

The Founder

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a tendency within Islam pushed towards a spiritualization of the religious life, and hoped for the imminent appearance of the two heralds of god. Since 1844, this so-called "Shaykhi" movement saw in the pious Ali Mohammed of Schiras (born 1819) the awaited prophet Bab (gate of knowledge). The Bab was an inspiring preacher, who elaborated upon Islamic teachings in a mystical way. He demanded social reforms and requested that women be given a higher position. His great success with large segments of the populace earned him the enmity of the orthodox clergy. They accused him of revolutionary agitation and the government ordered his execution on July 9, 1850. The abortive attempt of a Babist upon the life of Shah Nasir-ud-din [p. 20] resulted in the general persecution of all Bab followers. Many Babists were executed and many others emigrated to different countries.

A leading personality of the Bab community was Mirza Hussein Ali (born 1817). He was the eldest son of a minister, and he became the leader of the congregation. In 1863, in Bagdad, he proclaimed himself as the herald of god whose arrival had been promised by Bab. He took on the name of Bahauallah ("majesty of god"). After a dispute with his younger step-brother Mirsh Jahja (1830-1912), who claimed that in a letter Bab had appointed him the head of the community which made him take on the name of Subh-i-Ezel ("dawn of eternity"), Bahauallah managed to win the overwhelming support of the Babists. The Turkish government interned him first in Adrianople, and later, in 1868, in Akka (Palestine). However, Bahauallah managed to guide his followers who were scattered all over the world by writing epistles. When he died in 1892, his eldest son, Abbas Efendi (born 1844) became his successor under the name of Abdul Baha ("servant of majesty"). Freed from internment through the revolution of the Young Turks in 1908, he undertook great journeys to Egypt, Europe, and to North America. Through his speeches and prolific writings he succeeded in developing missionaries in many parts of the world. After his death in Cairo in 1921, his nephew Shoghi Efendi (1897-1956) as "guardian of the cause of god" democratically administered the community through the establishment of "National Spiritual Councils" in the various countries.

Teaching and the Cult

Both Bab and Bahauallah were born Shiite Moslems and their teachings were derived from the Koran and Islamic legacy. However, their efforts to reform the religion led beyond the borders of the inherited tradition. Whereas Bab was a mystic, who first of all turned to his Shiite countrymen, Bahauallah's religious conception was based more on practical ethics than on metaphysical features, and his message was therefore addressed to the peoples of all nations. Familiar with the more modern views of the West, he sought to harmonize the old religious beliefs with scientific research by offering a symbolic interpretation of the Koran's maxims about hell, angels, spirits, and devils, and by also rejecting many of the views and customs as being out of touch with the spirit of the modern age. Therefore he criticized special cult actions and

ceremonies, consecration rites, secret teachings, as well as slavery, polygamy, asceticism and crusades. He considered only prayer, meditation and the performance of good deeds as the way to religious perfection.

Like Islam, Bahatism is strictly monotheistic. It believes in a personal god who created and rules the world. When man dies, the material elements of the body dissolve, but his soul lives on and continues its spiritual development. Although nothing specific is stated about the hereafter and about the mode of existence of souls after death, the doctrine of transfiguration of souls is expressly rejected.

According to the religion, divine revelation is the source of all truth [p. 21] and knowledge. This concept has been proclaimed time and again by the heralds of God, such as Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Mohammed, Christ, and by other prophets who, today, no longer have any followers. Therefore, the accounts concerning these holy men are recognized by the Bahais as religious writings. However, they also believe that after the work of Bab and Bahauallah, the Koran seems to be the work in which the word of God has been best transmitted. Bab is considered as the precursor and Bahauallah as the fulfiller of a religion which will usher in a new age of peace and a unified mankind. The writings and epistles of these two men and of their successors are to contribute to a renewal of the world.

Consistent with its progressive ideas directed at the realization of world unity, Bahatism propagandizes for the equality of the sexes, for education and for culture, for the solution of social problems, and for the introduction of a universal auxiliary language, and for the establishment of a World Court and of a World Federation.

Bahauallah's teachings have found followers in all the countries of the world, above all in the United States, where a Bahai temple has been erected near Chicago, in Wilmette, Illinois.

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