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Bahatism Founded in Martyrdom, Taking Root Here

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Though This Persian Religion Was Established Only 70 Years Ago, Its Followers Have Suffered Persecutions Rivaling Those of the Early Christians -- Now Numbers 10,000,000 Adherents.

WITH increasing frequency items appear in the press relating to followers of a new religion who are usually, though wrongly, called Babists. The conversion of Americans to this religion is often the substance of this reference, as well it might be, for nowhere outside of the Orient has the belief spread with such rapidity as in this country. Although it is less than seventy years ago that the first prophet of the movement appeared in Persia and began to preach a new dispensation, the religion now claims about ten million followers.

A good deal has been written about this new religion, but certain phases of it, which are astonishingly dramatic and interesting, are hardly known at all. To most people they are only a sect of fanatics, more of "those Orientalists," who add to the picturesqueness of religion in these days. But whether they are fanatics or not they have a history which, in its stirring episodes and its tales of heroism, is rivaled only by the history of the Christian martyrs.

Never since the days of the early Christians, and perhaps not even then, have followers of a new religion been persecuted as these have been. So recently as eight years ago there were many martyrdoms, and in the middle of the last century there were executions which recalled the days of Nero by their cruelty as well as by the extraordinary exaltation and courage of the victims. The most conservative estimate places the number of martyrs during the great persecution of 1848 to 1852 alone at ten thousand, and many make it thirty thousand or more. Some claim that the religion has counted 50,000 martyrs in all.

In both these epochs of persecution amazing heroism was shown. Men have sung hymns a moment before they were shot from the mouths of cannon. They have helped with their own hands to light the fire that was to burn them. Young women, after tortures that cannot be described, have thanked God for the gift of martyrdom. Hardly ever has there been a recantation to save life, and children have been no less heroic than their elders. The history of the religion is full of anecdotes which describe the faithful as "thirsting for the draught of martyrdom."

Prof. Edward G. Browne of Cambridge University has translated many of the writings of the sect into beautiful English, so often using the phraseology of the Bible that the resemblance to the martyrdom of the early Christians is increased, and it is interesting to note

that in several other respects the events at the inception of the new religion rather closely resemble those of the beginning of Christianity.

In 1844 a young Persian named Mohammed Ali proclaimed himself the forerunner of what he called the Manifestation of God. He called himself the Bab, or the Gate, a name frequently used by Persian teachers to signify that through them, as through a gate, the divine wisdom flows. The Bab was but twenty-five years old, but in a short time his followers were numbered by thousands.

The teachings of the sect, which inculcates a love of the world rather than of country, and which declares all religions to be equally true, are hardly likely to find favor with the Persian authorities or the leaders of the Mohammedan Church. No sooner had its simplicity and essential purity attracted a large number of adherents than the persecution broke out.

Most of these are described in the singular volumes translated by Prof. Browne and entitled "A Traveler's Narrative." A Persian Babi writes under the pretension that he is a European, and in traveling through Persia has witnessed the sufferings of the sect and become converted to their doctrines. He records that of them, just as of the early Christians, the most astonishing slanders were told. They were bad citizens; they "plotted against the life of the Shah; they were guilty of the most disgusting immoralities in their private lives; not only were their goods held in common, but husbands and wives also; a woman was not only allowed but encouraged to have at least nine husbands, and so forth.

These stories, the narrator says, were entirely false, and so, indeed, they were, for as impartial an authority as Lord Curzon, who studied the situation carefully, denies that there was any immorality connected with the religion.

"The only communionism known to and recommended by the Bab," says Lord Curzon, "was that of the New Testament and the early Christian Church, viz, the sharing of goods in common by members of the faith, and the exercising of almsgiving and an ample charity. The charge of immorality seems to have arisen partly from the malignant inventions of opponents, partly from the much greater freedom claimed for women by the Bab, which, in the Oriental mind, is scarcely dissociable from profligacy of conduct.

"Babism is, in reality, a religious movement whose primary object is a revolt against the tyranny and fanaticism of the Koran, and against the growing laxity of Mussulman practice. As such it represents what in our terminology would be described as an effort after freedom of thought and purity of observance."

However, these slanders were carefully encouraged by the Governor and the leaders of the Mohammedans. It soon became the duty of every patriotic Persian and Mussulman to put the Babis to death. As an example, here is one story told by the traveler, whose account, it may be added, seems to be quite trustworthy, from a historical point of view, and to be borne out by the testimony of others. On one occasion the believers were forced to take refuge in the mountains, and even there were followed and attacked. They fought gallantly, but were greatly outnumbered, and were finally overcome.

"Their persecutors," says the narrative, "having captured and killed the men, seized and slew forty women and children in the following manner: They placed them in the midst of a cave, heaped up in the cave a vast quantity of firewood, poured naphtha over the fagots strewn around, and set fire to it. One of those who took part in this deed related as follows:

"After two or three days I ascended that mountain and removed the door from the cave. I saw that the fire had sunk down into the ashes: but all those women with their children were seated, each in some corner, clasping their little ones to their bosoms, and sitting round in a circle just as they were when we left them. Some, as though in despair or in mourning, had suffered their heads to sink down on their knees in grief, and all retained the postures they had assumed. I was filled with amazement, thinking that the fire had not burned them.

"Full of apprehension and awe, I entered. Then I saw that all were burned and charred to a cinder, yet they had never made a movement which would cause the crumbling away of the bodies. As soon as X touched them with my hand, however, they crumbled away to ashes. And all of us, when we had seen this, repented what we had done. But of what avail was this?"

In line with this story is the tale of the great siege in the tomb of Sheykh Tabarsi. A number of Babis had gone to a certain town and were there attacked by the residents. The authorities came to them and asked them to leave, which they agreed to do, but it was planned that they should be followed and killed on the road. There was some slight warning of the attack, and it happened that they were able to take refuge in the tomb of Sheykh Tabarsi, a walled inclosure.

The idea of the enemy was to starve them out, and for twenty days there was no attack. Rain fell heavily, and the officials decided to bide their time, but when at the end of three weeks there had been no word from the besieged, they thought it better to attack.

Within the inclosure, the Babis had organized for work, and every man had done his share, the artisans making the place stronger and more habitable, the scholars continuing their studies and their instruction. The leader of the party, as soon as it became evident that the officials without were about to attack, made them a speech. His followers were exhorted to make no attempt to protect themselves.

"If so be that God's will requireth your martyrdom," said their leader, "then great is your honor and happiness! But if God purposeth not that you should be slain, then none of these successive shots, will effect your death; and this will be but one amongst the countless manifestations of His Power and Grace. If, therefore, any one, in whatever position he may be, should so much as move his head to avoid a passing bullet, or should inwardly desire that the bullet should pass by him, he hath failed to attain to a state of true spiritual peace and contentment, is an unfaithful and wavering servant, and advanceth a vain boast."

With this spirit they endured a long time in the tomb. When the little son of one of the Babis was shot before his eyes his only words were, "May his filial piety find acceptance."

The besieged killed their horses and ate them, then ate the grass which grew in the inclosure, and finally boiled the leather of their saddles, but at length they responded to the negotiations of the besiegers, and agreed to leave the country altogether, if they were permitted to have their lives. Two hundred and thirty men came out and accepted an invitation from the commanding prince of the forces to a banquet in celebration of the truce.

They had no more than sat down unarmed, than the soldiers fell upon them, and the slaughter was such that the chronicler says, "almost might a horse have waded knee deep" in their blood. A few were spared, especially one rich young man, whom they did not kill in the hope that his parents would pay them a large sum of money for his life, but the young man refused to accept life while his fellows had been martyred.

"Do you not see that I am one of them?" he cried, and proclaimed his faith so loudly, with such bitter invectives on the men who had killed the Babis, that he forced them to slay him also.

One young man, when he was about to be killed, heard the headsman speak insultingly of the Bab. Breaking the bonds which confined his arm, he seized the sword and struck the headsman so that "his head rolled away some ten or fifteen paces. The bystanders rushed upon him, but he dispatched several of them to the hell whence they originally came and wounded some others until at length they shot the brave youth from afar off."

The heroism of these men was equaled by that of the children. A little boy was spared after one massacre, because they thought the Babis had treasure somewhere, and that the child if tortured might point it out. This he could not well have done even had he been cast in that mold, because there was no treasure, but he, too, had the martyr's spirit.

"Why did you not curse the Bab yesterday?" they said to him, since cursing the Bab meant that his life would be spared.

"So that you might kill me also," said the child.

"Was it so great a thing to kill you?"

"No," he answered, "but I would that the merit of the act might be yours."

Then, says the chronicler, "they tied him to the poles, but beat him as they might he continued so long as he had sufficient strength to revile them; and after that they continued to beat him until they thought he was dead, when they carried him away and cast him upon an ash heap." But the boy revived, and after several imprisonments became a leader of the Babis until he eventually suffered the martyrdom he had almost attained in childhood.

The Babis have in particular a tale of seven martyrs whose stories were chosen not because they were braver than the rest, but because they represented all classes of society.

Mulla Ismail of Kum, a divine conspicuous for his virtue and learning, was one of them. He was urged to recant and promised a large sum of money if he did so. Drawing himself up, he recited a verse addressed to Ismail, the son of Abraham, who, according to the Mohammedan belief, was the son whom Abraham was commanded to offer up. Likening himself to his famous namesake, he expressed his joy that he also had been chosen as a sacrifice, and that he would be enabled to make it complete. The appositeness and eloquence of the impromptu verses filled the bystanders with wonder. Ismail then removed his turban and bade the headsman do his work.

Mirza Kurban Ali was a famous mystic who was favorably known even to the Shah's mother. That lady, in her affection for the dervish, told the King that the man had been falsely accused and was no Babi. To this he replied, "I rank myself one of the followers and servants of his Holiness; though whether or not he has accepted me as such I wot not." When all arguments had proved vain he was brought to the block, but the first blow cut him only slightly, though it caused his turban to roll off. The dervish smiled and quoted a verse:

Happy he whom love's intoxication

So hath overcome that scarce he knows

Whether at the feet of the Beloved

It be head or turban which he throws!

Even the spectators felt a pang of sympathy for this brave man, but the next blow severed his head.

Another of the seven martyrs was the uncle of Bab, who died declaring it his utmost ambition to "lay down his life in the way of his Beloved." Another martyr was a tradesman and a third was a beautiful and gifted young woman known as Qurratul-Ayn.

Qurratul-Ayn was brought up in the learning of the Babis, and soon became a great teacher. Although she was both rich and noble, she left her home to expound the doctrine of his Holiness. She instituted a course of lectures, during which she was seated behind a curtain, and she enjoined the greatest strictness on her followers. She was married to an unbeliever and separated from her husband, and his relatives pursued her with great vindictiveness. When a high official was murdered, Qurratul-Ayn and her followers were accused of the crime, although they apparently were not in any way guilty. Many Babis were slain for this crime and Qurratul-Ayn was thrown into prison. After tortures she was put to death, and her body was thrown into a well in the garden.

Perhaps the most dramatic martyrdom of the whole list was that of Haji Suleyman Kahn, a noble of high position. When called on to recant he replied that his Majesty the King

had a right to demand from his servants loyalty and uprightness, but had no right to meddle with their religious convictions.

"In consequence of this boldness of speech," says the chronicler, "it was ordered that his body should be pierced with wounds and that in each of these wounds a lighted candle was to be inserted, as an example to others. In this state, with minstrels and drummers in advance, they led him through the bazars, he meanwhile, with smiling countenance, repeating verses. When one of the candles fell he would with his own hand take it up, light it from the others, and replace it." After these torturer, he was sawn asunder.

It was not to be expected that the founder of the religion, the Bab himself, should escape martyrdom when these tortures were being inflicted on his followers, and the end came in 1852. He was indeed "a thirst for the draught of martyrdom" and met his end in a singular manner.

After the Persian fashion he was sentenced to be suspended, by cords attached to his arms, from the parapet of a fort and then shot to death by soldiers standing below. Before he was martyred a friend was killed in a similar manner, and there is a touching story of this martyr's death.

While he was suspended from the eaves before the shots were fired his relatives called to the soldiers that he was mad and therefore could not be put to death, and when the man by his calm replies persuaded the soldiers that he was quite sane they held before him his own child, hoping that this sight would influence him. But it did not move him to recant.

"So they shot him in the presence of his master, and laid his faithful and upright form in the dust, while his pure and victorious spirit, freed from the prison of earth and the cage of the body, soared to the branches of the 'Lote-tree, beyond which there is no passing,' and there rested with the Beloved."

After this execution they brought out the Bab himself. The teacher had been paraded through the streets on an ass before his execution and subjected to all manner of indignities. Compelled to witness the execution of his friend, he exclaimed, as the body of his disciple rolled at his feet: "Thou art with me in Paradise." He himself was next suspended.

Stories differ slightly as to what occurred. The first volley of shots did not strike the Bab at all. Whether this was intentional on the part of the soldiers or not cannot be decided; but when the s [unreadable text] oke cleared away the body of the Bab was nowhere seen, either hanging from the eaves or prostrated on the stones below.

A great clamor broke forth. "He has disappeared," cried some, and others, "He has gone up to Heaven," but the soldiers, on searching, found him quietly sitting in a cell writing on the wall with a fragment of charcoal. The shots had broken the slender cords which held him, he had fallen to the ground on his feet -- it was not a very long distance -- and under cover of the smoke had entered one of the adjacent cells, and continued his work until such time as they should come for him again.

The chronicler says that the Mussulman soldiers refused to fire again at the Bab, so that a regiment of Christians had to be brought up, and they were forced to comply with the order. When the next volley was fired three bullets struck him and "that holy spirit escaping from its gentle frame, ascended to the Supreme Horizon.

In spite of the death of the Bab, his followers increased greatly. The Government evidently expected that with the teacher's death the new religion would disappear, and when they found their mistake they seem to have changed their policy slightly and to have exiled the leaders, instead of killing them. The spectacle of so much heroism on the part of men, women and children was evidently having an effect on the Persians, quite contrary to that anticipated by the Government.

After the death of Bab one of his disciples, Baha Ullah, proclaimed himself the expected

Manifestation of God, who was to come after the Forerunner. In a short time he had been accepted by a great majority of the Babis, although a small sect refused to acknowledge his supremacy.

Baha Ullah clarified the metaphysical and essentially Oriental teachings of the Bab and made the religion more suited to be what the Babis had wished to make it -- a universal faith having for its basis a belief that all religious teachers in all ages have been equally manifestations of God and have taught essentially the same truth. Baha Ullah spent most of his life in prison and died there in 1892.

Baha Ullah's sufferings were also a martyrdom, but of a different sort. He was a man of great wealth and of princely birth, descended from the ancient Kings of Persia. When his property was taken from him he exclaimed, " Thanks be to God: I am now free." Exiled with his wife and children he endured great hardships. They lived in filthy jails and suffered great ill-treatment until at length, his followers say, his mildness and wisdom began to win for him friends, even among his enemies, and he was allowed to live in a little house by himself.

His son succeeded him as the head of the religion. Abdul Baha Abbas he is called, and he, too, spent his life in prison from boyhood to the time when the accession of the Young Turks to power gave him a greater degree of liberty. The Master, or the Servant of God, or the Servant of the Servants of God is the way in which the faithful refer to him, and Acca, the place of his imprisonment, is the new Holy City.

His followers are now known as Bahais, and their number embraces practically all who before the declaration of Baha Ullah were Babis. At his house, as at his father's, men of all races meet as brothers, the European, the American, the African, the Turk, the Oriental. There is no distinction of race or nationality, and it is a cardinal principle of their faith that there shall be none.

The present Bab does not always advise people to break with their old faith and become Bahais, but he does say that Christians and Buddhists and Mussulmans shall go back to the plain and simple teachings of the founders of religion, which, he says, were essentially alike in their doctrines. The Bahais mix with this a good deal of curious Oriental lore and a profound belief in prophecy. The present Master makes no claim to work miracles and lives a life of austere poverty, giving away all that is sent him except the clothes he wears and the poor food he eats, but about him there are whispers of the supernatural.

That Babism and Bahaism have been a force for good in Persia seems to be generally accepted. That it is growing rapidly cannot be denied. It will be of singular interest to note whether the faith keeps its broad tolerance and simple purity, or whether it splits into numerous sects, each with its belief in a special set of doctrines. The Bahais say that this cannot happen, for theirs is a new dispensation of peace on earth and good will to men.

[picture caption: Haji Mirza Aghassi, The Grand Vizier Who Ordered the Great Persecution of the Babis.]

[picture caption: A Group of Baha Ullah's Secretaries. Sitting at the Right Is the Historian of the Movement.]

[picture caption: The House of Baha Ullah at Acca.]

[picture caption: The Burial Place of Baha Ullah. The Building on the right Is the "Holy Tomb."]

[picture caption: Building a Baha Temple in Russia. The Temples Have Nine Sides, the Perfect Number.]

[picture caption: The Servant of Baha Ullah Who Stole His Master's Body from the Turkish Authorities and Buried It on a Hill Above Acca.]

[picture caption: The Prison in Which Baha Ullah Wrote Many of His Books.]