

LIVING RELIGIONS AND MODERN THOUGHT

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BAHĀISM

Though Bahāism arose from Islām it has developed along its own lines toward a religious universalism, and has gained adherents in India, Europe, and America, as well as in the country of its birth. It had its origins in Persia in the nineteenth century movement of the *Bāb*, itself related with the Sheikhism founded by Sheikh Ahmed, described by M. Nicolas as the exponent of a “powerful and enlightened liberalism.” Bābism is to be explained partly by reference to the doctrine of the twelve Imāms, a doctrine of the Shiah sect, according to which the twelfth Imām remains alive to reveal himself as occasion demands to restore the faith of Islām to its original purity.

In 1844 Mirza Ali Muhammed declared himself to

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be the *Bāb* or door, meaning that through him the hidden Imām communicated with men. He aroused much fervor among his adherents, and the movement included a very important principle making for liberalism in its denial of the finality of the Qurān. *The Book of the Seven Proofs of the Mission of the Bāb* maintains not only that the sentences uttered by Mirza Ali Muhammed are equal in style and in spirit to those of the Qurān itself but further that they are an advance so far as they are meant for this age. The followers of the Bāb were thus to receive his utterances as later revelations than the Qurān. According to the

Bāb there is no final revelation: a new prophet comes when the age needs him. Nevertheless, many of his own teachings were far from progressive, and the importance of the movement lies chiefly in its giving birth to Bahāism. After years of persecution he was executed in 1850.

Bahāism takes its name from Bahā Ullāh, who assumed the leadership of the greater portion of the community after the death of the Bāb. For Bahāism the Bāb was simply the “door,” Bahā Ullāh claiming to be “he whom God shall manifest.” Bābism had been definitely Moslem: Bahāism would be universal.

That Bahā Ullāh was a very impressive personality the following, adapted from an account given by Professor E. G. Browne, is sufficient evidence: In the corner sat a wondrous and venerable figure whose face is unforgettable though indescribable.... His piercing eyes seemed to read one’s very soul; power and authority sat on his ample brow; while the deep lines on the forehead and face implied an age which the jet black hair and beard flowing down in indistinguishable luxuriance almost to the waist seemed to belie. “Praise be to God that thou hast attained” ...he said in a mild dignified voice. “We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banish-

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ment.... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers, that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religions should cease and differences of races be annulled what harm is there in this? ... Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away and the ‘Most Great Peace’ shall come.... Do not you in Europe need this also? Is not this that which Christ foretold? Yet we see your kings and rulers lavishing their treasures more freely on the means for the destruction of the human race than on that which would conduce to the happiness of mankind.... These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease and all men be as one kindred and one family.... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.”¹

The idealization of Bahā Ullāh may be seen in the name given to him, the Blessed Perfection. The Bāb, Bahā Ullāh, and his successor Abdul Bahā (Abbas Effendi) have all been described as “divine manifestations,” though the significance of the term is not clear. It ought perhaps to be interpreted in the light of the panentheistic conception of God which predominates in Bahāi writings. But the description of these three has also become more elaborate. They have been called a cosmic trinity,² and associated with love, will, and knowledge.

Bahāi leaders have disclaimed the purpose of founding a new sect, maintaining their aim to be the uniting of all the great religions of the world into a universal religion. “The object of the Bahāi revelation is the religious unification of all people.”³ This side of Bahāism much impressed the late Oxford theologian, T. K. Cheyne, who wrote that “The union of religions must

¹ Browne, E. G.: *Episode of the Bāb*. Recounting a visit to Bahā Ullāh near Acre in 1890.

² Holley, H.: *Bahāi: The Spirit of the Age*. New York, 1921. pp. 33, 45, 46, 71.

³ Remy, C. M.: *The Universal Consciousness of the Bahāi Religion*. Florence, (Italy) 1925. p. 12.

necessarily precede the union of races, which at present is so lamentably incomplete.”⁴ “The Bahāi movement is not an organization. You cannot organize the Bahāi

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Movement.... The Bahāi movement is the spirit of this age.”⁵ “The gift of God to this enlightened age is the knowledge of the one-ness of mankind and the fundamental one-ness of religion.” “The principles taught by every true prophet are the same: there is no difference between them.” But Bahāi teachers have been far from showing this to be a fact. “All the religions are revealed for the sake of good fellowship. The fundamentals, the foundations of all are fellowship, unity, and love.” The sacred books of the religions are to be interpreted allegorically: “All religions are written symbolically.” That it is maintained is the only way in which truth can be written to withstand time and its changes. Bahāism is eclectic, and claims to embody fundamental principles held in common by every creed; it is a purifying force liberating the truth from masses of superstition. “Bahāism has no priesthood for sacerdotalism engenders the spirit of caste and a struggle for mastery between secular and spiritual powers. It lays no stress on metaphysical dogmas or ritual which is their material clothing....”⁶

According to Bahāism no religion represents the absolute truth, which is not to be grasped by human minds. There is progressive revelation chiefly as the result of a closer communion of a few souls with God. The Prophet Muhammed is highly revered but as he is supposed by orthodox Moslems to have surpassed Jesus, so Bahā Ullāh is held by the Bahāis to have surpassed Muhammed. By this belief especially, but also in other ways, Bahāism has tended to differentiate itself from orthodox Islam. “The Bahāi teachings confirm and complete all religious teachings which have gone before, and offer a practical philosophy which meets the present-day spiritual need of humanity in establishing divine harmony and peace.”⁷

Bahāism is regarded as suitable for this age in insisting on the harmony of religion and science. Civilization and science are necessary for the highest religion and

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must be intimately associated with it. “There is no contradiction between Religion and Science.” “Religion and Science are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone. Should a man try to fly with the wing of Religion alone, he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, while on the other hand with the wing of Science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.”⁸ The harmony of science and religion is thus viewed by an ardent Bahāi: “To behold

⁴ Cheyne, T. K.: *The Reconciliation of Races and Religions*. London, 1914. Preface.

⁵ Holley, H.: *op. cit.* p. 28, quoting Abdul Bahā.

⁶ Skrine, F. H.: *Bahāism, The Religion of Brotherhood and its Place in the Evolution of Creeds*. London, 1912. p. 57.

⁷ Remy, C. M.: *op. cit.* p. 17.

⁸ *Talks by Abdul Bahā given in Paris*. London, 1915. pp. 132-133.

all things of the universe as animate with a divine animation, so that a single atom becomes as wondrous as a sun; to feel in all things the essence of a consciousness so that not even a stone remains insignificant; above all, to realize by what eternities of evolution matter has been trained in order to serve as the temple of man — whereby man becomes the perfect microcosm within the perfect macrocosm — this glory that was the crown of ancient seers, returns now universally to become the education of all.”⁹

It has been maintained that Bahāism teaches a conception of God as an impersonal force immanent in the universe. But though at times it is suggested that God is beyond the capacity of human thought to comprehend, the most frequent references are to attributes only intelligible as applied to a spiritual being. To the human mind God is incomprehensible, for the finite understanding cannot be applied to this Infinite Mystery. “God is love and peace. God is truth. God is omniscient. God is without beginning and without end. God is uncreated and uncreating, yet the Source, the Causeless Cause. God is Pure Essence, and cannot be said to be anywhere or in any place. God is Infinite: and as terms are finite the nature of God cannot be expressed in terms but as man desires to express God in some way, he calls

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God ‘love’ and ‘truth’ because these are the highest things he knows.... But while God does not create, the first principle of God, love, is the creative principle. Love issues from God and is pure spirit.”¹⁰

In the main the terminology and the general thought of the Bahāis is immanentist, stressing the inner spirit of a creative movement of a universal evolution. In this manner it endeavors to unite certain aspects of Moslem mysticism with what is taken to be the fundamental idea in the modern scientific theory of evolution. Thus, though the transcendence of deity is not denied, is even implied, the characteristic of divine personality tends to be blurred.

It is quite clear that for Bahāism God is not simply an intellectual principle of interpretation, a philosophical hypothesis but a Being calling for definite response from man. “It is astonishing; it is a most amazing thing; that God has created all humanity for knowledge of Himself, for the love of Himself, for the virtues of the human world, for the Life Eternal; — for perfect spirituality, for heavenly illumination has he created man; — nevertheless, man is utterly negligent of all this! He is seeking the knowledge of everything except the knowledge of God.”¹¹ Nevertheless, it is in relation with God that men are to seek and will find their highest happiness. “There is nothing greater or more blessed than the Love of God. It gives healing to the sick, balm to the wounded, joy and consolation to the whole world, and through it alone can man attain life everlasting. The essence of all religions is the Love of God, and it is the foundation of all the sacred teachings.” Love as the central quality of existence is of four kinds, “(a) The love of God toward the identity of God: Christ has said: God is Love, (b) The love of God for his children — or his servants, (c) The love of man for God; and (d) the love of man for man. These four kinds of

⁹ Holley, H.: *op. cit.* p.111.

¹⁰ Holley, H.: *Bahāi Scriptures*. New York, 1924. Section 609.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Section 648.

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love originate from God. These are rays from the sun of reality; these are the breathings of the Holy Spirit; these are the signs of reality.”¹²

In his account of human nature, Abdul Bahā appears to place all evil in the material part of man. “In man there are two natures: his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in man. In his material aspect, he expresses untruth, cruelty, and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth, and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man’s spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. If a man’s divine nature dominates his human nature we have a saint.”

Apparently man’s spiritual life has no beginning, but the character of its pre-existence is not discussed. Similarly, it has no ending, though again the nature of its future is not defined otherwise than as a process to perfection. “Divine perfection is infinite, therefore the progress of the Soul is also infinite. From the very birth of a human being the Soul progresses, the intellect grows, and knowledge increases. When the body dies the Soul lives on. All the differing degrees of creative physical beings are limited, but the Soul is limitless.”¹³ “Though death destroy his body, it has no power over his Spirit — this is eternal, everlasting, both birthless and deathless.”¹⁴ “Life is eternal, but the individual human consciousness is not inherently so. It can only gain immortality by uniting with the pure Divine Essence.”¹⁵

Bahāism is no passive mysticism. Perfection is to be attained only by constant effort, which when inspired by lofty motives is true worship. Further, Bahāism recognizes the profound significance of much of the suffering

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that man endures. “The trials of man are of two kinds, (a) The consequences of his own actions’ (b) Other sufferings there are, which come upon the Faithful of God. Consider the great sorrows endured by Christ, and by his apostles. Those who suffer most, attain to the greatest perfection.” “Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine Mercy for our perfecting.... Men who suffer not attain no perfection.”¹⁶

True to the Moslem background of its origin Bahāism insists on prayer. “Know thou that prayer is indispensable and obligatory, and man under no pretext whatsoever is excused from performing prayer unless he be mentally unsound, or an insurmountable obstacle prevent him. The wisdom of prayer is this: That it causeth a connection between the servant and the True One, because in that state man with all heart and soul turneth his face toward the Almighty, seeking His association and desiring His love and compassion.”¹⁷

¹² *Talks by Abdul Bahā*. pp. 74, 169.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 53-54, 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 59.

¹⁵ *Bahāi Scriptures*. Section 614.

¹⁶ *Talks by Abdul Bahā*. pp. 44, 45.

¹⁷ *Bahāi Scriptures*. Section 869.

The general neglect of religious meditation by the feverishly occupied peoples of Europe and America is a marked defect of modern life. Bahāism emphasizes its importance not only for attaining a state of peacefulness but also to recognize the profundities of existence. “Meditation is the key for opening the doors of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself; in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves.”¹⁸

There is to be complete tolerance toward all religions. Bahāis remain members of the religions in which they were nurtured. They may interpret dogmas and practices allegorically. Thus: “Real fasting is to abstain from carnal desires and the promptings of ego. Fasting means to purify the heart from every stain of egotism, replacing material tendencies with spiritual susceptibili-

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ties, refining the moral fibre, intensifying the fire of the Love of God, cleansing the self from the dross of haughtiness, teaching humility, and dispelling the darkness of ignorance.”¹⁹ The ideas of hell and heaven are to be explained ethically, “Hell is the state of mind in which there are evil thoughts and purposes, yielding to the desires of the senses, and clinging to material things. In that state man is separated from God and in his ignorance he suffers. Salvation — heaven — is the conscious realization of God in this life, which is gained by love, kindness, and good deeds.”²⁰

The ethical teaching of Bahāism is a definite humanitarian cosmopolitanism. It sets in the forefront of its thought the “oneness” of mankind, and the aim of universal peace, “the Great Peace,” to attain which it advocates a world council and a world language. It champions the causes of liberty and justice in all their forms, making definite mention of the equality of the sexes. The claim is made,²¹ though apparently with little justification, that the teachings of Bahā Ullāh solve “the economic problems.” It is unfortunate that though universal peace and brotherly love occupy so prominent a place in their teachings, the Bahāi movement has suffered from considerable inner conflict between different groups, most often on questions of organization and the seat of power and authority.²²

¹⁸ *Talks by Abdul Bahā*. p. 163.

¹⁹ Sohrab, M. A.: *Abdul Bahā in Egypt*. New York, 1929. p. 148.

²⁰ Phelps, E.: *Abbas Effendi, His Life and Teachings*. New York, 1912. p. 134.

²¹ Remy, C. M.: *The Bahāi Revelation and Reconstruction*. Chicago, 1919. pp. 77-78.

²² See, e.g., White, R.: *The Bahāi Religion and Its Enemy the Bahāi Organisation*. Rutland, 1929.