” Her personality, conduct and impact were praised by the Báb himself, as well as Bahá’u’lláh, Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi,⁸ whose unquestionable authenticity is regarded at the same level as that of the Bible in Christianity. Other religious Babi/Bahá’í authors, like Johnson (1982), Fadil Mazandarani (2009), Mohammad Hosseini (2000), Momen (2003) and Shahrokh (2018), as well as most Bahá’í historians (Johnson 1982; Lee 2016; Maneck 1989; Root 1938; Shahrokh 2018) agree that Táhirih was a faithful and authoritative disciple of the Báb.

Because of their respective reputations and extensive influences, much was and is still written about Paul and Táhirih, respectively. Therefore, the abovementioned literature provides only a very broad and limited overview of what is written about them. Next, a comparison between their lives and works is drawn, focusing on the similarities and parallels between their viewpoints and work. Although it is possible to refer to Paul’s own writings that are contained in the Bible, the works of Táhirih, except her poetry, were burnt and therefore secondary sources are used as references.

Shared Experiences, Theology, Ideals and Fates

Education and Training

Both Paul and Táhirih had proficient knowledge and insight of the divine Scriptures of their initial religions, and they incorporated the Jewish and Islamic theology

8 “The Báb praised Táhirih and declared that she is fully authorized in her decision” (Mohammad Hosseini 2000, 192). Bahá’u’lláh named her Táhirih, meaning the “pure one” (Mohammad Hosseini 2000, 250). Abd’ul-Bahá introduced her as the “Burning Brand of the Love of God” and “a Lamp of His Bestowal” (Borovicka 2016, 41). Effendi admired her brevity and noted that her fame penetrated the whole world (Borovicka 2016, 41–42, 46).

respectively in their teachings and writings to promote the development of the new religious movements.

As a diaspora Jew, Paul was exposed to diverse cultures and belief systems while also well educated in Judaism. He memorised the holy Scriptures (Gal 1:14), and he was a Pharisee⁹ (Duling 2003, 150; Php 3:5) who trained under Gamaliel I, the son of Simeon ben Hillel from the more liberal Hillel school of Pharisees (Ac 22:3) who was one of the most influential scholars of the time. This education provided Paul with a vast knowledge of the Old Testament (Stalker 2007, chap 2, par 24) and in his writings, he drew from this knowledge to give authority to his teachings and allegorised earlier Scriptures (Gal 4:22–31) to provide new meaning within the Christian context (Ludlow 2006, 227). Paul also used and reaffirmed some Jewish texts in his epistles (Rm 9:7–9).

Many centuries later, Táhirih (born in 1817) grew up in the multireligious society of Qazvin.¹⁰ Her paternal family was literate and were influential religious leaders. Both her father, Haji Mulla Salih-i-Qazvini, and his brother, Mulla Taqi, to whose son, Mulla Muhammad, she was married, were influential mujtahids that were skilled in Muslim law, and were well-known and respected in Persia (Muhammad-i-Zarandi 1932, 82). Her mother, *Ameneh Khanom*, was from a Persian noble family. She was a descendant of the prophet Muhammad¹¹ and her brother was the imam of the Shah Mosque of Qazvin. Thus, Táhirih's parents ensured that their children, daughters included, were well educated (Abdu'l-Bahá 1971, 103). Together with her daughters, *Ameneh* studied in the women's section of the Salehiyya, the Salehi madrasa that her husband established in 1817.

Táhirih's education included philosophy, jurisprudence, the Persian and Arabic languages, and poetry (Abdu'l-Bahá 1971, 103; Fadil Mazandarani 2009; Momen 2003, 47). From a young age, Táhirih excelled in Islamic studies. In addition to memorising the holy Qur'an, she knew and understood the Islamic Law and traditions well (Root 1938, 5). She was, therefore, allowed to conduct religious classes although this was something unprecedented at the time (Johnson 1982, 9).¹²

9 A Pharisee was a member of a Jewish sect of the intertestamental period noted for strict observance of rites and ceremonies of the written law and for insistence on the validity of their own oral traditions concerning the law (*Merriam-Webster* 2024).

10 Different sects resided in Qazvin: Jews, Christians and various Islamic branches including Sunni, Shiite, Esmaeili, and so on. (Mohammad Hosseini 2000, 109).

11 Aminih Khanum, Táhirih's mother, came from one of the leading families of Qazvin. Aminih's mother was Fatimih, who was a member of a distinguished Qazvin family of Sayyids (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) and "ulama". They traced their bloodline back to the Imam Husayn and from him to Fatimih, Prophet Muhammad's daughter, and Imam 'Ali, and hence to the Prophet Muhammad himself (Momen 2003, 36).

12 For two years, Táhirih conducted Islamic classes in her father's religious college and mosque named Salihyyih (Mohammad Hosseini 2000, 110).

After converting to the new religion, Táhirih wrote many treatises in defence of the Báb and the Babi doctrines in which she made use of the traditional conventions of Islamic jurisprudence and theology. In her writings,¹³ Táhirih used and relied on Islamic traditions and divine verses to emphasise her views to such an extent that others failed in opposing her (Mohammad Hosseini 2000, 379–383). She used terms that describe Islamic concepts (like the “Day of Alast”) to provide a new interpretation for this religious metaphor. In her view, the “Day of Alast” was the day that a new manifestation would appear as an announcement of a new dispensation (Lee 2016, 13–14). Táhirih also made use of concepts from the Sufi tradition when she implemented terms such as wine, fire, light, madness, sexuality, and love as metaphors for the spirit in her poems (Lee 2016, 11).

Called through Visions

Before their conversions both Paul and Táhirih experienced visions of the manifestation of God. Later, they both relied on these experiences to justify their radical breaks from Judaism and Islam respectively (Lee 2016, 7). Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus on his way to Damascus while planning to prosecute Christians (Ac 9:3–9; 26:12–18). He recognised the divinity of Christ (Rm 1:7; 9:5; 1 Cor 12:1–3; Cotter 1945, 262, 270, 272) and he interpreted this vision as his calling and commission to proclaim the gospel to non-Jews (Gal 1:11, 12) with the same authority as the apostles who were taught by Jesus during his earthly ministry.

Sources, such as *The Dawn-Breakers* (Muhammad-i-Zarandi 1932, 81–82) and the *Memorials of the Faithful* (Abdu'l-Bahá 1971, 69–70), indicate that Táhirih started believing in the Báb through a dream. In her vision, Táhirih saw a Siyyid wearing a black cloak and a green turban. He was standing in the air, reciting verses and praying with raised hands (Borovicka 2016, 38–39). As soon as she woke up she wrote some of the verses down. Later she recognised these verses spoken by the Báb. This account of events is confirmed by a letter Táhirih sent to her brother-in-law to be delivered to the Qa'im (meaning “him who shall rise, the promised one”). After receiving Táhirih's letter in August 1844 (Shahrokh 2018, 5), the Báb accepted her as the 17th and only woman of 18 “Letters of the Living” – a title bestowed on the first 18 believers who recognised the Báb as the promised Qa'im.

Ministries

Due to their advantaged position in society, both Paul and Táhirih had the opportunity to travel while proclaiming their messages with mixed success to all whom they met. On the one hand, they spread their ideas and established the foundations of the new faiths in such a way that their names and works are globally known inside and outside of their religious contexts. Their words and actions, on the other hand, brought them in

13 Táhirih wrote in Persian, Arabic and Azeri, which is the main language of Azerbaijan, but unfortunately, most of her writings were destroyed after her death.

confrontation with religious leaders and politicians and caused cultural shockwaves in their respective societies, often resulting in confrontation¹⁴ and eventually causing their martyr deaths.

Although Táhirih's years of ministry were much shorter than those of Paul, and her travels less extensive, they both managed to meet and speak to large numbers of people from all ranks of society. Both Paul and Táhirih met with the rulers of their countries. After a near-death confrontation with the religious leaders in Jerusalem, Judea, Paul appealed to the emperor of the Roman Empire.¹⁵ Eventually, according to tradition, Emperor Nero was responsible for Paul's martyr death.¹⁶ Before he was taken to Rome, Paul was held in custody in Herod's palace by governors Felix and Festus (Ac 24:27) and he also spoke to King Agrippa II, the king's sister/lover Bernice, and Drusilla the Jewish wife of Felix, and the military and civil leaders of Caesarea Maritima (Ac 25:23–27). Paul also had success when Sergius Paulus, the Proconsul of Cyprus converted to Christianity (Ac 13:6–12).

Táhirih was presented to the 18-year-old monarch of Persia, Nasser-al-Din-Shah. He tried to persuade her to set aside her new beliefs and offered to marry her (Root 1938, 14). He also ordered that she should not be harmed, but eventually, without the Sháh's knowledge, the Grand Vizir or prime minister, Mirza Taqi-Khan-i-Amir Kabir, orchestrated her death (Shahrokh 2018, 13), days after an assassination attempt on the life of the Sháh.

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- 14 Paul himself provides a summary of his experiences in 2 Cor 11:23–27: "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." Root (1938, 1), a well-known Bahá'í historian, summarises the experiences of Táhirih like this: "The Iránian Government took her prisoner; she was stoned in the streets, anathematised, exiled from town to town, threatened with death, but she never failed in her determination to work for the freedom of her sisters. She bore persecution and suffering with the greatest heroism."
 - 15 According to *Biblical Hermeneutics* (n.d.), Paul appeared before emperor Nero. Clement claims that Paul died prior to Nero's death, and based on content from events that happened earlier in Paul's life it can be assumed that he did not arrive in Rome while Claudius, the predecessor of Nero, was still in office.
 - 16 In Eusebius' *Church History* 2.25.5, The Persecution under Nero in which Paul and Peter were honoured at Rome with Martyrdom on Behalf of Religion, Eusebius states: "It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified under Nero." This account of Peter and Paul is substantiated by the fact that their names are preserved in the cemeteries of that place even to the present day (Schaff 1885, 243–244).

While under house arrest for three years in the home of Mahmud-Khan, the mayor of Tehran, Táhirih received many visitors, including the princesses of Qajar (Mohammad Hosseini 2000, 276) who converted to the Bahá'í faith. During a wedding celebration at his home, where many ladies of the aristocracy, princesses, and wives of ministers were present, Táhirih started to speak to some of the guests and this transformed the wedding to a speech gathering as the guests left the party to listen to her (Effendi 1971, 73; Johnson 1982, 28). She defended her views in the home and before the jurist and Muftí of Baghdád, Shaykh Mahmúd-i-Álúsí and later, in Kirmansháh, engaged with the `ulamás, the princes and government officials on the commentary of the Báb¹⁷ on the Súrah of Joseph (the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá) (Effendi 1971, 74). The deputies of the Grand Vizir interrogated her during seven conferences.¹⁸ Táhirih's passion, knowledge and wisdom to explain the content of the new revelation at these conferences proved to them that she was a threat to society and had to be killed.

Although Paul and Táhirih endured their house arrest, abuse and prison life (Paul), they did not hesitate to write or appeal to authorities when they were wronged. Táhirih appealed thrice to governmental officials and each time she received a positive response. After hearing that officials had arrested a woman they thought was Táhirih, she wrote a letter to inform the governor of Karbilá of her location and requested to be arrested and the other women released (Abdu'l-Bahá 1971, 191; Borovicka 2016, 48). After waiting months under house arrest for the government's response to the accusations against her, she wrote a second letter to the governor of Karbilá, requesting to go to Baghdad to ask there for the verdict regarding her arrest (Abdu'l-Bahá 1971, 192–194). Her third appeal was to the Governor of Kermanshah when Táhirih and her companions were assaulted and their property stolen outside the city. The governor commanded the return of their belongings (Abdu'l-Bahá 1971, 194).

Paul's appeals are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, the fifth book of the New Testament. In Philippi, Paul and Silas were arrested, and without trial severely beaten before they were jailed. Although they were set free because of a mysterious earthquake, Paul refused to abandon the jail. He demanded an official apology from the magistrates of the city and then to escort them from prison (Ac 16:23). While in Jerusalem, his teachings caused turmoil and when the Roman tribune wanted to flog him, he appealed on the ground of his Roman citizenship (Ac 22:25). As a result, he was taken to Caesarea

17 Táhirih translated the lengthy commentary from Arabic for the benefit of Persian believers (Effendi 1971, 74).

18 Mirza Taqi-Khan-i-Amir Kabir issued the commandment that the Báb, Táhirih and many other Babis should die. He visited Táhirih and encouraged her to renounce her belief. However, she proved the rightfulness of the Báb and his teachings in such a way that Amir Kabir admitted that she would convince him to become a Babi if he did not leave the meeting (Mohammad Hosseini 2000, 279). Two priests, Mulla Ali Kani and Mulla Muhammad Andarmani, interrogated Táhirih during the conferences (Mohammad Hosseini 2000, 291) and finally they accused Táhirih of blasphemy and heretical beliefs and sentenced her to death in the name of the holy Qur'an (Johnson 1982, 29).

to await trial before the governor and after some years, he appealed to be tried before the Emperor in Rome (Ac 25:11).

There were also times when like-minded people had to rescue Paul and Táhirih to save their lives. While preaching in Damascus the city gates were guarded to kill Paul as soon as he was detected but his fellow believers put him in a basket and lowered him through a window in the wall to get him out of the city (Ac 9:25; 2 Cor 11:32, 33).

Táhirih suffered a similar experience. During the time that she was under house arrest in Qazvin, her husband wanted to kill her after her father in law's death which she predicted. However, guided by instructions from Bahá'u'lláh, some of her fellow believers rescued her and got her safely to Tehran during the night (Borovicka 2016, 49–50).

Paul was stoned and left for dead in Listra (Ac 14:19–20). Likewise, Táhirih and her companions experienced stoning while they were leaving Karbilá for Baghdad (Mohammad Hosseini 2000, 186).

Despite huge differences in time and place, Paul and Táhirih as first-generation apostles of a new faith, were talented and well-educated orators who promoted their beliefs through personal visits and writings. Although they could not travel when under house arrest or in prison, most of the time people were allowed to visit them and this provided them with the opportunity to keep proclaiming and to pen down their ideas in letters and writings.

Paul's missionary work and letters spread Christianity through the Roman Empire. While in prison in Rome, Paul wrote several of his epistles and although some were lost, others (like the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon) later found their way into the Christian Bible.¹⁹ Paul wrote and preached on various aspects of the Christian faith. His writings are instructions and encouragement and advice to believers on what it means to live a new life in Christ.

Táhirih's travels, teachings, writings, and letters left an indelible impression on the Arab and Persian societies.²⁰ While in Karbilá – the stronghold of Shí'ah Islám – Táhirih addressed lengthy epistles to each of the `ulamás residing in the city, on their malignant view that women do not have souls and are similar to animals (Effendi 1971, 3). In

19 Although 13 or 14 of the 27 books in the New Testament are traditionally attributed to Paul, only seven of these are accepted as authentic and some of his works are extinct (Petruzzello 2018).

20 "Through her eloquent pleadings, her fearless denunciations, her dissertations, poems and translations, her commentaries and correspondence, she persisted in firing the imagination, enlisting the allegiance of Arabs and Persians alike to the new Revelation, in condemning the perversity of her generation, and in advocating a revolutionary transformation in the habits and manners of her people" (Effendi 1971, 73).

addition to the numerous letters that she wrote, Táhirih was a talented poet,²¹ but unfortunately most of her writings were burnt after her death (Root 1938, 19).

Both Paul (2 Tim 4:6–8) and Táhirih (Root 1938, 17) foresaw their deaths and were therefore prepared to suffer as martyrs. They lost their lives during the first official persecutions aimed at the adherers of the developing religions when many of the believers in the initial stages of the development of the religion were brutally murdered. Táhirih was strangled with her own veil in 1852 in Tehran after a failed assassination attack on the Shah by some Babis that sparked the brutal torture of Babi believers throughout Persia (Effendi 1971, 75). Paul was beheaded (the preferred death for Roman citizens) between 64–67 CE, in Rome in the aftermath of the devastating fire that destroyed parts of the city. The Roman emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the disaster and severe persecution of Christians followed (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2019).

Theology and Teaching

Paul and Táhirih are both famous for their bold behaviour that underscored their radical beliefs. They respectively regarded Jesus and the Báb as the culmination and end of the Jewish and Islamic laws as people cannot gain salvation through legalism or seclusion. Paul and Táhirih also believed and openly proclaimed that all people are equal, irrespective of citizenship, gender, wealth, class, or any other human-made traditional distinctions. As can be expected, going against these traditional religious and cultural rules brought both Paul and Táhirih into confrontation with ecclesiastical authorities from both the mother religions and with fellow first-generation apostles of the new faiths. Political leaders also recognised their teachings as a threat to the social order and traditions and therefore tried to silence them permanently.

Paul clearly proclaimed his view that the Jewish law was replaced by the Christian law of love (Gal 3:11; Rm 3:20): “Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rm 10:4). In line with the teachings of Jesus, Paul turned away from the ceremonial requirements of the law and focused on the superiority of moral laws by eliminating the formal requirements of the law and shifting the focus to rationalising and spiritualising its content (Gould 1899, 184–186).²² During the apostolic conference in Jerusalem (Ac 15:2–35), Paul and Barnabas won their case

21 “Some of her poems are set to music and I often heard the records on the vitrolas (gramophones) in Persian homes. Many poems written by Qurratu’l-’Ayn were amongst the favourite songs of the people, who were for the most part, unaware of their authorship. Open allusion to the Báb had of course been cut out or altered, so that no one could tell the source from whence they came” (Root 1938, 19).

22 The main controversy between Paul and Jerusalem was about two matters: They reached an agreement that circumcision should not be demanded for Gentile-Christians, but they should abstain from things (foods) that were offered to idols. However, Paul simply taught that the domain of morals did not extend to the matter of food and that to eat food offered in sacrifice to idols was morally quite an indifferent matter (Gould 1899, 186).

against those who wanted to insist that non-Judaic Christians should be circumcised. In Antioch, Peter, one of the most important apostles that Jesus taught, refused to eat his meals with the non-Judaic Christians as he felt pressured by the circumcision group (Gal 2:11–14). This brought Paul into confrontation with Peter. Once again, Paul emphasised that Christians are justified by faith and not by obeying the Jewish laws (Gal 2:16). In stark contrast with the culture and world views of the peoples who lived under the rule of the Roman Empire, Paul emphasised that there is no difference between Jews and other people in the eyes of God because every person who beliefs in Christ would be saved (Rm 3:22, 29; 10:12).

Táhirih believed that, through the appearance of the Báb, the Islamic laws had been abolished and would no longer restrict people's freedom (Lee 2016, 10): "During the Badasht conference²³ Táhirih openly proclaimed the dawn of a new era and the end of the Islamic law (the *shari'ah*)" (Lee 2016, 4).²⁴ Her words materialised into action by her appearance without a veil in the presence of men as her view regarding the equality of men and women was also firmly expressed.²⁵ The Babis present in Karbilá were shocked (Muhammad-i-Zarandi 1932, 295).²⁶ Mullá Ahmad Khurasani argued with Táhirih and requested her to stop her extraordinary behaviour (Lee 2016, 4) while others left the conference and forsook their faith.²⁷ Tension also grew between Táhirih and Mulla Muhammad 'Ali-i-Barfurushi, known as Jináb-i-Quddús, who was the 18th and last "letter of the living". However, through the intervention of Baha'u'llah, a complete reconciliation was reached between them before the end of the conference. While staying in Tehran in the house of Bahá'u'lláh, during an interview with the fellow believer Vahid,²⁸ Táhirih interrupted his speech on the signs of the new Manifestation, and passionately urged him to demonstrate the depth and sincerity of his faith through heroic actions and self-sacrifice (Effendi 1971, 73).

23 In 1848, 80 men and a single woman (Táhirih), all members of the Bábí community, gathered in a small village in the north of Iran called Badasht. Bahá'u'lláh financed the event, and he appointed two secondary leaders: Táhirih and Quddús.

24 "Today a great Light has come which changes all! This is the Hour of Resurrection. Let us fill the souls of men with the glory of the Revealed Word. Let us emancipate our women and reform our society, Let us arise out of our graves of superstition and self, and pronounce that the Day of Judgment is at hand; then shall the whole earth respond to freedom of conscience and new life! The blast of this trumpet of the Resurrection, it is I!" (Root 1938, 4).

25 Táhirih's approach towards women's rights was clear from her childhood days when she attended her father's religious classes and later lectured herself. Unconventional for the women of her time, she left her husband and children to search for truth.

26 "The trumpeter was a lone woman, the noblest of her sex in that Dispensation, whom even some of her co-religionists pronounced a heretic" (Effendi 1971, 33–34).

27 "Abdu'l-Khaliq-i-Isfahani was so gravely shaken that he cut his throat with his own hands. Covered with blood and shrieking with excitement, he fled away from the face of Tahirih. A few, following his example, abandoned their companions and forsook their Faith" (Muhammad-i-Zarandi 1932, 295).

28 "Vahid was one of the most learned early Babi believers who was later martyred in Nayríz" (Johnson 1982, 21).

Paul and Táhirih often acted in radical and unconventional ways that did not only introduce new religious ideas and customs but also promoted social and cultural development and change. They broke with outdated customs, world views, and traditions to introduce new universal religious concepts that promote social justice and became the fundamental elements and characteristics of the two developing religions into global belief systems.

Táhirih denounced polygamy, rejected the wearing of veils and openly rejected other restraints, such as the lack of education put on women and pleaded for affirmative actions to promote gender equality and inclusivity. Root (1938, 4) summarises the message of Táhirih regarding the position of women as follows (emphasis added):

Are you aware that this old custom of veiling the face was not enjoined by Muhammad so rigorously as you seem to observe? Have you never heard that the wives of the Prophet Himself, on their journeys, had their faces exposed? Do you not remember that in some matters, Muhammad was wont to tell His Disciples to go and ask His wife? But even if this were not the law of Muhammad, today a great Light has come which changes all! This is the Hour of Resurrection. Let us fill the souls of men with the glory of the Revealed Word. *Let us emancipate our women and reform our society, Let us arise out of our graves of superstition and self, and pronounce that the Day of Judgment is at hand; then shall the whole earth respond to freedom of conscience and new life!* The blast of this trumpet of the Resurrection, it is I!

Contrary to Roman and Jewish social customs, Paul acknowledged with appreciation the work women leaders did during the early years of Christianity (Php 4:3; Rom 16:1, 7; 16:3). He emphasised human and gender equality:

For in Christ Jesus *you are all children of God* through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female;* for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26–28; emphasis added)

Legacy

The words of Táhirih, as the “first woman martyr in Central Asia for the education and equality of women and laying aside the veil” (Root 1938, 4) are still repeated globally as a cry from oppressed women: “You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women” (Effendi 1971, 75). Although her poetry is highly regarded in Persian culture (Von Hein 2023b), her fame, courage, bravery, determination and unwavering commitment ensured that she became famous in Western Europe (Effendi 1971, 75). She soon became an icon that inspires generations of women globally today.²⁹ The name of Táhirih is linked with those of other famous female religious figures, such as:

29 “I have seen the influence of Táhirih in all the five continents I had visited” (Root 1938, 85).

Sarah, . . . Ásíyih, . . . the Virgin Mary and . . . Fátimih, who, in the course of successive Dispensations, have towered, by reason of their intrinsic merits and unique position, above the rank and file of their sex. (Effendi 1971, 75)

Paul is recognised as “one of the most influential figures in the West” and a “literary genius” (Becker 1980, 5, 10) whose letters are globally read as they form part of the content of the most published book in the world: the Christian Bible. Christianity owes its initial geographical expansion to Paul. Partly through the work of Paul, Christianity was recognised by the Roman authorities as a predominantly Gentile movement (Whittington et al. 2005, 751). Within a decade, Paul established the church in four Roman provinces, namely: Galatia, Achaia, Asia and Macedonia in Philippi (Duling 2003, 208). His work assisted people to live under the law of love as the unique characteristic of Christianity and also build on the foundations that Jesus laid to emancipate women from their inferior place in society.

The legacies of these two apostles and their influence on traditions, customs and religious thought patterns of people worldwide affirm the need for continuous and expanded comparative historical research and the publication of findings in order to promote understanding and tolerance for the right to religious freedom for all people as well as the need for social reform and development to ensure equality and freedom for all people.

Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue is the positive interaction between people of different faith communities and an important first step towards ending religious discrimination, persecution, and war through implementing the golden rule that underlines several world religions, namely, to be respected and treated in the same way that we (adherers of the same faith) want to be treated. Replacing the silo mentality with a common spirituality (without sacrificing faith or trying to convert or convince others) opens opportunities for peaceful co-existence, working together for the common good. Spirituality means to have an open mind and open heart which are able to listen and interact with people of different worldviews, ideas, and religious convictions without being judgmental.

The aim of promoting interfaith dialogue is mainly to overcome set stereotypes and historical grievances. Through focusing on comparative historical research, it would be possible to recognise that religions in general are advocating similar causes, including ending human suffering and promoting equality. Through open, respectful discussion, based on this common ground, attempts can be made to build bridges of understanding and tolerance. Only on this foundation will religious leaders be able to forcefully emphasise the core values of equality and freedom for all. Global platforms, like the broad-based interfaith organisations such as the World Congress of Faiths, founded in 1936 and the World’s Parliament of Religions (1893), together with global ecumenical movements (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the High Atlas

Foundation) can assist and intervene in disputes and discriminatory actions against minority religious groups in countries where religious freedom and accompanying human rights issues should be addressed. Organisations focused on peace or social upliftment are usually playing an important part in the initiation of interfaith dialogue (O'Connor and Ali 2024).

Although the models for interfaith dialogue identified by Knitter (2012) have evolved and the interpretations and applications may have changed, they are still used to explain the different approaches to the relationship between religions. The Replacement Model regards other religions as stepping stones towards Christianity (Knitter 2012, 113–114). The Fulfilment Model considers other religions as partial or imperfect when compared to Christianity (Knitter 2012, 63). The Mutuality Model acknowledges shared truths and values between religions and therefore religions can learn from each other (Knitter 2012, 109–157). The Acceptance Model recognises the validity of religious traditions without claiming that one is superior to the others (Knitter 2012, 173–247). It can be stated that Christianity is traditionally using the Replacement Model while the Babi faith is more inclined to the Acceptance Model. However, with the current high percentage of religious plurality in almost every community, interfaith dialogue is becoming a necessity (WCC 2002, 2).

Following in the footsteps of Paul and Táhirih, religious leaders will be able to turn away from religious pettiness that still results in murder, war, and discrimination. Only after achieving this in religion, spiritual leaders can advise and influence political leaders positively on such matters. When religious leaders start to act respectfully and become living examples of the freedom and love, and social justice that religion entails, they can contribute to transformation where things like food security, medical assistance, equality and peace can alter society for the better; away from war, violence, and discrimination. The starting point could be dialogue: Sharing stories, compare experiences, and listening with an open mind and heart. This is what the stories of Paul and Táhirih can initiate.

In Iran, where the Bahá'ís, especially female believers, are severely persecuted Christianity is protected as a minority religion. Acknowledging that the comparison between Paul and Táhirih does not address gender-based aspects, Christianity in general does have several matching points with the early development of the Babi faith. The first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection were women (Matt 28:9) and although the first-century society did not regard women as humans with rights, Jesus constantly broke the rules and later Paul declared: "There is neither . . . male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Christians in Iran can reach out to the Bahá'ís, and based on the Biblical principles of freedom and dignity, interact and advocate and practically search for and implement projects to uplift and celebrate Babi women.

Although the Bahá'í World Centre is located in Haifa, Israel, less than 1 000 Bahá'ís live in Israel and Palestine. Both Christians and Bahá'ís are religious minorities in Palestine, under Muslim rule, similar to the situation in Iran. Both Christianity and Judaism are tolerated and protected. Although the law guarantees freedom of belief and worship, in practice harassment and discrimination are rife. This article highlights that the similarities between the early developments of Christianity and the Babi faith can provide extensive support and topics for discussion between the mature and the young religions. Suffering calls for action – a major focus point for all religions. Projects to end suffering (human, animal, environment and earth) and bring about justice in local communities can promote dialogue, cooperation, respect, trust, and commitment to a shared cause without competition and strife. This unity in diversity between people from different faith groups can combat discrimination and provide a strong and united voice to call for justice and fairness.

Conclusion

Religion influences society in all aspects of life, including political, cultural, and legal practices. Furthermore, throughout history, religion is either the undercurrent or the direct cause of wars, crimes, discrimination, oppression and persecution of which the current bloodshed in Israel and Iraq are just two examples. Religious intolerance and the refusal to interact with people from different religions other than to convert them, violates the right to difference of opinions, freedom, and equality, and also restrain efforts to end suffering of humans, animals, the environment, and earth as a whole. In order to counter this silo mentality and biasness open-mindedness and open heartedness are needed to cultivate religious spirituality that will influence society towards cooperation and peaceful co-existence while ending religious persecution, war, violence, and discrimination.

The first step towards these goals is dialogue – sharing stories and comparing experiences, focusing on similarities and not on dogmatic differences. Christians (especially women) should reach out to Babi women to identify and work together towards emancipation and ending gender-based violence in Iran. In Gaza, Christians and Bahá'ís, who are both religious minority groups, should join hands to work together towards social upliftment and education.

Through comparative historical research, the study has shown that despite significant differences in time, place, race, context and social status, there are momentous similarities between the lives and work of Paul the Apostle of Christianity and Táhirih the most famous apostle of the Babi faith. They became such important influencers that their religious beliefs managed to influence not only the development of the new religions they promoted, but actually redirected the paths of history. They challenged the Jewish, Roman and Muslim laws, traditions and customs, and religious persecutions to bring fresh perspectives on issues like freedom, inclusivity, love, and positive social change. Their radical actions, theology, and teachings are still causing controversy

within society. By turning away from focusing on differences and aiming for world domination, religion should become a unifying force to promote freedom and diversity and to end discrimination and persecutions.

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