

A Baha'i Pontiff in the Making

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A Baha'i Pontiff in the Making

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The coming of an Imam or Mahdi is the living hope of Islam. Ever since the fateful battle of

Kerbela (680) which witnessed the defeat of the grandson of the Prophet by the hosts of the

orthodox, and the annihilation of his gallant but ill-starred band, the febrile imagination of

many sections of the Islamic world has kindled to the expectation of one to come, a sort of

returning Elijah, under whose divine guidance the faith would be reformed toward a uniform and

more or less primitive orthodoxy, and the world itself brought under the dominion of the

Prophet. The hope has been more fervent among the Shiah, the partisans of Ali, than among the Sunnis.

Just how or when the belief arose is not clear. The title appears to have been given to Ali's son

Mohammed, but there is little ground for supposing that the prophet himself contemplated the

appearance of a Mahdi, notwithstanding the fact that prophecies of such a personage were

afterwards attributed to him. Unquestionably it is the expression of a deep-rooted desire of the

human heart, not peculiar to Islam alone, but to be found among other religions of the world,

breaking out in different ages and among different peoples, now as a Messianic hope, now as an

Adventist doctrine, and anon as a theory of incantations or avatars. It must be

remembered too, that this foundling faith with its infancy was rocked in the cradle of Christianity by the hand of Judaism, and in its adolescence it both wooed and fought with amazing audacity now one, now the other. Geographical propinquity meant constant commercial contacts, as the Persian Gulf-Palmyra-Tyre and the Red Sea-Mecca-Tyre caravan routes attest. "The history of earliest commerce is the history of incense, and the land of incense was Arabia." And commercial contact of any dura-

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tion at all always means cultural contagion. It would be strange if this hope, which at times beat so ardently in the breasts of neighbor-Jew and neighbor-Christian, had not found a response in the heart of the Moslem. In the third place — and perhaps this is as significant a factor as any — the formative era of Islam was characterized by disorder, confusion, and civil war. Especially was that true in respect to Persia, whose people were more conquered by the new faith than converted to it, and into whose tragic history was written a new chapter when the Abbasids unfurled their black standard in Khorasan, and the surveillance of the Omayyads changed to bloody suppression. There could be but one issue to this, an issue psychologically predictable — an undaunted confidence, if somewhat unsound, in a Deliverer to come, an expectation which heightened with their own weakness. To the Jew in exile, more than a thousand years before, the vision was familiar, to which fancy the infant Church under the persecution of a Nero, a Domitian, a Decius, a Diocletian also fell heir. In an apocalyptic atmosphere, a Messiah becomes inevitable, imperative. Between Palestine and Persia, however, there was a difference: with the former, the moral implications of the forces at work were consistently clear, and one's ethical perspective as to truth and duty was never distorted either by fanaticism or fear. In the history of neither Judaism nor Christianity can one parallel taqiyya — that ethical toboggan slide — countenanced by the Shiah,

and to which all the sects which have sprung from that faith have had recourse.[1]

With Persia steeped in Imamism and the equally heady principles of Sufism[2] it was only to be anticipated that aspirants would be forthcoming, who would claim in themselves

the fulfillment of the national expectancy. Such a one was the mystic dreamer, Mirza Ali

Mohammed, who as a young man of four and twenty declared himself to be the

1. A study of the life of Mary Baker Eddy and of the history of the Christian Science movement furnishes interesting data of the encroachment of this perversion upon the confines of Christianity, data which suggest too its fearful moral consequences.

Taqiyya = dissimulation

2. It will be recalled that the Ahmadiya movement of the Punjab sprang from a soil impregnated with Mahdism and Sufism.

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revelation of God, himself the Primal Will, the Bab or "door" to life eternal, who was to supercede all previous prophets, including Jesus and Mohammed, as Babism, of which he was the author, was destined to eclipse Islam. He was a pathetic figure whose life was quickly cut short by a firing squad, but whose delusion that act failed to frighten from the public mind.

Though he claimed to be God, Mirza Mohammed yet held no revelation was final, that another dispensation building upon him would yet be founded — salvo jure and apologia for the next saviour. And unerringly he came (by a delayed and circuitous route but ultimately arriving) in the person of Mirza Hussayn Ali of Teheran, alias Bahá'u'lláh who, from the day of his "issuing forth" until his death at Akka was accorded increasing recognition by Babists and others, particularly visionary enthusiasts and speculative mystics as the one foretold, "whom God will manifest." The principle of succession was not long in resolving itself, and the Elisha who seized the mantle of this departing Elijah was his eldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, accepted by the faithful as the Exemplar and Interpreter of the faith now

founded.

"Bahá'u'lláh ascended (i.e., passed from this world) in 1892, leaving a Testament naming 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Head of His Cause, the Interpreter of His Teachings

and the Promulgator of His Faith. The providential spirit guiding and protecting the Bahá'í

cause from its beginning, centered thereafter in 'Abdu'l-Bahá."

So runs the record.[3] This last-named leader "served as the witness and proof of

Bahá'u'lláh," unifying the followers and organising the faith into a system, albeit not a very

lucid or original one, and "exploring the fundamental problems of religion" before audiences in

America and Europe in an accommodating and reconciliatory fashion. As for the Scriptures that

wrote themselves off from his pen we are assured that

"no such source of education in the whole meaning of the word exists in the modern world outside the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In these writings the ideals of Christian, Jew, and other religionists,

3. The Bahá'í World, 1926-1928, p. 5

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of philosopher and scientist, of economist and reformer are abundantly realised."

Time passed, and with it 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who died November 28, 1921, after committing the future of the Cause to his eldest grandson Shoghi Effendi.[4]

It was Sunday noon when the automobile from Jerusalem halted its dusty trail in the heart of

Haifa. A hotel, a bath, a lunch, and I was ready for a stroll. Knowing something of the

significance of Haifa to the Bahá'ís, my steps turned to the little Persian colony grouped near

the home of the leader of the sect. The Guardian of the Cause was engaged, I was told, and would

see me later, say, in an hour. In the meantime, would I like to visit some of the sacred places at

hand? It was his secretary and cousin who was speaking. I would, and so together we set out up

the slope of Carmel to the garden-tomb of the Bab (executed in Tabriz in 1850, but later

exhumed and re-interred, so his followers asservate, at Haifa), and of

'Abdu'l-Bahá. The place
was undeniably beautiful, from the height of which one could view the long
street stretching off
across the German colony, glittering white in the Mediterranean sunlight, and
beyond the blue
waters of the Bay.

The conversation was casual, but a little sifting elicited the statement from
my companion that
he was a graduate of the American University of Beirut and had studied,
principally Economics
and Law, at the University of London.

The slow progress of the faith discouraged him.

"We find youth to be not interested at present in true religion (i.e.,
Bahá'ism). It is a
discouraging aspect of the age. Our youth today are making two blunders: they
think it
necessary to imitate the West in everything, and believing the West to be
unspiritual they think
it fitting to become irreligious to be in fashion."

4. According to the will of Bahá'u'lláh, a younger son Mohammed Ali
was to succeed 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but the last-named disregarded this provision and
appointed his
own grandson, then twenty-five years of age. Mohammed Ali did not appear to
have the influence
behind him to contest the nomination.

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But there was nothing, I was assured, to prevent a man from being a Moslem and
a Bahá'ist at the
same time "provided he accepts the status of Bahá'u'lláh as the divine Son of
God and the fullest
and final revelation of God" - rather high for an initial hurdle, I thought.
Evidently,
notwithstanding profuse professions of catholicity and tolerance there was
encysted in the faith
the seed of bigotry.

He had said he had been in the United States, so I enquired of him what he
found the attitude of the
Christian West to be as he traveled through this land.

"I found the Unitarian Church, the Ethical Culture Society, and the liberal
leaders of various
denominations most appreciative, but the more orthodox bodies very
unsympathetic. With the

Roman Church of course we had no point of contact" — naturally, I reflected, since the leader of Bahá'ism demanded of the Pope of Rome that the latter acknowledge his priority as the absolute and universal Lord of mankind. For Bahá'u'lláh, following, consciously or otherwise, the precedent of Mohammed, who in the flush of his success subpoenaed the potentates of Rome, Persia, Byzantium, and Egypt to accept his mission, issued. Likewise his mandamus to the Christian rulers of the earth.

We returned to the spacious home of Shoghi Effendi. He met us — a man of medium height, of quiet demeanor, and dressed in European attire. There seemed to be nothing markedly spiritual in that handsome face, and when he spoke one was more conscious of his courtesy and reserve than of any profundity in his utterances. To play the role of prophet, and much more to pose as God, is a sobering undertaking. Claim infallibility, and the dictates of discretion will prescribe a mystifying silence, and if to infallibility is added impeccability,[5] one can hardly afford to be original or enterprising.

After a few polite preliminaries, and attendant led us to a waiting automobile into which we entered.

5. It is alleged by some that the Bahá'ists of Syria are following in the footsteps of the Shíahs in their regard for Ali, and say that Shoghi Effendi is sinless.

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A sea breeze laden with the odor of the ocean; ten miles of hard, smooth sand pounded by the white-reefed rollers to the firmness of macadam over which we rolled in a comfortable car — it is the road to Akka around the bay of Haifa. And at the end of the journey two miles beyond the town, the garden-tomb of Bahá'u'lláh, - red geraniums in quantity, red balsams by the hundreds, red coral plants (*ruselia superba*) and red paths of broken pottery set in a garden of green sward, relieved by white bushes of the fragrant jasmine, and the equally redolent oleander — it was a charming scene. Within, the tomb was a combination of hot-house and sanctuary. The grave of the leader, one which stood some golden-branched candlesticks, an urn of flowers, the gift of American adherents, and a few expensive and ornate vases, lay in a small chamber to the right. The main

room was in the form of a square, perhaps thirty feet on the side with a large alcove at one end, adjoining the modest mausoleum designed with alter- effect. In one corner of the room, attached to the wall, was a lamp, the gift of Stuttgart believers. The centre of the room was a garden of green plants and trees, not flowers, about fifteen feet square, rendered extremely beautiful by a verdant column of trailing asparagus in heavy foliage which first reached to and then dropped from the roof.

From the shrine, where by this time a group of a dozen pilgrims had gathered, who bowed and bowed and bowed obsequiously to this youthful, western-educated, western-clad, English-speaking leader of the sect whenever he spoke to, looked at, or passed them by, we repaired to the garden of Bahá'u'lláh, where the dead promoter was wont to rest and meditate, read and write, after the ban of his incarceration was lifted. It too was not without its beauty, thanks to the assiduous care of a young Persian Zoroastrian. The garden, like the other, a blazing glory of red, was in reality a small island. From the central bed fifty yards in length, rose a half dozen giant trees like conifers, which, I was informed, had been brought as seeds from Egypt, in the days of Bahá'u'lláh.

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Ultimately we returned to the car upon the beach, and speeding back to Haifa I put some questions to my kind host.

"You are a university man?"

"Yes, I am a graduate of the American University of Beirut, and I spent also a year and a half at Oxford studying political economy."

"Did you ever take up psychology?"

"No!"

"Or philosophy?"

"No! I am not interested in abstract thought."

An illuminating admission, I thought, explaining in part the paradox of his own person, that he could hold essentially abstract notions about divine effulgences to the extent of impersonating divinity without sensing either its futility or its humor. One would not expect specialization in

political economy or, as in the case of his assistant and cousin, Ruhi Afnan, law, to be particularly pertinent in preparing one for a hypostatic role.[6] "Religion" he added, "is to be a social idea."

I asked if he did not think a full-rounded and efficacious religion should speak with confidence concerning sin, forgiveness, God, immortality, and was immediately assured that Bahá'ism does all of that — that it differs from other faiths not in fundamental principles, for therein it agrees with all, but in its application of certain social laws, which were divinely revealed to Bahá'u'lláh, thereby placing him on a different and unique pedestal among God's prophets, as the last to come. This revelation he has sent down in a book in Arabic, not yet translated, "because the time is not yet ripe, the world is not yet ready to receive it. When it is translated, which will be after the economic and spiritual catastrophe foretold by Bahá'u'lláh to occur within a

6. Not infrequently, writers on Indian affairs, brought into personal contact with Mahatma Gandhi confess surprise and regret that one who is presuming to prescribe for India's millions a new economic and political regime, should entertain a contempt for books, especially such as would inform him on the problems arising in those particular fields, and of the experience of the race in endeavoring to solve those problems. For example, one well-informed critic writing on M. K. Gandhi as a Factor in Indian Politics, (F.G. Pratt in Political India: Oxford University Press, 1932, pp.206-7), says: "His habit from quite an early period of his life has been to rely on what he describes as the inner light or the inner vision, for the solution of mental and spiritual problems. and this manner of thinking has given him a supreme self-confidence which has sometimes been to him a tower of strength and sometimes a snare and a pitfall. He distrusted book-knowledge, so his friend Mrs. Polak tells us, and seemed to think that it 'obscured if it did not destroy the capacity to perceive the inner vision.' Of history and economics he has made no serious study. His ideas of history are

such as might be derived from the school-books of fifty years ago."

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hundred years, seventy of which have passed, it will revolutionize society.

After that cataclysm

Bahá'ísm will come into its own. [7]

He spoke with incredible seriousness, like one who sensed impending disaster.

It was not that he

anticipated the inevitable and evolutionary revolutions with every thoughtful student of history

foresees, but an event more apocalyptic. Such changes as were under way he grasped at as the

sign and seal of the soundness of Bahá'ísm. Indeed it was as if among the religions of the world,

Bahá'ísm was the chanticleer whose crowing would cause the sun to rise upon universal ruin.

"How many Bahá'ísts would you say there are in the world?"

"We cannot say. We keep no records of membership, in the sense that the Christian Church

does. The lines between Bahá'ísm and Christianity are not yet clearly demarked. It is sometimes

difficult to tell who are and who are not Bahá'ísts, so much do they merge.

We also find that

many people assent to our teachings, even join our communion, but refrain from active loyalty

to us."

"Do you ask your members to submit to any initiatory rite before you accept them?"

"No ceremony is necessary for recognition of membership,[8] nor do we observe any one day as peculiarly sacred. All that we insist on is the acceptance of the status of

Bahá'u'lláh and of his infallible teachings in their entirety."

On this last point he was adamant and explicit. He reverted to it time and again.

"Is Bahá'u'lláh in your thought a divine being and as such to be worshipped?"

"We do not think of him as God, though he is divine. He is God in the sense that the mirror

reflects the sun. We know that the sun is not in the mirror, but we know also that it is.

Similarly Bahá'u'lláh said he was God, and as such we worship him."

"You mean you pray to him?"

"Yes. Our prayers are to him, for by him as our Mediator we come to God."

7. The book referred to here is the Kitab-i-Aqdas (the "Most Holy Book") a small volume written by Bahá'u'lláh, a compendium of laws purporting to govern

Bahá'ísm a world-empire to be. Those non-Bahá'ísts who have had the opportunity to study it

— for the Bahá'ísts are jealous for its possession, as the conservative Muslim objects to

the sale of the Koran to the infidel — point out its dogmatic insistence on unreserved

acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as the sole hope of salvation, and its Levitical character as being

manifested, patterned, notwithstanding many changes, after the Koran, which work it abrogates

— reason enough perhaps why they prefer it should remain untranslated.

8. Any ceremony involving public confession of the faith would hardly be consonant with the

practice of taqiyyah or dissimulation which Bahá'ísm endorses.

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"Are you not afraid that with the passing years Bahá'ísm will degenerate into a cult of saint-worship, a form of homolatry?"

"We see the danger, and the education of our people is my great concern, to which I am devoting much thought."

"I wish you could dislodge from my mind the notion that Bahá'ísm at its best is but a fragment of the teachings of Jesus."

I said this because I was not unaware of the fact that the founder of this cult had been influenced by the Bible.

"It does not contradict Christianity. It only supersedes it, as a later revelation of a teaching more needed by this modern age," he answered impatiently.

"In what way?"

"Not in fundamentals, but in the laws to govern future society which it will promulgate"

— hinting, I thought, at the mysterious Kitab-i-Aqdas.

I surrendered. there was not much one could say, for as far as he was concerned, the matter obviously was closed.

We left the beach, the beautiful beach still strewn with the prickly purple shells which made ancient Tyre famous for its dye, and re-entered the city. As we did so our conversation dropped to an exchange of commonplaces. what was the use of talk anyway? I was perplexed, depressed — at the seeming everlasting vitality of error; at the credulity of men. True, I reflected, it is a bubble religion, an evanescent phenomenon, but until it breaks, what waste of ideals, of hope, of faith, of precious qualities of the human spirit! Moreover its fraudulent character, not to mention its ill-balanced dogmatism, and its attenuated ethics,[9] covered o'er with the jargon of the social reformer, rasped my sense of decency and right. The Greek in me stumbled (was it, I wondered, thus with the Athenians and Paul?) as the unperturbed pagan within fought for a hearing, blinding me momentarily to the pathos and - let us admit it — the beauty in Bahá'ísm's smouldering, questing passion.[10]

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9. Bahá'ísm sets its approval on polygamy. Indeed Bahá'u'lláh himself had two wives and a concubine. The history of the succession subsequent to his death is dark with conspiracy and violence. And in its sanction of the death penalty for enemies of the faith it goes beyond the limits of Islam.

10. For further information see: "Bahá'ísm - its Origin, History, Teachings", by William McElwee Miller, New York, 1931.

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