

The adherents of this sect in Persia are now exceedingly numerous, and many people believe that in the end the whole country will become Behai; so the question whether the Behais are more reliable than the orthodox Shiah has become an important one. Certainly they teach a cleaner and purer doctrine on points of ethics; but what Persia needs is not so much a higher moral teaching, but rather a higher basis for morality. A religion that puts the commandment not to steal on the same level as the direction not to stew your dates but to fry them, will never produce the high characters that are to be found in such communities as the Parsi. It would be irreverent to compare such a faith with the religion given to us by the Saviour.

During the late Behai massacre, I had the

[page 88]

opportunity of discussing what was going on with a Behai muballigh, that is, an authorised Behai teacher and missionary. I have no intention of unnecessarily dwelling on the ghastly horrors that were then being perpetrated, but a few details are unavoidable. The Behai sectaries were not at that time being executed before the mujtahids, but were being torn in pieces by the crowd. What had excited the people was not simply religious feeling, but it was very largely the statement by the clerical authorities that the goods of the Behais were "lawful," that is, that any one might plunder them who cared to do so. The attacks were often made by men who had lived for a long while in close companionship with the Behais, knowing them all the time to be members of the sect, and yet consorting and eating with them freely. Holes were bored in the heads of some of these poor wretches with awls, oil was then poured into the hole and lighted. Other forms of torture were used about which one cannot write. Women and children were very seldom actually killed, but were fearfully ill-treated, and sometimes left to die of starvation. It was reported that in one of the villages Babi

[page 89]

children died within full sight of the villagers, after waiting for days under the trees where their murdered parents had left them.

The Behai muballigh with whom I was talking was certainly well aware, in a general way, of what was going on; yet I could not get him to see that these things, done in the name of religion to his own sect, were in themselves wrong, and that man's eyes had been opened, or could be opened, to their essential wrongness. Of course he maintained that the action of the Mussulmans was evil, but his reason was that, in the first place, those persecuted were spiritually right, and, in the second place, even had they not been so, the last book-bearer, the Behau'llah, had promulgated a Divine commandment that there was to be no religious persecution. I then asked him if such persecution could again become lawful if another book-bearer appeared and promulgated a different commandment. He answered that it was impossible for another book-bearer to appear for a long period. I then asked him if he would accept a new book-bearer, who, besides satisfying the other conditions, exhibited a text in

one of the previously received Scriptures, stating that one day in God's sight is as a thousand

[page 90]

years. He replied that, if such a verse could be shown, and the other conditions were satisfied, such a man might be accepted to-morrow, even although he taught a doctrine similar to that of Mohammed about religious persecution and other matters of the same sort.

Now there are three points to be noted by those who expect great things of the Behai movement. First of all, the Behais accept the whole of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, which, of course, include a verse of the kind above mentioned. Secondly, they have already had three book-bearers; the Bab, who was the original founder of the Babi sects, and who not only exhibited a Divine book, but also claimed to be the resurrection of Mohammed in the same way that Mohammed was the resurrection of Jesus; Subhi Azal, whom for some years they recognised as the Bab's successor; and lastly, Behau'llah, whom the Behais now hold to be the only major prophet of the three. Thirdly, the Behais, in attempting to prove that the Bab was a lesser prophet and a mere forerunner of the Behau'llah, and also that Subhi Azal was never a really great personage, have seriously falsified their records. The reader who desires further informa-

[page 91]

tion on this subject cannot do better than consult Professor E. G. Browne's admirable introduction to his translation of the Tarikhi Jadid.

The Bab, who came forward rather less than a century ago, was a young Shirazi Persian, a Seyid of the merchant class, whose real name was Ali Mohammed. The Shaikhi sect were at that time predicting the appearance of a great religious leader, and the Bab came forward claiming to be this prophet. He called himself the Bab, or Gate of Knowledge, and was at first supposed by his followers to be the Gate of Access to the Mehdi; but he seems to have used these terms in a very broad and allegorical fashion, and to have held the doctrine of the essential unity of all book-bearers. He later declared himself to be the Mehdi, and also to be the Gate of Access to One Whom God should manifest.

The movement caused a great deal of fighting in Persia, and though the Babis were acting on the defensive, there is very little doubt that they had harboured political designs. The Bab, however, differs from Mohammed in having been, so far as we can judge, primarily a religious reformer, and having done his best to make the movement as spiritual as possible. His followers

[page 92]

were treated with the most barbarous severity, and he himself was after a few years put to death. Before this he appointed Subhi Azal, one of his followers, to be his successor, and for a few years this man was received as "He Whom God should manifest." Later on, Subhi Azal's half-brother, the Behau'llah, managed to get himself accepted as head of the sect. Many of the followers of Subhi

Azal were assassinated, and the sect was re-organised with some important differences. It now purports to be absolutely non-political, and the teaching has become more simple and practical. The Behais are anxious to retain the use of the Quran, so as to preserve their claim to toleration, although they imagine that the law of the Quran no longer stands, its place having been taken by a later revelation. Partially to avoid inconsistency in this matter, and partially to keep before the minds of the Mussulmans the possibility of one really divine book being replaced by another, they encourage the reading of all the Scripture considered divine by Mohammedans, that is, not only the Quran, but also the whole of the Christian Bible, nor do they generally call the authenticity of the extant version in question.

[page 93]

Behaiism is obviously an attempt to adapt Islam to the exigencies of modern circumstances, taking advantage of the special tenets of the Shiah. The North of Persia is being at present rapidly overrun by Russia, and even in the South the Persian feels that he is on the eve of political changes. The Behais consider that they have a creed which enables them to meet the foreigner without continual jar and offence. In this they are right, for they do not veil their women, they do not consider infidels unclean, and they go further than does the broadest Shiah in the matter of respect to other forms of faith. Some orthodox Shiah accept the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as they stand, without pressing the story that the Jews and Christians altered their books to suit their own purposes. Almost all Persians are open to argument on this point, though most will say that to those possessed of the Quran the perusal of former Scriptures is unnecessary. But the Behais hold that, unless started by a real prophet, no religion can possibly survive, and consequently they allow to even the grossest forms of idolatry a divine origin, and the possession of a certain substratum of truth.

In Persia there can never have been that

[page 94]

almost impenetrable wall of dogmatic assertion and self-assurance which seems to exist in many Sunni lands, but something of the kind is to be found throughout Islam. As the self-satisfaction of the Behai is almost as strong as that of the Sunni, and infinitely stronger than that of the Shiah, it seems a paradox to say that Babiism has given us in Persia a prepared soil for missionary work. The fact is that the field prepared is not amongst the Babis themselves, but amongst the Shiah who have been in touch with Babis, and are nevertheless unconvinced. Consequently it is a field which cannot be expected to last for ever, but of which advantage ought to be taken immediately, for it is very seldom that we find so exceptional an opportunity given to us for attacking Mohammedanism on its own ground.

In Yezd the Behais have attached to themselves many of the most enlightened Mussulmans. The teaching of the sect about behaviour and practice is not bad, though, in matters connected with women, there is an inclination to adopt

customs that are rather dangerous considering the low moral atmosphere. The tendency to minimise the miraculous element in religion is not altogether wholesome, and some professing

[page 95]

Babis are inclined to a rather crude rationalism, the end of which it is difficult to foresee. This tendency is perhaps fostered by the peculiar manner of interpreting the sacred books, a method difficult to describe, as it fluctuates between the wildest flights of metaphor, and the lowest depths of puerile literalism, the balance between the two being decided by a very determined preconception of what ought to be. To give a specimen of this, it was seriously urged in a Bahai pamphlet, reviewed and summarised by the Rev. W. A. Rice in the Church Missionary Intelligencer, that Isaiah xxv. 6-9, where God is described as making "unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined," refers to the entertaining of visitors by Behau'llah during his banishment at Acre. The "wines on the lees well refined" are the tea, which Persians generally pour through a small strainer. The passage also refers to the fact that God "will swallow up death in victory," and will "wipe away all tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of His people shall He take away from off all the earth." To this part only a spiritual interpretation is given.

I tried before I left Persia to find out the

[page 96]

impression that the sect had made upon other Europeans, so as not to give a one-sided opinion about them. Personally, I came to the conclusion that, in matters even remotely connected with religion, they were less truthful than the ordinary Shiah, but that in the ordinary affairs of life they were a trifle more reliable. Some other missionaries had a lower opinion of their truthfulness, and most of those who had had business dealings with them considered that they were not more trustworthy than ordinary Mussulmans. My conclusion is that, though they may succeed in establishing their creed in Persia, and may even make the Persians more easy to deal with, they will not greatly alter the moral character of the people. They have not done so hitherto, and an examination of their faith shows that they cling, in the main, to the Mussulman theory of the paighambari, or at any rate have not changed it for a doctrine which gives a man more cogent reasons for adhering to an approved line of conduct in times of difficulty.

METADATA

Views9075 views since posted 2002-10-08; last edit 2023-08-23 14:53 UTC;

previous at archive.org.../malcolm_five_years_persia;

URLs changed in 2010, see archive.org.../bahai-library.org

Language

English

Permission

public domain

History

Scanned 2002-02 by Jonah Winters; Formatted 2012-08-14 by Jonah Winters;

Proofread 2011-12 by Bobbi Lyons.

Share

Shortlink: bahai-library.com/574

Citation: [ris/574](#)

select Collection:

Archives

Articles

Articles-unpublished

Audio

Bibliographies

BIC

Biographies

Books

Chronologies

Compilations

Compilations-NSA

Compilations-personal

Documents

East-asia

Encyclopedia

Essays

Etc

Excerpts

Fiction

Glossaries

Guardian

Histories

Introductory

Letters

Maps

Music

Newspapers

NSA-documents

NSA-letters

Personal

Pilgrims

Poetry

Presentations

Resources

Reviews

Scripts

Software

Statistics

[Study](#)
[Talks](#)
[Theses](#)
[Transcripts](#)
[Translations](#)
[UHIJ-documents](#)
[UHIJ-letters](#)
[Video](#)
[Visual](#)
[Writings](#)

[home](#)

[sitemap](#)

[series](#)

[chronology](#)

[search:](#)

[author](#)

[title](#)

[date](#)

[tags](#)

[adv. search](#)

[languages](#)

[inventory](#)

[bibliography](#)

[abbreviations](#)

[links](#)

[about](#)

[contact](#)

[RSS](#)

[new](#)

— [Five Years in a Persian Town](#) (Used by permission of the curator)