

"twelfth Imam," who is expected to return to life and assume the empire of the world.* The reverence paid to these personages resembles that rendered by Roman Catholics to the saints.

About the beginning of the present century, a teacher named Sheikh Ahmed founded the school of mysticism to which we have referred. He taught that the universe emanated from the Supreme Being, and that all the good were embodiments of his all-pervading spirit. Especially the twelve Imams, the objects of popular reverence, were, according to him, personifications of the divine attributes, Ali standing at the head of all. In this system an inclination towards Pantheism seems

* A similar superstition among the Druses, with regard to the Caliph Hakem, forms the subject of Browning's "Return of the Druses." The delusion which the poet was depicting from imagination, was at the same time acted out in a more distant land, in larger proportions and with a more tragic termination.

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to have been combined, not only with a corrupted Mohammedanism, but with the ancient Persian tendency to believe in emanations and incarnations. It may, however, be more favorably regarded, as an attempt to give a more spiritual meaning to the popular superstition.

The seat of Sheikh Ahmed's school was at Kerbela; and there his successor, Sheikh Kazem, taught, when the young Ali Mohammed became his pupil. The doctrine of the Sheikholes, with which, probably, even thus early, some views of political regeneration were connected, had become so popular that in the province of Irak alone it numbered a hundred thousand adherents. The Sheikh appointed naibs, or representatives of himself, for the various provinces, and thus there existed throughout the kingdom a formidable force, bound together by religious and political association.

Ali Mohammed soon attracted the attention of his fellow-disciples and of the Sheikh himself, by his pure character, his austerities and devotions, even by his reserve in speech, in connection with the wisdom he displayed when he saw fit to break silence. Sheikh Kazem would never clearly designate who should be his successor. He would say, "He is in the midst of you," "You will seek for him and find him;" and once, when Ali Mohammed entered the hall, and took his accustomed place near the door, the master suddenly exclaimed, "There he is!" The words were little thought of at the time, but were recalled to memory, when, after Sheikh Kazem's death, the majority of his disciples fixed on Ali Mohammed as their chief. He received, either from an expression of his own, or from that of one of

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his principal adherents, the name of the Gate of Truth. The word Bab, meaning Gate, thus became his title, and furnished a new designation for his political and religious partisans.

The doctrines of the Bab appear to have been an advance on those of his predecessor. He taught that the Supreme Being comprised in himself all infinite attributes; that the law of God was to be obeyed in the spirit rather than in the letter; that nothing which God had made was in itself impure; and that woman is not the slave of man, but his equal. The first of these doctrines appears to dethrone the heavenly family of the twelve Imams; the second went against the lifeless formalities into which a religion is apt to degenerate; the third was practically applied against the Mohammedan prohibition of wine, while the fourth opposed the custom of divorce at the pleasure of the husband, and the whole Oriental system of the seclusion and degradation of woman. To these tenets, another was added, more dwelt on in the new Koran than aught else, — that in Ali Mohammed the twelfth Imam had returned to life, and that he and his followers were to rule the world.

Instead, however, of seeking or priding himself on these honors, Ali Mohammed seems to have conducted himself with modesty and with prudence. He was repeatedly arrested, and subjected to examination, once before an assembly of dignitaries, gathered round the heir-apparent of Persia, a youth of seventeen, and nominally governor of the province. Before this court it is said that he appeared with great dignity, making no answer to some questions, but declaring himself to

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be the expected Imam. This account, which bears marks of being copied from the examination of Jesus before the Jewish high priest, is the less credible, as such a claim would have led to his immediate condemnation to death. As it was, the Persian government acted towards him at this time with a lenity hardly to be expected in a Mohammedan despotism. For a time he was at large under surveillance, and, when in confinement, was mostly allowed to receive the numerous visitors who sought him. Political events, however, and the rash and criminal action of his followers, brought his singular career to a bloody close.

Among the proselytes of his religion was a lady of noble birth, called Kourret-oul-Ain — Light of the Eyes. To the great displeasure of her relatives, she threw aside the veil, worn by all women of respectability in the East, and went around the city of Kasvin where she dwelt, organizing a branch of the followers of the Bab. At length one of her relatives, a Moudjtehid or religious officer of the city, having tried all means to win her back, pronounced a solemn anathema against the Bab and his doctrine. Soon after, as he was going to the mosque in the early morning, three of the Babists rushed upon him and put him to death. The murderers were seized and executed, and Kourret-oul-Ain obliged to leave the city. Many of her fellow-believers accompanied her. At the same time disturbances had commenced elsewhere.

At this critical time the Shah of Persia died (September 5, 1848). Such an occurrence in a despotism is often the signal for anarchy, and such was now the case. The prime minister, aware of his own unpopu-

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larity, fled to Kerbela, where the tomb of the Imam Hussein afforded an inviolable sanctuary. The heir-apparent was but a youth, and a new ministry had to be formed. Among other disturbances of the public peace, the Babists burst into insurrection. Kourret-oul-Ain, the heroine of Kasvin, entered with her adherents the city of Miami, and proclaimed the doctrine of the Bab. She was joined by some of the inhabitants, but the greater part rose against her, and compelled the insurgents to leave the city.

A more important outbreak took place in the province of Mazanderan, on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. Its leaders were Hadji Mohammed Ali, and Moulla Houssein. The latter, a brave man, whose views were chiefly political, had been influential in securing the spiritual chieftaincy to the Bab, having been first designated for it himself; and he now conceded the superiority in religious matters to his colleague, bending the knee before him, and saluting him as "most high lord." They fortified themselves at a place known as the tomb of Sheikh Tabersi. Here they repulsed, with courage and skill alike remarkable, successive attacks made upon them by the Persian forces.

Meantime, the government of the young Shah had been organized, and turned its attention to the suppression of the Babist rebellion. Prince Mehdi Kouli Mirza, Governor of Mazanderan, and a near relative of the sovereign, with two other princes, laid siege to Sheikh Tabersi, but was driven into disgraceful flight by a sudden sally of the besieged. His camp was set on fire, and the two princes who accompanied him lost their lives. The government had, however, the acknowledged head of

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the rebellion, the Bab, in its hands; and, with little wisdom, instead of using his influence, or at least continuing to hold him as a hostage, they resolved to put him to death. Four of his principal adherents had the same fate appointed them, unless they would deny their master, denounce him as a hypocrite and impostor, and spit in his face. Three of them yielded to these dishonorable terms; among them was Seid Houssein, who had been, according to his own declaration, the amanuensis of the Bab in writing his new Koran, but who is thought by the author from whom this account is derived, to have composed it himself.* The fourth showed a nobler spirit. When the miserable Seid Houssein had cursed his master and offered him the unmanly insult, Agha Mohammed Ali kissed his hands with the most profound respect, and cried aloud to the people with solemn voice, "This is the Gate of the Truth, the Imam of Islam."

The execution, according to the authority just referred to, was by shooting; and for this purpose a Christian regiment was employed, lest the religious feelings of Mohammedan soldiers should interfere with the work assigned them. Agha Mohammed Ali, "with a loud and calm voice, repeated fragments of prayers composed by his master. The Bab kept silence. His pale and handsome face, with black beard and small mustaches, his distinguished figure and bearing, his

white and delicate hands, his clothing simple but exquisitely neat,

* Bab et les Babis, ou le Soulevement Politique et Keligieux en Perse, de 1845 a, 1853. Par Mirza Kazem-Beg. Journal Asiatique, 6th series, volumes vii. and viii. The author is Professor and Privy Councillor at St. Petersburg. See vol. vii., p. 61.

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everything finally in his person awoke sympathy and compassion." The Governor and others addressed the (crowd, speaking of the blood that had been shed in various parts of Persia, through the persevering hostility of the Babists, especially of the murder of the holy man at Kazvin, and the enemy still fortified in Mazanderan. The first fire of the soldiers, instead of even wounding the Bab, cut the cords by which he was bound. The prisoner rushed towards the people, and would probably have been rescued under the general impression of a miracle, had the executioners been Mohammedans. But the Christian soldiers ran forward, and showing to the crowd the cord which had been broken, bound their prisoner anew. Agha Mohammed Ali was first put to death; afterwards, the master whom he had so faithfully and bravely owned. "The crowd dispersed in silence, but many bore in their hearts germs of hostility against the government." This scene took place July 19, 1849. At Sheikh Tabersi, Moulla Houssein fell in battle. After many strange experiences, and terrible suffering, Hadji Mohammed Ali made proposals for peace. Prince Mehdi Kouli Mirza, the same who had once so ingloriously fled, promised liberal terms, and sent a horse, splendidly caparisoned, for the use of the insurgent leader; but when the latter, with his attendants, entered the camp, they were attacked and overpowered, many slaughtered on the spot, and others more deliberately tortured to death. Hadji Mohammed Ali, and five others, were publicly executed at the capital of the province. Another leader, Moulla Mohammed Ali, who was defending Zengan, was owned as successor of the Bab.

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Meantime the war continued in other parts of Persia, but we cannot enter into its details; the government made efforts at conciliation, but the treachery and cruelty displayed in Mazanderan had destroyed all faith in their offers; the strife was desperate, and when the few survivors of the siege of Zengan were brought to the capitals it was said that each of them had cost the kingdom fifteen hundred lives.

Persecution raged for a time, and then subsided; a year and a half of peace succeeded, but it was interrupted by a new crime. As the Shah was going forth to hunt, he was fired upon by several Babists, and wounded, though not dangerously; this treasonable act aroused again the vengeance of the government. The Babists were sought out, not only in the capital, but throughout the kingdom, and put to death, enduring torture with heroic constancy. Kourret-oul-Ain, the heroine of Kasvin, was privately executed. These appalling scenes took place in the autumn of 1852.

In various respects, the history of Mirza Ali Mohammed, surnamed the Bab, presents startling resemblances to that of the Savior. Claiming descent from an ancient prophet king, he was yet, like Jesus, born in a lowly station; still he was regarded by his followers as the sovereign of his nation and of mankind, whose advent had been long foretold and ardently expected. After leading a life of purity, and uttering words of wisdom, he was put to death, through the hostility of his own government, but by the hands of foreign soldiers; and, before his execution, he was denied by some of his most prominent followers; nay, the very form of contumely with which they were compelled to treat him, was the

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same which had been used towards the Savior in the hall of the high priest.

It is high honor for a teacher of wisdom thus to bear in his own history a resemblance to that of the Redeemer; and we would fain believe that Mirza Ali Mohammed was worthy of the distinction. But we cannot forget that the claim was made for him, that he was "the Gate of Truth, the Imam of Islam," the subject of ancient prophecy, the worker of present miracles, and the destined possessor of universal empire. How far he himself advanced these claims, it is impossible to decide, since the accounts differ widely; but his acquiescence in them is implied in his whole history. A public denial of his supposed supernatural commission would not only have conciliated the government and saved his own life, but, by weakening the rebellion, would have saved the lives of thousands more. His silence proved that he accepted the honors rendered him; his martyrdom proves that he believed them to be his due. That in this belief he was deluded, needs no other evidence than his own death and the extermination of his party.

He was, then, we judge, not consciously an impostor, but a sincere and amiable, yet deluded believer in his own divine commission. Perhaps there was truth in the account given by some, that as he spent much time in prayer on the roof of his house, exposed to the rays of the sun, and the burning wind of that climate, a disease of the brain, had part in his self-deception.* He appears, too, rather as the nominal and imaginary, than

* Journal Asiatique, vol. vii., page 337.

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as the real head of his party. Its governing spirit seems rather to have been Moulla Houssein Bouchroui, the gallant defender of Sheikh Tabersi; a warrior and politician, who probably believed more in his own good sword than in any prophet. He nominated Ali Mohammed to the spiritual chieftainship, reserving to himself only the title of his naib or vicar, and acting with the utmost energy to extend the sect. Seid Houssein, too, who saved his life by abjuring and insulting his master, is supposed by the authority before us to have been the real author of his Koran. It is possible that thus the quiet and dreamy enthusiast was but a tool in the hands of men of more practical ability, but

less purity of character, than himself.

Even in acknowledging that purity of character, we must remember that Ali Mohammed was, through nearly his whole life after assuming the leadership, either a prisoner, or constantly watched by the servants of the government. He could not take part, personally, in the insurrection of his party. That their outbreak was marked not only by deeds of courage, but by acts of assassination, is a reproach to the religious teaching they had received. We hear of no such deeds in the early history of Christianity. The resemblance between the Persian teacher and the Man of Nazareth would have been more near, had Jesus commanded Peter to draw his sword, instead of directing him to sheathe it, and had he committed the task to Judas to write down his law.

While we admit, too, the elevation of sentiment apparent in some of the doctrines of Babism, we cannot forget that these are derived, by direct descent, from the

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Gospel. It is well remarked by our historian, that if Mohammedanism is regarded as a schismatic form of Christianity, Babism may be considered a purified branch of that schism. The constant intercourse, too, of Persia with Christian nations, the existence of large bodies of Christians, especially the Nestorians, within the kingdom, and the mystical philosophy of the Sooffees, derived probably from Christianity in a former age, all contributed to prepare the way for that sect, and that instructor, whose brief history adds a chapter of mournful interest to the records of a land once foremost among the nations.

The enemies of the Babists have ascribed to them, probably with great exaggeration, the preaching of doctrines subversive of morality. While we pay no attention to such charges, we certainly find in the Oriental religion of the nineteenth century, as we have found in the American, nothing in character or in doctrine to supersede the Christian system, or eclipse the glory of its Founder.

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