

PARADISE REENVISIONED, PART TWO

THE REALIZATION OF THE PROMISE

In our first discussion of the Baha'i village model described in the Baha'i Writings, a number of ideas were introduced, and perhaps it was assumed that none of these ideas had been put into practice. That is not the case.

In his series of books entitled Baha'i Communities of Iran 1851 to 1912, historian Moojan Momen has written about a number of villages that applied the model to various degrees. It must be remembered that they did so at their peril, because they were Baha'is and the majority of the population, then as now, was composed of Twelver (Ithna-'Ashari) Shi'i Muslims, whose leadership has been implacably opposed to the Baha'i Faith since the time of the Bab. So implementing any of these teachings constituted a heroic dedication to Baha'u'llah, and incurred opposition and eventually liquidation. The villages in the north of Iran are described in first first volume of Dr. Momen's multivolume work, available at George Ronald Press at https://www.grbooks.com/products/baha-i-communities-iran-vol-1_momen-m

The villages in the south of Iran are described in the second volume of this work, at [https://bahai.works/The Baha%E2%80%99i Communities of Iran 1851-1921 Volume 2](https://bahai.works/The_Baha%E2%80%99i_Communities_of_Iran_1851-1921_Volume_2)

Possibly the first Baha'i village which applied this model was named Seysan and also Sisan-i-Qadim (the old Seysan). It was located in Eastern Adhirbayjan, in the present day county of Bostanabad, the Central District, and the Rural District Mehranrud-i-Junubi. Nowhere near Tihran, or

Shiraz or any major city. It was founded in the 1860s and was destroyed in 1982. I recall seeing references to Seysan in issues of Star of the West, a Baha'i periodical, in the early years of the 20th century, decades before I was born. Now there is a book written about this village, entitled Seysan: History of Iran's Largest Baha'i Village, by Taied Shaeri, in English...you can purchase a copy here: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/BoH229KHF1>

In 1874, the villages of Mahfuruzak and Ivel in the province of Mazandaran began to apply Baha'i principles, and they were destroyed in the 1980s. The first volume of Dr. Momen's book describes these communities, along with Paul Haney in a zoom talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43xxZu1aQeY&t=673s>

Sometime in the 1890s, Siyyid Mustafa Rumi (1846–1945), born in Iran, who spent most of his childhood in India, and having settled in Rangoon, the largest city of Burma (now called Myanmar), made contact with the headman and then the village elders of the village of Daindanaw. He was invited to make his residence in that village, and subsequently approximately 800 residents of the village became Baha'is, making it perhaps the largest Baha'i community outside of Iran. In 1945, Siyyid Mustafa and a number of other Baha'is were murdered and the village destroyed by disgruntled Muslims. Many of the principles of the model were implemented in this village. There is not yet a book about this remarkable community but there are some details about its founder here: https://bahaipedia.org/Siyyid_Mu%E1%B9%A3%E1%B9%ADaf%C3%A1_R%C3%BAm%C3%AD

In 1901, land was purchased by 'Abdu'l-Baha close to the Jordan River, currently located in Jordan, where a number of villages were ultimately populated by Iranian Baha'is of Zoroastrian background, the most

prominent of these villages called ‘Adasiyyih. It was at threat during the war of independence (1948) in which the village was no longer under British Imperial governance but now under Jordanian rule. While they were Sunni Muslims and hence not as inclined towards the Baha’is than the Twelver Shi’i Muslims, the Jordanians and their government found pretexts to cancel the permission of the Baha’i villages to remain in existence and around 1960 they were abandoned. The village of ‘Adasiyyih is described by Paul Haney in his book ‘Adasiyyih: The Story of ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s Model Farming Community, available from the U.S. Baha’i Publishing Trust: <https://www.bahaibookstore.com/Adasiyyih-ePub-P10908> and <https://www.bahaiblog.net/articles/books/adasiyyih-the-story-of-abdul-bahas-model-farming-community/>

This village was also depicted by Iraj Poostchi in ‘Adasiyyah: A Study in Agriculture and Rural Development, published in volume 16 of the Baha’i Studies Review: <https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/bsr.16.61/7> and part of which can be found here:

<https://www.holy-writings.com/?a=SHOWTEXT&d=%2Fen%2FBah%C3%A1%27%C3%AD+Faith%2F2+-+Bah%C3%A1%27%C3%AD+Studies%2FArticles+%28published%29%2FAdasiyyah-+A+Study+in+Agriculture+and+Rural+Development.txt&q=covenant>

Hossein Ashchi (1943–2013) was born in ‘Adasiyyih and spoke fluent Arabic and Hebrew. He probably wrote about life in the village in his personal memoirs, which are unpublished. See more about him here: <https://bahaichronicles.org/hossein-achtchi/>

It should be noted that all of the communities which implemented the model were eventually eliminated. That word is chosen deliberately.

Their elimination was intentional, premeditated and the result of hostility of the general populace, the clergy and the government, all of which were predominantly Muslim.

The atypical Baha'i community which implemented this model in the most impressive manner, was that of the city of Ishqabad, in what is now called Uzbekistan. In 1882 a Baha'i purchased property in the city with the intention of establishing a Baha'i population here, and in 1884 the first permanent settlers arrived. It thrived, not only during the government of the Russian Empire but also under the USSR, building possibly the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkar in until it incurred the disapproval of the Communists, as described here:

“Islam, both in its Shiite and Sunnite form, is attacked by the communists because it is reactionary, encourages nationalist narrowmindedness and obstructs the education and emancipation of women. Bahá'íism [sic] has incurred communist displeasure for exactly the opposite reasons. It is dangerous to Communism because of its broadmindedness, its tolerance, its international outlook, the attention it pays to women's education and its insistence on the equality of the sexes. All this contradicts the communist thesis about the backwardness of all religions. In the political sphere social reformers appear to the communists more harmful than 'reactionaries', and in the religious field an outlook which is mindful of modern social problems is thought more obnoxious than out-of-date obscurantism. This is perhaps why Bahá'íism has attracted the attention of the Soviet communists to a much greater degree than might be warranted by the numerical strength of its supporters.” (Walter Kolarz, Religion in the Soviet Union, 1961, p. 470)

Communist opposition began in 1922, and intensified in 1929. Then for a period the Baha'is were permitted to continue their lives unmolested, but in 1938 the government expelled the Baha'is and appropriated the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar. Communism had proven to be as implacable an enemy of the Faith as Twelver Shi'i Islam. Dr. Moojan Momen wrote an article about this community entitled The Bahá'í Community of Ashkhabad: Its Social Basis and Importance in Bahá'í History, published in *Cultural Change and Continuity in Central Asia* (ed. Shirin Akiner, pp. 278-305, London: Kegan Paul, 1991) which is available online: https://bahai-library.com/momen_ashkhabad

A close study of the history of all of these Baha'i communities, in Iran, Myanmar, Uzbekistan, and the Holy Land will certainly unveil to a considerable degree the implementation of the Baha'i village model in each of these locations and over the span of nearly 200 years. What they do not chronicle of course is how these communities might have further developed had they been accorded the freedom of religion which is Constitutionally protected in the United States of America. What we can observe, and which might be somewhat comparable, are the rural communities in America which implemented a somewhat similar model during this same time period.

In 1683 and at the instigation of William Penn, then governor of the state of Pennsylvania and a Quaker, the first Anabaptist village was established in America. It was called Germantown, as these immigrants were German Mennonites. It disbanded in the mid-1950s, lasting for nearly 300 years. The second such village was established in Lancaster County, also in Pennsylvania, in 1710, by Swiss-German Palatine Mennonites. It continues to thrive, after over 300 years. While they have divided along theological lines through the centuries, they continue to thrive in many places.

“Approximately 12,000 of the 40,000 dairy farms in the United States [were] Amish-owned as of 2018. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish>, citing footnote #44 "Licensed Dairy Farm Numbers Drop to Just Over 40,000". *Milk Business*. February 21, 2018.) “According to the USDA list of licensees, over 98% of Ohio's puppy mills [were] run by the Amish, as [were] 97% of Indiana's, and 63% of Pennsylvania's.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish> citing footnote #74 ["APHIS Public Search Tool"](#). [aphis-efile.force.com](https://efile.force.com). Retrieved March 17, 2022.

If Baha’i villages were to be established in the USA, it is likely that they would also thrive. Why then are there no such villages here? Baha’is have settled in urban communities, very few of them in rural areas. The Guardian forbade Baha’is to establish or to inhabit communes, and perhaps, by an excess of caution, the believers did not live in close proximity with one another. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice have generally encouraged Baha’is to disperse, either as pioneers who live outside of their country of origin, or to communities in their homeland where Local Spiritual Assemblies are slated for establishment. However, the principal reason why the village model has not been implemented is that most Baha’is have never heard of it, let alone seen it implemented. Because it has not been attempted outside of the countries reviewed above, there has been no opportunity to see it in action.

Another reason why this model has not appeared in America is that most Baha’is are first generation adult converts from other religions or agnosticism and are not accustomed to adopting an entirely different way of living...in fact, they consider that to be cultish, and alienating to their friends, family and work colleagues. When they see this pattern of behavior in other communities they automatically assume that it is hostile

to modernity, hostile to the Baha'i principles, and a recipe not for unity but division. They much prefer to live amongst a population mostly composed of Christians than a population predominantly composed of Baha'is. They may well believe that minority status is what Baha'u'llah intends for them.

American Baha'is seem to be a community that would prefer not to become too Baha'i, too distinctive from other Americans...and hence perfectly comfortable living in the status quo, in which they are a tiny minority wherever they find themselves. It is no wonder perhaps that attempts at mass enrollment of new believers have largely failed to result in a considerable expansion of Baha'i communities. No wonder perhaps that many of our children do not become Baha'is and do not raise their children as Baha'is. No wonder perhaps that over the course of our lifetimes we so often hear our fellow Baha'is state that the heyday of the Faith was in the past. Perhaps we should reconsider?

Perhaps we should contemplate the example of the Baha'i villages that were established in the past, notwithstanding the opposition of their neighbors. Perhaps we should consider the billions of village-dwellers worldwide. Perhaps we should recall where our food comes from. Perhaps we should recall Baha'u'llah's love for His garden, 'Abdu'l-Baha's love for the farmers who established Baha'i villages, Shoghi Effendi's insistence upon planting beautiful gardens around the Baha'i shrines. Perhaps we should remember that Baha'u'llah considered the development of agriculture to be a fundamental objective of the Faith. Perhaps we might also bring to mind that most of our ancestors, be they from any place in the world, were engaged in agriculture, and that their ties to their families, their neighbors and the world of nature made them who they were, and who we are.

Perhaps we are not intended to live in cities, in the midst of millions of people, dependent upon technology that grows exponentially more complicated and divorced from human beings and their fellow dwellers on the planet. Perhaps an “ever-advancing civilization” is not a universal megalopolis but rather a return to our roots. Perhaps, as T.S. Eliot wrote “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”