

Baha'i: A Second Look

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Bahá'í:

A Second Look

Marcus Bach

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"Fourth Article in a Series on Sects and Cults"

[Note: this essay was followed in a later issue by two letters, included below.]

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"IF THESE BAHÁ'IS ever get going, they may take the country by storm." So said a discerning Protestant minister as we talked one evening about America's most "ecumenical" faith. He felt the Bahá'ís were held captive on two counts: their insistence that a new prophet had appeared in the person of Bahá'u'lláh, and their lack of emphasis on a personalized faith.

This comment prompted me to take a second look at the Bahá'í group, which has a \$3 million temple in Wilmette, Illinois, an American membership of perhaps 18,000, and sizable assemblies in most of our major cities. All of which may be regarded as substantial for a religion which came to the United States some sixty years ago.

Whenever a Bahá'í representative addressed a group of my students there was a deep-seated response to the social and ethical teachings he set forth. College students generally are as tired of sectarian squabbles as they are tantalized by efforts toward spiritual unity. They liked the Bahá'í emphasis and were interested not only by what Bahá'ísm is but by what it may become. Also, they were not unwilling to accept the Bahá'í claim that Woodrow Wilson in his plans for the League of Nations was influenced

by Bahá'u'lláh, that the steps toward world understanding might be the result of Bahá'u'lláh's mystical presence, and that the development of the United Nations might be the substance of the imposing shadow cast by the Persian seer. So far so good. But when they learned that in order to accept the precepts they must also accept the preceptor, that to become true Bahá'ís they must recognise Bahá'u'lláh as the Promised One - this simply spelled out another and new kind of sectarianism.

Cornerstone and Stumbling Block

It seemed that any second look would only confirm the minister's contention of captivity: the Bahá'í cause is held down by the unwillingness of Americans to accept seriously the claim that another messiah has appeared or that Christ has returned. Though Bahá'u'lláh might represent the cornerstone of Bahá'í faith, he was still the stumbling block to Bahá'í growth throughout the Christian world.

I went to Israel recently, to the harbor city of Akka, for it was there that Bahá'u'lláh, banished from Baghdad, spent his years of exile. To this windswept land, where Francis of Assisi once walked, Bahá'u'lláh came in chains in 1865. I went to the old prison where he was held captive for 25 years and where his son, Abdul-Baha, was a prisoner for 40 years. As I poked around behind the old walls and peered into the dungeons, the Bahá'í story came to life. Bahá'u'lláh, like Jesus, had a forerunner who called himself the Bab, which means "the Gate." In the midst of the religious and political wrangling of Moslem, Christian and Jew, the Bab said in effect: "A plague on all your houses. You have all lost sight of your common origin." He preached that God is the Father of all men and the Founder of all faiths, and that the time had come when heaven would personify this truth. Like John the Baptist, the Bab announced the coming of a messiah: Bahá'u'lláh, who proclaimed himself in 1863.

I went to Bahji, some six kilometers inland. Here is the sheik's mansion where Bahá'u'lláh lived like a prince after his release from prison and where he died in 1892. Here is the holy spot where Christians, Jews, Moslems, Zoroastrians and Buddhists came to "lament the loss and magnify the greatness of the herald of God." Bahá'ís even today do not speak of the death of Bahá'u'lláh but, rather, of his ascension. In reverence, I knelt beside the bier.

An Orientalist's Impressions

As I walked through the majestic rooms I was reminded that it was here, years ago, that the noted Cambridge University Orientalist, Edward G. Browne, visited Bahá'u'lláh. His impressions, widely quoted, are precious to every ardent Bahá'í: "The face of him on whom I gazed I can never forget. Those piercing eyes seemed to read one's very soul.... No need to ask in whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before One who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and

emperors sigh for in vain!"

This was Bahá'u'lláh whose power and grace Bahá'ís saw reflected in his successor, Abdul-Baha, and which they see mirrored today in the present leader, Shoghi Effendi, the eldest son of the eldest daughter of Abdul-Baha, and a distant relative of the Bab. This was Bahá'u'lláh who, as my minister friend insisted, "can never be sold to Americans; even his name is against him."

But quietly in the heart of every Bahá'í there lives a feeling that he and his fellows are children of destiny as well as children of light. Bahá'u'lláh assured them in his writings: "Be not dismayed! Arise to further my cause and to exalt my word among men..... We are truly almighty. Whoso hath recognized me will arise and truly serve me with such determination that the powers of earth and heaven shall be unable to defeat his purpose."

Cut to the Same Pattern

I have met Bahá'ís in many parts of the world.

They are all cut to the same pattern: heartfelt dedication to the cause and person of Bahá'u'lláh, zeal in the advancement of their ideals. They ask no salaries, want no honor, and are literally more interested in giving than in receiving. Typical were two Bahá'í women I met in Chichicastenango. They had been in this Guatemalan village for two years and had won two converts among the Maya-Quichés. "Isn't this slow progress?"

I asked. "That all depends on how you figure it," I was told.

"Who knows the power or the value of one soul?"

For them it is unthinkable that anyone will ever rob Bahá'u'lláh of his deification: he is the true reincarnation

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of Christ. They plan to "get loose" from Christian resistance to this claim through demonstration, through dedicated effort in the cause which he proclaimed: the oneness of all mankind. How can he be a stumbling block? How can he hold them captive? Many there were in the days of Jesus who rejected him, and some there are who even today have not accepted him. Bahá'ís believe that as Jesus brought the message of the sanctity of the individual, so Bahá'u'lláh came to reveal the sanctity of all races and faiths. God sends his prophets at stated periods with a universal message for their time.

But for the Christian world this belief also presents a question and a problem. Most Christians feel that the world has not caught up with the teachings of Jesus, has not yet lived his life or met his challenge. Bahá'u'lláh came too soon. Given time, we might somehow find the courage and the will to live out the principles of Christ. And if we did that we would automatically establish the kind of better world which Bahá'u'lláh foresaw.

Bahá'ís do not agree that this can be accomplished through Christianity. They contend that the truest and deepest teachings of Jesus are obscured by the sectarian exclusiveness of the Christian faith. Christianity is as divisive as Judaism, Buddhism or Islam. Bahá'u'lláh came to show us a better way: we can find the treasure of true faith only by looking beneath the "welter of intolerance and bigotry, formalism and hypocrisy, corruption and misrepresentation, schism and contention." In other words, we must accept a new prophet before we can rediscover the old. As of now it is mockery to say, "In the spirit of Jesus we unite for the worship of God and the service of man," since Christianity insists upon excluding certain races and people and colors and creeds from its fellowship. So say the Bahá'ís; and they add that this could never happen in the name of Christ reborn, Bahá'u'lláh.

Nine Doors in the Temple

You will see a demonstration of this idea at a Bahá'í service. It is an ecumenical service, without the benefit of priest or cleric, a simple and solemn service with readings and music from the living faiths of all the world. It is worship in which Protestant and Catholic and every other Christian, Jew, Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu and person of every other faith and race may participate. The temple in Wilmette has nine doors, as if to declare that each of the world's great living religions may enter through its own portal and unite with every other belief under the single dome of God. Passages from Bahá'u'lláh's inspired writings adorn each alabaster entrance and the words are always significant: "The earth is one country and mankind its citizens"; "Make mention of me on my earth that in my heaven I may remember thee"; "My love is my stronghold; he that entereth therein is safe and secure."

But what about the second point of "captivity" which holds back the progress of Bahá'í religion in America? What about the accusation that it lacks emphasis in the area of the "personal gospel"?

Are Bahá'ís laboring under the illusion that people are more interested in saving the world than in saving themselves? Do they realize that we are in the whirr of the gospel of self-advancement? Haven't they caught on to the fact that never before have so many in religious circles offered so much to those who want more? Can't they see that the great masses of people, weary of talk about the insecurity of the big world, are eager to make their own little worlds safe and secure?

The Bahá'í answer to such impertinences has always been a patient smile and a quiet word: "It is not what people want but what people need that will save them. Life is intricately bound up with life. Individuals are interwoven with individuals. The need of one is the need of all. The concern of each is the concern of everyone. Your true self is every other self, his love is your love and his peace your peace."

A 'Tenth Door' Opening?

But now a second look shows something quite revealing: the opening - so it seems to me - of a "tenth door" to the Bahá'í cause, a door for those who insist that religion must meet their daily needs, help them over life's rough spots, and supply what so many of our major faiths today promise their followers. This "tenth door" is just now beginning to open slowly and silently, and the Bahá'ís have a motto to engrave over its symbolic entrance: "The Power of the Holy Spirit heals both material and spiritual ills!" And I hear the voices of Bahá'ís saying: "Didn't you know that personal techniques have always been basic in our teachings? Has it escaped you that we have always believed in health and healing and help through the power of faith and prayer?"

Abdul-Baha had much to say on this matter, and just now his words invite the modern searcher to investigate the Bahá'í claims. Let all who are interested in the gospel of the abundant life take heed! It may be that the Bahá'ís are coming.

"The healing that is by the power of the Holy Spirit needs no special concentration or contact. Healing is through the wish or desire and the prayer of the holy person.... as soon as that holy person turns his heart to God and begins to pray, the sick one is healed." Thus Abdul-Baha.

Bahá'u'lláh is being rediscovered in the area of mental therapy: "Verily the most necessary thing is contentment under all circumstances.... Yield not to grief and sorrow, they cause the greatest misery. Jealousy consumes the body and anger burns the liver."

Bahá'u'lláh is being found in the field of mental health: "Joy gives us wings. In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener."

Bahá'u'lláh appears in the arena of diet and health: "The food of the future will be fruit and grain. Renouncing of tobacco, wine and opium gives health, strength, intellectual enjoyment, penetration of judgement and physical vigor."

Bahá'u'lláh speaks in the province of mystical prayer: "All of us, when we attain to a truly spiritual condition, can hear the voice of God."

These and many other injunctions covering the ethics of wealth, the oneness of religion and science, the spiritual content of work and play, the role of religion in education are part of the "tenth door." From here on when someone cries out, "Poor me! All is lost! And you want me to save the world?" the Bahá'í answer is clear: "Look again and you will find in the teachings of our Prophet not only a way to save the world, but a method to save

yourself as well." And, as in other instances of this kind, the consciousness of need will be a definite factor in the consciousness of discovery.

The Bahá'í faith may have been slow in getting started in America because of its ambitious and altruistic world-uniting program. It may have put the cart before the horse. It may have oversold Bahá'u'lláh on the basis of the oneness of all faiths. But a second look shows that by way of its devotion and the opening door, it may loose itself from captivity. It may also be that the minister was quite right when he said, "If these Bahá'ís ever get going, they may take the country by storm!"

- Marcus Bach

The Christian Century, Volume 74, Number 20 (May 15, 1957), p. 625

CORRESPONDENCE

Bahá'ía [sic]

[letter #1]

SIR: Many thanks for the splendid article by Marcus Bach on the Bahais in The Christian Century of April 10. The article, brief as it is, is well written and shows a good impression of our faith. I do hope that it may show to others a clear explanation of what we stand for.

- CHESTER WAFFORD.

Santa Ana, Calif.

[letter #2]

SIR: As a former Presbyterian, U.S.A., missionary who lived in Iran, the home of Bahaism, for more than 40 years, had first-hand contact with Bahais there, and has made some study of this religion, I was amazed at Dr. Bach's "Bahá'í: a Second Look" (April 10). I gather that his knowledge of the subject comes largely from writings by or conversations with Bahais, which are often distortions of the facts, especially when it comes to early Bahai history.

Dr. Bach states that Bahaullah went to Akka in 1865; the correct date, I believe, is 1868. He speaks of visiting "the old prison where he was held captive for 25 years and where his son, Abdul-Baha, was a prisoner for 40 years." This is pure Bahai propaganda. Baha and his followers were imprisoned in the military barracks of Akka for two years and suffered much discomfort there. After that Baha lived in a house in the town for nine years, and from then on till his death in a palace outside the city purchased with funds that poured in from his followers in Iran. Bahaullah was sent to Akka by the Turkish government because of his bitter quarreling with his brother, Yahya, who was at the same time deported to Cyprus.

Abdul-Baha - no prisoner for 40 years - lived with his father till the latter's death. After that he moved about freely till 1901, when he was again confined to Akka for seven years because he in turn quarreled so bitterly with his half-brother, Mohammed Ali. Thereafter he was again at liberty.

The Bab never announced "the coming of a messiah: Bahá'u'lláh." He announced the coming of "Him whom God shall manifest," who was not to be expected for at least 1,500 years. He appointed as his successor not Bahaullah but Bahaullah's brother Yahya, as is indicated in a letter which the latter showed to Dr. Browne (mentioned in Dr. Bach's article). Yahya, or Subh-i-Azal, as known by his title, was head of the movement for 10 or 15 years, after which Bahaullah usurped the leadership and had the history of the movement rewritten to make out that the Bab was merely a forerunner of himself and not the divine manifestation he had claimed to be.

The Bahai Scriptures, from which Dr. Bach quotes, contain selections from Bahaullah and Abdul-Baha, many of them praiseworthy and chosen to appeal to the mind of the Christian Westerner. The twelve special tenets of the Bahai faith, as set forth in their promotional literature, contain nothing new or original. Examples of these tenets are: "independent investigation of the truth" (where Bahaullah claimed to be infallible and no one had the right to dispute him); "religion must be the cause of unity" (where in the case of Bahaullah and his brother it was the cause of disunity); "equality between men and women" (where Bahaullah himself had three wives - or, some say, two wives and a concubine). The teachings are good but they do not seem to square with the life of the founder.

The real Bahai Bible, as Bahais will admit, is the Kitab-ul-Aqdas (Most Holy Book), a small book, written in Arabic, which contains laws promulgated by Bahaullah.... It shows Bahaism to be a legalistic faith: it legislates on such subjects as prayers, fasting, inheritance, pilgrimages, punishments for various crimes, marriage. Bahais do not dare translate it into English for fear of the damage it would do their movement.

Dr. Bach entitled his article: "Bahai: A Second Look." May I respectfully suggest that he take a third look by reading such books as Miller's Bahá'ism: Its Origin, History, and Teachings, or Richards' The Religion of the Bahá'ís; or, if he knows Persian, Kashf-ul-Hayal (Exposure of Fraud) by Avareh, the historian of the Bahai movement, who later defected, or Niku's Felsefeh-yi-Niku (Niku's Philosophy), written by another former Bahai.

- C. H. ALLEN

New York, N.Y.

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