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THE BAHAI CAUSE

MIRZA AHMAD SOHRAB

IN 1844, A MOVEMENT for religious and social reform was launched in Iran. In spite of its modest beginnings among a handful of students, this movement within a short while gained so much momentum that both government and church felt their institutions threatened and proceeded to take drastic counter-action. The leader, calling himself The Bab, meaning the Gate, was thrown into prison and later martyred, while his followers, known as Babis, were eliminated by mass measures, supplemented by unimaginable cruelties. The rebellion was on the way out, so the authorities thought.

Now The Bab, who was not only a reformer but also a Prophet, had foretold the appearance of a yet greater one than he to carry on the work after his departure from the scene of contest; consequently, the remaining disciples treasured the hope that all was not lost. In this group of humble persons was Mirza Hussain Ali, distinguished by the fact that he was the oldest son of Mirza Abbas of Nur, wealthy minister of the State. On joining the Cause, this young noble had recovered his family name, a custom prevalent among the Babis and had assumed the name, Baha-O-Llah, signifying the Glory of God. Thus Baha-O-Llah stepped out of the framework of court circles to espouse a people's reform movement of which he was presently recognized as one of its most fearless and powerful exponents.

In 1852, an event occurred which was fraught with terrible consequences for the Babis. One of The Bab's followers, a simple boy who had been mentally unbalanced at the spectacle of his Master's martyrdom, waylaid the Shah as he issued from the Capitol on an afternoon's promenade, and fired a pistol at him. The weapon was ineffectually charged with small shot, and the demonstration resulted merely in an attack of royal nerves, but the assailant was put to death

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on the spot and a reign of terror loosed in the city, the hideousness of which has few parallels in history. Among the Babis, thrown into jail as suspect in the plot, was Baha-O-Llah, and it was in the lowest depths of a series of underground dungeons in Teheran that this disciple received the revelation that he was disciple no longer but that indeed he was the leader whose coming had been foretold by The Bab.

Owing to his family connections, Baha-O-Llah was not summarily executed as were his fellow-believers. Instead, he was given benefit of a trial, at which he was cleared, largely through the intercession of the Russian Ambassador. He was, however, exiled to Baghdad, as member of a sect unwelcome in his native land, and there in company with his family and close adherents, he took up his life

under the jurisdiction of the Turkish Government.

During this period, which lasted approximately ten years, Baha-O-Llah made of his house in Bagdad a center to which scholars from near and far were attracted, and many Babis found their way to him, forming a community in exile. Here he wrote three books, classics in Bahai or in any literature, namely: Hidden Words, Seven Valleys and The Book of Iqan.

This sojourn, under comparatively friendly conditions, was not to last indefinitely, for here also the revolutionary teachings of the New Cause were cutting channels in minds ready for a broadening conception of religion and social science; consequently the Turkish Government in turn became uneasy and dissatisfied. In 1863, Baha-O-Llah and his associates were ordered to move on.

Preceding his departure from Bagdad, Baha-O-Llah tarried twelve days. (April 21st., May 3d, 1863) in the Garden of Rizwan, a property adjoining the city, while the poor uprooted families straggled in with their small possessions, choosing of their own free will to continue with him whatever the cost. Then when all had assembled, he stood before his distracted followers who were wailing at this second banishment, and made an unexpected announcement, one which actually broke upon the scene like a bombshell. The announcement was as follows: The One whose coming had been foretold by their Master, The Bab, was no stranger to them. He had been living with them all the while. He, Baha, was their leader and the leader of the Cause. Let those who would, follow him.

From that night on, the Babis existed no longer. Those who

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recognized Baha-O-Llah as the fulfillment of prophecy turned to him, calling themselves after his name: Bahais. A very few who were unconvinced made their way back to Bagdad.

The twelve days spent in the garden near Bagdad are celebrated every year, this period being known as the "Feast of Rizwan." It is one of the outstanding Bahai anniversaries, for it commemorates a new phase in the Cause. Under the leadership of Baha-O-Llah, the movement shifted outward into an all-embracing circle. The reformation within Islam was to be a World Reformation.

The caravan of displaced Bahais made for Constantinople. A stop of a few months, then on to Adrianople. Here they took up life again for four years, and it was during that time that Baha-O-Llah addressed the kings and rulers of the earth in a series of Tablets which were sent to their destinations from the next place of exile. In these epistles is developed a system of international law to be applied to the politics and ethics of the modern world. They also contain prophecies on the status of the nations which were justified later, and repeated appeals for bettering the condition of the poor and downtrodden. If appearing in these latter years, these epistles would stand out as remarkable, but in view of the fact that they were written in the nineteenth century, they make extraordinary and impressive reading.

Again on the move, this time by sea, the weary travellers arrive at the fortress city of Acca, Turkish dominion on the shore of Palestine. It is the final exile. Baha-O-Llah and his family were incarcerated in the military barracks, a confinement which with time became less and less restricted. During twenty-four years, Baha-O-Llah lived in Acca, while the massive walls which had withstood the onslaughts of Napoleon showed themselves impotent to prevent the light of world consciousness from filtering through to a harassed humanity. The teachings of Baha-O-Llah, transmitted in secret past the city limits, were carried back to Iran, the land of their origin; back to Turkey proper, and on to Russia, China, India and Arabia. The concept of federating the nations of all the earth was beginning to germinate in the minds of the people of the East. "Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country," Baha-O-Llah addressed Professor Edward G. Browne of Cambridge University, England, in the single recorded interview with an Occidental, concluding "let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind."

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Alongside of his plan for world unification, Baha-O-Llah made a spiritual blue-print of religion, showing that the different Faiths were illumined pathways toward the same goal. The Founders of these Faiths were one in purpose and taught identical lessons. Why then, asked the great Teacher, could not their followers serve God and men in complete understanding, sympathy and cooperation.? Only superstitious imaginations and man-made laws prevented them from arriving at this state of awareness. These stumbling blocks should be relegated to the past where they belonged and cease to figure in an awakened society.

Baha-O-Llah wrote in Persian and Arabic, of which languages he was a past-master. His works are practical and poetic, inspired and human. He always thought of the world as a whole, without parts, yet the component objects of that world were very real to him. He loved children and music; he delighted in a blade of grass.

Abbas Effendi started life as the privileged son of a rich landowner. When still a child he saw his house stripped of furnishings and treasures, heard the threatening murmur of the mob, and saw his father laden with chains, the target for abuse.

Together with his mother and her younger children, he accompanied Baha-O-Llah into exile and, as he grew up, he more and more became the intimate companion of his father. At the age of seventy five Baha-O-Llah passed into the life beyond on the 28th of May, 1892, leaving his son, Abbas, leader of the Cause and interpreter of the teachings.

Abbas Effendi became known to the world as Abdul Baha, meaning Servant of Baha, a name which he chose to designate the state of servitude that was his throughout his life. He served his great father, the Bahais and the communities in Acca and Haifa during the years of his captivity, which lasted over half a century, and when, with the revolt of the Young Turks, he was set free, he

issued forth to serve the world at large.

Abdul Baha undertook journeys which carried him to Egypt, France, Switzerland, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Canada and the United States, in the course of which he delivered hundreds of lectures before churches, synagogues, universities, colleges and civic organizations. As interpreter of the Bahai Cause, he summed up its teachings in a set of principles, as follows:

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1. The Oneness of the world of humanity.
2. Independent investigation of Truth.
3. The foundation of all religions is one.
4. Religion must be the cause of unity.
5. Religion must be in accord with science and reason.
6. Equality between men and women.
7. Prejudices of all kinds must be forgotten.
8. Universal peace.
9. Universal education.
10. Solution of the economic problem.
11. An International Auxiliary language.
12. United States of the World.

At the termination of his arduous journeys in Europe and America, Abdul Baha returned to Palestine where he dictated *The Divine Plan*, a work in which he summoned the Bahais of all lands to go out into the world and spread the teachings of Baha-O-Llah for the unification of the races, nations and religions.

In 1921, Abdul Baha at the age of seventy-seven, terminated a life of unexampled devotion to humanity, leaving behind a will in which he appointed his grandson Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Bahai Cause. Under the leadership of Shoghi Effendi, the various Bahai Assemblies on this continent have been organized by the "National Spiritual Assembly," and headquarters established in Chicago, Illinois, where a Bahai Temple has been erected. According to the *World Almanac*, 1946, page 308, the Bahais in the United States number 4,489.

The Bahai Cause has no rituals. It has no priesthood. A respected person in the community who knows and understands the teachings is fitted to conduct the meetings, which consist of talks, readings from the writings of Baha-O-Llah and Abdul Baha, prayers and occasionally questions and answers. Fellowship of spirit and mutual service is the badge of association and worship. Local groups, wherever organized, are under the direction of the National Spiritual

Assembly of the Bahais of the United States and Canada.

As an outgrowth of the Bahai Cause, a second movement is functioning throughout the world, with the intent of bringing the universal teachings of Baha-O-Llah and Abdul Baha to the consciousness of the youth of all nations. In 1929, The New History Society was founded in New York by Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Stuyvesant

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Chanler and Mirza Ahmad Sohrab (a secretary to Abdul Baha from 1910 to 1919). This society engaged itself in public lectures and in the publishing of Bahai books, and from it, as its youth section, emerged The Caravan of East and West.

The Caravan of East and West is an educational movement, the chief activity of which is international correspondence. It numbers 1,300 Chapters in 37 countries, with an aggregate membership of 100,000 children, young people and adults. Its publications, The Caravan and Pen Friends Guide, respectively appearing quarterly and monthly, keep the large circle of its readers informed as to the growth and influence of the movement.

The New History Society and the Caravan is a movement in itself for the spreading of the Bahai ideals and principles, independent of and unaffiliated with the Bahai organization.

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Views20033 views since posted 2001; last edit 2025-01-20 05:55 UTC;

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