

engaging in communal sex, in the "candle blown out" ceremony (of the Cult of Angels) and were persecuted in Persia with such severity that by comparison the savage repressions of the Yezidis by the Ottoman Empire seem relatively benign.

The involvement of the ethnic Kurds in Babism was relatively strong. One of the earliest major Bâbi communities was Kurdish, numbering about 5000 and inhabiting the area between Bâsh Qala and Qotur in Hakkâri in north-central Kurdistan on the Perso-Ottoman border. However, in July 1850, when the Persian Qajar king Nâsir al-Din ordered the execution of the Bâb in Tabriz, it was the Shiqhqi Kurdish and Armenian troops who carried out the order.

Bâbism soon evolved into the universalist Bahâ'ism under the direction of Mirzâ Husayn Ali, Bahâ'u'llâh ("the Glory of God"). For two years before his proclamation of the new religion and his mission in April 1863, Bahâ'u'llâh lived in the Kurdish city of Sulaymânia (less than 30 miles from Barzanja, the legendary birthplace of the Cult of Angels), earning his livelihood by providing Muslim religious services to the local people under the pseudonym Dervish Muhammad. Many of the coins he gave to people as festival presents are still cherished for their healing power. In one of his books, *Iqân*, Bahâ'u'llâh paints a vivid and interesting picture of his retreat in the "wilderness" of Kurdistan.

A Kurdish Bahâ'i, Muhammad Zaki al-Kurdi, established the first Kurdish publishing house in 1920 in Cairo. He took over the publication of the first Kurdish newspaper/journal, *Kurdistan* (published first in Istanbul in 1898 without his involvement) after it moved to Cairo after the start of World War 1. Some of the most important works of Bahâ'i literature, such as J.E. Esslemont's *Bahâ'u'llâh and the New Era* have been translated into the dialects of Sorâni (by Husein Jawdat) and Gurani (anonymous).

Bahâ'ism has done much to distance itself from the militancy of Babism. In the form of a new world religion, it has also tried to shed itself of the Shi'ite Islamic and Cult of Angels (particularly, Yarsanist) influence so apparent in Babism. Minorsky preserved and translated in 1920 just one Bahá'í polemical tract directed against the Yarsans. Several paramount aspects of the Cult, however, remain apparent in modern Bahâ'ism: 1) universalism, that is the belief that other religions are an extension of a same original idea of faith, and that all are equally respectable; 2) the belief that all prophets and holy figures of other religions are manifestations of the same supreme Deity or Spirit, from Buddha and Zoroaster, to Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad; 3) the belief that the Word and, supposedly the soul, is conveyed to these prophets through an intermediary archangel(s); 4) the practice of a mandatory ritual communal gathering at Mahfels, similar to the ceremony of jam in the Cult, but every 19th day; 5) social and class liberalism, and a high status of women, including their right to serve on high religious councils. The de facto female avatar of the Bâbi cycle of primary incarnations, Tâhira Qurratu'l Ayn, removed her veil in public in 1849 to "signal the equality of women with men as a basic principle of the new Bâbi religion".

With its attention directed to the world level, little Bahá'í proselytization has been conducted in Kurdistan—a naturally fertile ground for this new religion that carries such fundamental affinities with Kurdish religious and social values and tradition. There are only a few thousand Kurdish Bahá'ís, spread over southern and central Kurdistan today. Of the number of Bábís, if there are any left, even an educated guess is hazardous.

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Sources: *The Kurds, A Concise Handbook*, By Dr. Mehrdad R. Izady, Dep. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization, Harvard University, USA, 1992

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