

The Báb disparages its ritual and disciplinary practices. He pulls down the juridical edifice, laboriously erected by the Masters, in order to substitute his own conceptions. Against the Sunnis, Imámism, with more virtuosity than success, had employed the tendencious process of ta'wíl, or

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allegorical interpretation. The Báb in his turn adopts the allegorical method, and applies it not only to the text of the Qorán, but to the dogmas still held in common by the two great Islámic factions: the Judgment, Paradise, Hell and the Resurrection.

He favours the equality of the sexes, abolishes the obligation of the veil for women, circumcision, ablutions, the theory of legal impurities, and that of the sumptuary laws. He allows interest on goods sold on the deferred-payment system. The number 19 corresponds to the number of Arabic letters which compose the complete formula of Bismillah. This number plays an important part in Bábism: annual fast of nineteen days; year divided into nineteen months; months into nineteen days; daily reading of nineteen verses from the Bayán.

The Bayán. Such is the name of the collection containing the Bábist reform. It is drawn up in the style of the Qorán, which has manifestly served as model to the Báb, but its phraseology is bombastic and involved to the point of obscurity. This book is animated by a more liberal and modern inspiration; but the Báb takes care not to represent it as the final word of revelation. Others, he asserts, will come after him to improve and complete it.

Such is, at least, the interpretation of the Beháists. But they had, as we shall see, an interest in presenting the Báb as a simple precursor. It may be that, like the author of the Qorán with the theory of the abrogating and abrogated verses, the Báb merely desired to reserve to himself the opportunity of revising his work and of announcing more explicitly his own advent. His adversaries left him no time for this; but before disappearing he declared himself to be the Mahdí and the Imám whom the Shí'as awaited.

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BEHÁÍ'SM. In the month of July, 1850, the Báb was executed by order of the Persian Government. After his death, one of his disciples, Behá Allah, the 'splendour of Allah', born in 1817, arrogated to himself the mission of revising thoroughly the works of the vanished master. Behá Allah's half-brother, known by the name of Subh-i-Azal, 'the Morning of Eternity', clearly seems to have been nominated as the official successor of the Báb and he desired to preserve the substance of the original Bábist doctrine. He was violently denounced by Behá Allah. Their rivalry degenerated into an open schism and ended in assassinations which decimated the ranks of the 'Azalís', as the partisans of the minority of the proto-Bábists or continuators of the Báb were called.

The Báb had really only intended a reform of the Imámite Shí'a, that of the 'Twelvers', such as an evolution of several centuries had made it. In

order to bring this about, he had had recourse to well-worn expedients. He was content to utilize the principles laid down by the Shí'a sects: Imámism, Milenarism [sic], Sheikhism. Behá freed himself resolutely from this constraint. He founded a new religion, 'Beháí'sm', so called after him.

He announced himself as the emanation of the Divinity, the Apostle of the final revelation, no longer for the Shí'a or Islám alone, but for the whole of humanity. This claim led him to make a clean sweep of all the Imámite conceptions preserved by the Báb, who was no longer regarded as more than a simple precursor of Beháí'sm. He abolished the last ties – the liturgy and the ministers of the cult – which attached Bábism to Islám.

The new revelation is set forth in the 'Kitáb-i-aqdas', or the most holy Book, another imitation of the Qorán, which Behá completed with a series of official missives

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addressed to the heads of governments. These lucubrations preach universal peace and brotherhood. Wars are condemned. The establishment of a universal tribunal is extolled, also the adoption of 'a universal language to be chosen or created, in order to put an end to the misunderstandings between nations, races and religions'. Monogamy is recommended, bigamy tolerated, but as the extreme concession in matrimonial legislation. Every man should pray where and when he chooses, so that there are to be no religious edifices! Mortification of the flesh is prohibited, and Beháí'sm recognizes no forbidden foods; 'everything is lawful except what is repugnant to the human intelligence'. The resources of the community consist in fines, and later in the tax of a nineteenth, levied once and for all on capital.

'ABBÁS-EFFENDI, the eldest son of Behá, born in 1844, succeeded his father, who died in 1892. He adopted the titles of "Abd al-Behá", or Servant of the Splendour, and 'Ghosn A'zam', or Supreme Branch, shortened from 'Ghosn Allah al-A'zam'. He had already assumed the direction of the Beháís during the lifetime of his father, who passed his days in prison or seclusion. 'Abbás, like his father, also came into conflict with his half-brother, Muhammad 'Alí, called 'Al-Ghosn al-Akbar', or Major Branch.

Settled in Haifa and Acre (Palestine), where he had been interned with his father, 'Abbás again emphasized the cosmopolitan, pacifist and humanitarian character of Beháí'sm and its aspiration to become a universal religion. 'Humanity is one ... fanatical attachment to a religion, a race, a country, destroys unity ... men should free themselves from traditional beliefs and cleave only to the principles of divine religion.' He has found encouragement in this path,

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especially since the success of his propaganda in America.

The Beháí dissidents who have followed Muhammad ‘Alí are called ‘Muwahhidún’, or Unitarians, and are excommunicated by the adherents of ‘Abbás. There subsists no more than a modest group of Bábis who have remained faithful to the original doctrine of the Báb. As for the ‘Azalís’ (v. p. 192) who were persecuted and decimated in Persia (1906-1912), they probably number about fifty thousand. These two factions represent the conservative or orthodox party in the movement inaugurated by Seyyid ‘Alí Muhammad. A conservative form of Beháí’ism is also adopted by the small group of adherents of Muhammad ‘Alí, the Unitarians. In effect, ‘Abbás has created a new revelation, sprung directly from Beháí’ism; a second religious avatar of Bábism in which ‘Abbás figures as the Messiah and the son of God.

Syria numbers only a few hundred Beháís, early emigrants from Persia who have settled round the centre Acre-Haifa, which has the same attraction for the adherents of Beháí’ism as Mekka and Medina for Muslims. The adepts are chiefly distributed in Persia, where their number amounts to a total of eight hundred thousand to a million, on a rough estimate. In the crisis through which the Persian Imámism is passing, liberalism and Beháí’ism have been practically merged. Then, too, a considerable number of Beháís of all sects finish by swelling the army of agnostics and the indifferent.

Arrived at the stage where ‘Abbás-Effendí has left it, Beháí evolution with its borrowings from Biblical monotheism, from humanitarianism, pacifism and internationalism – demands the establishment of obligatory arbitration, a Parliament of Humanity

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– this syncretism of Bábist origin no longer has anything in common with the Qorán. Its doctrinal originality is slight but it nevertheless claims ‘to realize the highest ideal, to sum up the best tendencies of Christianity, Judaism, Islám, Freemasonry and Theosophy...’

On the other hand, its political importance as regards the future of the East is not to be despised, assuming that the statistics of the sect relating to the number of Beháís can be trusted. The first European expert on the Bábist question, Mr. Edward Browne, asserts that ‘the Power which, by winning over their supreme Pontiff at Acre, succeeded in utilizing their organization in Persia, would be able to secure an enormous influence in that country’.

In the United States there are some thousands of adherents, and Germany numbers several scattered groups of Beháís. The introduction of Beháí’ism into America is due to the propaganda of Dr. Ibrahim George Khairallah, a Christian Lebanese, born at Bhamdún (1849) and one of the first pupils of the American College at Beyrout. After a visit paid to Acre in 1898, he was led to break with ‘Abbás and declared himself in favour of Muhammad ‘Alí. But he did not succeed in carrying with him the majority of the American Beháís. These religious dilettanti on the other side of the Atlantic, while they applaud from motives of snobbery the humanitarian theories of the Prophet of Acre, have been

careful not to break with their protestant 'congregations' whose churches they continue to attend. Their number appears to have remained stationary.

In any case, the contribution of the American disciples enabled 'Abbás-Effendí to intensify his propaganda. He himself visited the United States in 1912. He died at Haifa (November, 1921). The

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British government had conferred a knighthood on him, and the English High Commissioner of Palestine was present at his funeral. 'Abbás left only daughters. His grandson, Shauqí Rabbání, a student at Oxford, has been proclaimed his successor, but has not succeeded in rallying to his candidature the unanimous support of the Beháís, followers of 'Abbás-Effendí.

Sources

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