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Iran Press Watch

Documenting the Persecution of the Baha'i Community in Iran

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Denial of Education: An Appeal by an Academic

December 9th, 2008

On 30 October 2005, Dr. Christopher Buck wrote the following letter to several officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran serving in the United States, Canada and the Great Britain, in addition to sharing it with several academics and colleagues.

Iran Press Watch is pleased to share this letter as one example of efforts of western Baha'i intellectuals assisting with the deplorable condition of the Baha'i youth in Iran that are barred from education.

To: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Ambassador to the U.K. <info@iran-embassy.org.uk>

Sir Richard Dalton, KCMG, British Ambassador to Iran <Chancery.Tehran@fco.gov.uk>

Dear Iranian Ambassador:

As a dual Canadian/U.S. citizen, I am writing to protest the continuing denial of access of Baha'is to universities in the Islamic Republic of Iran. By depriving the Baha'is their basic human right to a university education, the current policy in Iran does serious damage to the image of Islam in the West.

The Islamic position that refuses to recognize the Baha'is as a religious minority or cognizes their human rights is doctrinally understandable in that the Baha'i Faith is a post-Islamic religion—a theoretical impossibility considering Muhammad's ontological status as the "Seal of the Prophets" (Qur'an 33:40). But by international human rights standards, Iran's 25-year-old policy is morally wrong—even if claiming to be doctrinally "right" from an orthodox Muslim perspective.

Islamic values encompass such human rights as the right to an education and freedom of religion. Both by Islamic standards and by the yardstick of international human rights, Iran's efforts to preserve Islamic values at the expense of the Baha'i have arguably had the effect of perverting them in the eyes of Muslim moderates in Iran and around the world. An Islamic state cannot claim that Islam respects human rights if the state selectively denies such rights for one or more of its minorities.

In Iran, where the Baha'i Faith originated, Baha'is have historically been the target of persecution. Much ink has been spilled in documenting the bloodshed and systematic

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deprivation of civil and human rights of the Baha'i minority in Iran. As an academic and former professor of religious studies, I can tell you that the definitive scholarly study of the "Baha'i question" in Iran is Nazila Ghanea's Human Rights, the U.N. and the Baha'is in Iran (2002), written with special reference to international human rights law. See also Christopher Buck, "Islam and Minorities: The Case of the Baha'is," Studies in Contemporary Islam 5.1-2 (Spring & Fall 2003 [published in 2005]): 83-106 ("Special Issue on Religious and Ethnic Minorities"), available in Farsi at <<http://www.iranian.com/Opinion/2005/June/Bahai/Images/BuckBahais2005.pdf>> and in English at

<<http://www.iranian.com/Opinion/2005/June/Bahai/Images/BuckBahais2005Eng.pdf>>.

Skipping over the history of their persecution to focus on the case of the Baha'i question in Islamic Iran, one may simply say that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran has simply reasserted clerical and state intolerance of Iran's largest religious minority, the Baha'is.

Since the early days of the revolution, Baha'is have been subjected to systematic torture, execution, and economic deprivation until international pressure caused the regime to alter its plans to exterminate the Baha'i community. From 1982 to 2001, the UN International Commission on Human Rights had, for nearly each year for twenty consecutive years, adopted a resolution decrying the human rights situation in Iran, with recent U.N. resolutions having been adopted in 2003 and 2004. The oppression of Baha'is in Iran is now relatively quiescent, but still systemic.

While the post-revolutionary persecution of Baha'is in Iran has attenuated, a subtle strangulation of the Baha'i community is now in effect, evidenced recently by unprovoked arrests and short-term detentions of Baha'is, confiscation of Baha'i properties, summary seizures of liquid assets, wrongful denial of rightful pensions, desecration or destruction of Baha'i cemeteries, official and public denunciations of the Baha'i religion, harassment of Baha'i teachers and students, the effective barring of qualified Baha'i students from higher education, and the barring of Baha'is from all government employment enforced as a matter of official policy and adroitly orchestrated. All attempts to obtain redress are procedurally frustrated or systematically denied, as Baha'is have no legal recourse under Iran's constitution. Particularly egregious has been the recent destruction of Baha'i sacred sites in Iran, comparable to the Taliban's demolition of two towering Buddha figures in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in 2001.

This might be more comprehensible, although no less justifiable, had Baha'is acted against Iran or Islam — both of which they respect and honor. Paradoxically, Baha'is have a strong belief in the prophethood of Muhammad and in the authenticity and veracity of the Qur'an. The situation is even more peculiar for a Western academic, like myself, teaching Islam in an effort to counteract the cultural Islamophobia that still predominates in the West, as a United Nations study has rightly noted.

In the final analysis, Iran's policy does serious damage to the reputation of Islam globally. As a consequence of Iran's treatment of its Baha'i minority, the ultimate injury-in-fact is refractory damage to the reputation of Islam in the eyes of the international community.

Baha'is are still not allowed to enroll in universities. The exclusion mechanism is simple and policy reason is clear:

- In 1981, Iranian universities required that applicants belong to one of the four religions recognized in the Iranian Constitution, namely the Muslim, Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian religions, by providing these as the only options on applications for university entrance exams.
- In 1991, a secret memorandum written by Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, secretary of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, (and personally endorsed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on 25 February 1991) commands: "They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha'is."

- In September 2001, the Ministry of Justice issued a report that reiterated that government policy continued to aim at the eventual elimination of the Baha'is as a community.

Iran's "Baha'i-phobia" feeds Islamophobia in the West, reinforcing the public perception that Islam is a tolerant religion in principle, but intolerant in practice. I and my colleagues urge Iran to pursue a policy of enlightened self-interest by allowing Baha'is to attend universities.

Iran styles itself as a democracy. But the Baha'i question is not even a question. It is foregone conclusion — viz., that this religion should never be allowed to flourish under an Islamic system. But to give entrance to that policy vitiates any claim to equal protection, procedural or substantive due process, or any other democratic principle that Islamic states may wish to claim. Thus, the "Baha'i question" has confronted the Islamic world with a test case by which Islam's claims to religious tolerance will either be vindicated or compromised.

The most urgent need of the Iranian Baha'i community is for the youth to have access to higher education in the regular official universities. I appeal to your Islamic sense of humanity to grant Baha'is full access to a university education, and to give legal status to the Baha'i Faith as a distinct religious minority. Legal recognition of the Baha'i Faith is not without historical and legal precedent in the Middle East. In 1924, an Egyptian court ruled that the Baha'i Faith is a distinct religion; the same conclusion was reached in a landmark case in Turkey in 1959.

"Everyone has the right to education," according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Iran is a signatory. Surely, an enlightened Islamic social policy would grant no less for any human being, whether he or she is Muslim or not.

Respectfully,

Christopher Buck, Ph.D., J.D. (candidate)

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(former) Professor of Religious Studies (2003–2004)

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Comments are closed.