

\* FALL  
OF THE  
PEACOCK  
THRONE

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THE STORY OF IRAN

William H. Forbis



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The religion business keeps Mashhad bustling all year round, but most pilgrims come during Ramazan and Moharram, those floating months of the Islamic lunar year set aside for fasting and mourning. A proper pilgrim, making what will probably be his only visit, brings a homemade rug to sell for enough money to stay ten days, in order to do the whole round of prayer and fasting. But Mashhad also observes between seventy and eighty religious or civil holidays a year, and many pilgrims visit then. At busy times twenty thousand people arrive and depart every day; half a million may be present at any given time. They used to stay at two hundred lodging houses in the old bazaar; Valian demolished these warrens and when I was in Mashhad ten replacement hotels were going up. Twelve thousand private houses also stand ready to take in visitors. The Hyatt Omar Khayyam puts up the richer pilgrims. Afghanistan and Pakistan supply thousands of Mashhad's pilgrims.

As residents of a holy city, the Moslems of Mashhad fought particularly hard against the Shah's soldiers in 1978 and 1979, and hundreds of them were killed. Many died crushed by the treads of army tanks as troops attacked the home of an ayatollah, who fled. A SAVAK agent was hanged in public.

Cyrus the Great set an enduring precedent when he proclaimed a policy of toleration toward all races and creeds. Over a span of 2,500 years Iran's monarchs have occasionally persecuted Christians and Jews, but such attacks have been few compared to those of European and Arabic history. When Cyrus conquered the ancient Babylonian kingdom, he allowed the exiled Jews to return to their homeland and he ordered the reconstruction of their temple in Jerusalem. In my interview with the Shah, he reminded me that one of the Iranian kings married a Jewish woman. For love of Esther, Xerxes I in the fifth century B.C. retracted an order to kill all Jews in the Persian Empire. If the Islamic revolution now turns violently against Jews, it will be a break with history.

Teheran is a Moslem metropolis that traffics easily with other religions. The 2 percent of Iranians who are Christians are mostly Armenians (270,000) and Nestorians or Assyrians (32,000); but Western sects of Christianity are also present and prominent. Several places in the capital are distinguished by the formal façades of Christian churches: the Greek Orthodox church on Roosevelt Avenue, the Iran Mission of Seventh-Day Adventists on Pahlavi Avenue, and the Protestant Community Church in Saltanatabad. There are also churches for Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics. The Protestant ministers have adapted to the Islamic week by holding services on Fridays, but

the Roman Catholic and Orthodox priests stick to Sunday masses on what is otherwise a busy Moslem weekday.

Christmas in Iran is—or at least has been—a festivity that brings joy to the Christians and profits to the Moslems. The merchants and hotelkeepers stock up with large quantities of trees, tinsel, and turkeys, and the Christians good-humoredly pay inflated prices for them. But Teheran's ecumenical spirit might best be illustrated by newspaper advertisements for Transcendental Meditation. Moslems, Jews, and Christians all agree that living in Iran's largest city is maddening. So Maharishi Mahesh Yogi appeals to all faiths when he promises reduced anxiety and fatigue to all those who practice TM.

I was waiting for a bus one cold November day in Teheran when the driver of a Mercedes-Benz pulled up and offered me a lift. During the next twenty minutes I learned that my benefactor was an air force general and, intriguingly, a Bahai. As late as the 1950s the resentful mullahs were still able to keep Iranian members of this newest of Persian religions from gaining entrance to the government. But by 1966 the Shah's cabinet reportedly contained seven Bahais. Today in Teheran there are 30,000 Bahais, and another 30,000 live in other cities.

The Bahais, now a worldwide religious organization, originated from Iran's historic quest for a messiah. Particularly in the mid nineteenth century, after forty years of the despotic and degenerate Qajars, many Iranians hoped for the appearance of a new prophet. In 1844 a precocious young man from a Shiraz merchant family announced to a Sufi sect there that he was the Bab, the Arab word for "gate," who would make known the grace of God. After a satisfactory initial success in attracting followers, he came right out and claimed to be the Hidden Imam, reappearing to give the world universal love and a just government. Iranians from all classes—aristocrats, merchants, and poor farmers—found the Bab's religion of universal brotherhood an escape from the oppression of the Qajar autocracy. The growing membership of Babis, as the members of the new religion were called, so incited the mullahs, who feared the loss of their privileges, that they spurred the government to have the Bab executed in Tabriz. His martyrdom at the age of twenty-five only redoubled the fanaticism of his followers.

When a fervent disciple of the Bab attempted to assassinate the shah in 1852 to avenge his leader's death, thousands of Babis were killed or thrown into prison. One of the imprisoned was Husayn Ali, a young man from a rich Teheran family who had elected to follow the Bab from the beginning. He grew so ill in prison that he was allowed to leave after the officials were satisfied that he was not implicated in the assassination attempt. But he was exiled to Baghdad, where

for the next ten years he directed the reorganization of the Babis as they fled from Iran. In 1862 Husayn Ali declared himself Bahauallah, Glory of God, whose coming the Bab had foretold nineteen years before.

Bahauallah never returned to Iran; in fact, the Iranian government conspired to force him and his followers to go to Turkey. In and out of prisons and houses of detention, he spent the last years of his life in Bahji, a town in Palestine, then controlled by the Ottoman Turks. Writing and teaching, Bahauallah gathered around him a devoted coterie of followers. One inspired visitor from England, Edward Browne, wrote in *The Persian Revolution* of being taken into Bahauallah's presence: "I bowed myself before one who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain." At his death in 1892, the Bahai organization (the word is the first half of Bahauallah's name plus the suffix *i*, "adherent of") had already succeeded in spreading the new religion beyond the boundaries of the Middle East. Today the Bahais boast a worldwide membership in three hundred countries.

As a heresy of Islam, the Bahai sect does not enjoy the tolerance that orthodox Moslems accord to other religions. In particular, they cannot accept that the Bab was the Hidden Imam. The Shah's custom of appointing Bahais to high office—former Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda was said to be an example—was among the inflammatory causes of the Islamic revolt against the king in 1978. Ayatollah Khomeini denounced Bahai "missionary centers" that alienated people from their religion, and demanded, "Is it not our duty to demolish these centers?" At the end of 1978, the Bahai community in Iran had practically gone underground. Whatever may have become of the air force general who gave me a lift I do not know.

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### The Iranian Way of Life



It is hard to remember, when a nation is going through a revolution, that its people remain intensely interested in what they eat and drink, how they dress and furnish their houses, how they play, kiss, bathe, and get high. Yet because it is what a revolution is all about, a nation's way of life is vitally important in understanding the revolution—particularly in the case of Iran, where the concern of the revolution is to preserve some age-old cultural values that the Shah, in his hurry to turn Iran into Sweden, lost track of.

Rice in Iran? Of course not. Rice is the dish of China, Japan, India, Southeast Asia. Everyone knows that. But the plain fact is that barren Iran, making use of that thin strip of well-watered land along the Caspian coast, grows rice of longer grain and finer quality than any other nation, and the Iranians cook it more skillfully than anyone else. Yet the rice is only a staple to go with a delicious cuisine: scores of savory dishes combining meat or fowl and vegetables with the special Iranian touch of fruits and fruit juices.

The Iranian housewife goes through fourteen steps to make a bowl of *chelo*, crusty steamed rice. Starting with two and a half cups of her good long-grain rice, she washes it and rinses it three times in lukewarm water. She soaks it overnight, covered, in heavily salted water. The next day she sets two quarts of water to boiling with two tablespoons of salt, and adds the drained, soaked rice in a stream. She boils the rice for ten or fifteen minutes, stirring it once or twice, then puts it in a strainer and rinses it with lukewarm water. Next she melts half a cup of butter, and puts a third of it in a cooking pot, to which she adds two tablespoons of water. She spoons the boiled rice into the pot so as to make a cone, and pours the rest of the butter evenly over it. She covers the pot with a folded tea towel, to make the rice cook