

THE RELIGIONS 卐 卐 AND PHILOSOPHIES OF THE EAST 卐 卐 卐

BY

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"Tout ce que nous pensons, et toutes les
manières dont nous pensons, ont leur origine en
Asie."

Gobineau.

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religious men, who, in an endeavour to mortify the flesh, hold out one arm at right angles to the body and keep it in this position for years. There are instances of others who clench a fist, and by the exertion of their will-power keep it in this position until in time the nails grow through the back of the hand.

Again, the influence of an idea on the Oriental mind cannot be fully conceived by the Westerner, who is so much accustomed to rely merely upon his reason or dialectical arguments. Napoleon himself complained that he found it practically impossible to inspire his European soldiers with enthusiasm through ideas, and he more than once expressed a wish that he had gone further east when he invaded Egypt, put a turban on his head, and founded a new empire. It is for this reason that I am inclined to disagree with Nöldeke, who, as already mentioned, thought that the logical and legal divisions of the Koran were more likely to be listened to by the higher class of Arabs than the fiery words of the early Suras—the fact being that only the poetical portions of the book would have appealed to Arabs of any class, the legal divisions being looked upon as necessary evils.

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The Sunnites as we have seen, consider the califs from Abu-Bekr, Omar, and Othman as the true successors of the Prophet Mohammed, while the Shiites look upon these three califs as usurpers, and consequently their descendants also. The Shiites do not recognise the spiritual authority of the Sultan at Constantinople, and they believe that Mohammed's power passed at his death to his son-in-law Ali, whose followers were massacred by the forerunners of the Sunnites at Kerbela—a place to which the Shiites now make regular pilgrimages in order to visit the tomb of the Imam Hussain. Ali's authority descended to twelve Imams (priests), the last of whom disappeared about the year 940. The Shiites wept over his absence and awaited his return some day, just as the Christians await the second coming of Christ.

In 1844 (the year 1260 of the Mohammedan Calendar) a young man of twenty-five, known as Mirza-Ali-Mohammed, declared that he was the missing Imam Mahdi. He took the name of Bab, meaning, in Persian, a gate or door, *i.e.*, representing himself as the gate through which men would have to pass to acquire a knowledge of God. He was, in other words, the mediator between the Supreme Being and ordinary mortals. Little is known about the

early years of the Bab. He was born at Shiraz on 20th October 1819, belonging to a branch of one of those families which claimed descent from the Prophet himself, and are thus entitled to special privileges. We may safely pass over the numerous miracles which are attributed to him, contenting ourselves with the knowledge that when he was still young his father died, leaving him to be brought up by an uncle, who gave him some training in his business establishments at Shiraz and Bushire (Abu-Shehr), on the Persian Gulf. Having little aptitude for business, however, the future Bab left his uncle and visited the tomb of the Imam at Kerbela, where he fell in with a sect of Shiites, known as the Sheikhis, led by one Seyyed Kazim, who were known among the Shiites for the earnestness with which they looked forward to the second coming of their lost Imam. All their conversation bore upon this particular point, and their prayers were directed to this end, all of which no doubt influenced the mind of their new and enthusiastic disciple. Shortly afterwards Mirza became friendly with the well-known theological student Mullah-Hussain-Bushruzeh, another disciple of Seyyed Kazim.

On the death of Seyyed Kazim in a few

years' time, Mullah-Hussain-Bushruzeh sought out Mirza, who had returned to Shiraz, in order to talk over the position of the sect. It was then that Mirza said that he himself was the embodiment of the missing Imam, whose return had been awaited century after century, and he felt himself to be the man who was destined to abolish the ancient state of things and prepare the way for new examples of the divine power. The day was come, he held, when man should be freed from the tyranny of the priests and civil authorities and left to follow the dictates of his own conscience, apart from ancient commandments and superstitions. His friend was naturally alarmed at this display of what may very justly be called Moslem Protestantism, but the eloquence of the new prophet disarmed all his suspicions, and he began to read with much favour the different works which the Bab had composed during the previous two years. Amongst these a commentary on Sura xii. of the Koran, dealing with the history of Joseph, is one of the most celebrated. The connection between the new faith and the earlier forms of Christianity will seem to a modern student to be very close. Justice, liberty and equality were constantly on the lips of the few followers

whom the Bab had gathered round him, though, like the early Christians, they failed to see what the consequences of liberty and equality might be when carried out to their logical conclusions. It was not long before the faith began to spread with great rapidity. It appealed to what Nietzsche would have called the disinherited Moslems, and in a few months the Bab was surrounded by the Persian free-will men, who could "think for themselves" without the help of the priests, and by the usual crowd of penniless, landless, uninfluential and uncultured revolutionaries, who were charmed to hear that, after all, the priests and prophets were not better than they ought to be, and that they were all brothers in Allah. Had not the Bab said so, and was not he the missing Imam, whose appearance they and their forefathers had awaited with such anxiety for centuries? Charming!

In 1845 the Bab carried out one of the Moslem precepts by making his pilgrimage to Mecca, whence he returned, we are informed, more than ever determined to undermine the authority of the clergy and to establish "equality," *i.e.*, to abolish order and harmony and raise up chaos and disorder. While the sect had been making progress in his absence, the

authorities became alarmed, doubtless at the political animosities which the new theologian was raising in the minds of the lower classes. The command was therefore issued for the arrest of the Bab, who was pounced upon by a squad of infantry when he arrived from Mecca, and taken to Shiraz. The Shah was not particularly hostile to him, and sent a high dignitary of the palace clergy to speak to the young man and ascertain precisely what his doctrine actually meant. To his surprise, however, his messenger was persuaded by the Bab into becoming his follower ; a fact which seems to indicate that the young prophet was at all events well qualified dialectically. Irritated, not unnaturally, the Shah then ordered an assembly of Mullahs to be held, who, without, however, hearing the Bab's explanation, declared him to be a schismatic, and ordered him to be placed under arrest. His followers were also subjected to certain penalties, the most common being that of "hamstringing," in order that they might not be in a condition to propagate the heresy further.

These precautions, however, proved ineffective. The Bab was imprisoned in a private house, but he succeeded in converting his guards and in escaping to Ispahan. Besides

this, his followers were scattered throughout the country, and it was therefore difficult for the Government to run them all to earth, and the imprisonment of their leader led to renewed agitation on the part of the Bab's followers. Matters were allowed to drag for a time until the death of the Shah, whose successor, being little more than a tool in the hands of the clergy, proceeded to adopt vigorous measures against the new faith. Mirza wrote to his Highness before the drastic measures proposed by the Government were put into execution, begging that he might be permitted to go to Teheran and discuss publicly with the Mullahs and the priests the theological questions at issue. This dialectical proposal, however, the invariable subterfuge of weak demagogues, was rejected by the aristocratic Mullahs, and the Shah, anxious lest the young agitator should create a disturbance in the capital, gave orders that he should be imprisoned in the fortress of Maku, in the north of Persia.

These commands, however, were given out too late to be effective. The Bab had carried his propaganda even into every village in the land, and the movement had gathered in force. One of the principal intellects which had been awakened by it was that of a woman belonging

to the peculiar type whose mentality has been partly explained to us by the investigations of psychologists like Weininger. She was known as Kurrat-ul-ayn (" the consolation of the eyes "), and was very beautiful and well educated ; but, it would seem, as is usual in such cases, without sexual feelings, her womanly passions having, in the words of a well-known German philosopher, " mounted into the brain." ¹

It was one of the doctrines of the Bab, as it was of his Christian forerunners, that women should be unsexed, dragged from the protecting seclusion of the harem, and put on an " equality " with man. Easily convinced of the truthfulness of the Prophet's mission, Kurrat willingly helped him, and undertook a propaganda among the women of Persia. Gobineau in his *Histoire des Religions et Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale* has given a lengthy account of the progress of the Bab, particularly from 1848 to 1850, when the sect was closely pursued by the Shah's troops, during which time the Bab was once more arrested and kept in close confinement. He was still able to communicate with his friends, however, and he also revised the greater portion of his works dealing

¹ The same characteristics will have been remarked by those who have come into contact with the English Suffragists or the " emancipated " American woman.

with the doctrines of his sect—the “Biyan,” or exposition. He explains that no revelation is final, but that each different prophet represents the amount of truth which the men of his time are capable of grasping. He believed that the time had come for his countrymen to live more strictly in accordance with the divine law, and he inveighed at length against the corruption of the priests. A modern thinker may find much to agree with in all this, but the fatal defect of the Bab’s doctrine is his putting of the lower orders on a level with the higher, and thus accentuating the chaos introduced into Europe by Christianity. The high position he allocates to women is also unwarranted by certain moral and physical factors which Goethe on one occasion referred to in rather blunt terms.

Determined to check the progress of the new sect, the Government had the Bab taken to Tabriz, where, after being tried, he was condemned to be shot on 9th July 1850. As Moslem soldiers were afraid to execute one who was in all likelihood a descendant of the family of the Prophet, the work was entrusted to Christians. The Bab and one of his disciples were bound to pillars and the word to fire was given. When the smoke cleared away, we are

told, the disciple was found to be dead, but the Bab had not been touched. More: as if by magic, the cords which bound him to the pillar had been cut through by the bullets, and the young prophet was free. If, as Hippolyte Dreyfus suggests in his lecture on Babism,¹ the Bab had had the presence of mind to walk towards the crowd, then overawed by what looked like a miracle, and urged them to follow him, there is no knowing what might not have happened. But he hesitated, and it was instinctively recognised by those who witnessed the scene that this was a sign of spiritual weakness. An officer sprang forward and cut down the young prophet with a single stroke of his sword, and the soldiers hastily tied the bleeding figure to the pillar again. Another volley was fired, but the bullets entered a corpse.

Later critics have suggested that the Government, having thus disposed of the leader of the sect, should not have troubled about his followers, when the movement would probably have died a natural death. But it is easy to be wise after the event, and doubtless the Shah's advisers acted for the best when they proceeded to inaugurate a campaign against the Babis. While the weaker spirits fell off, the stronger,

¹ *Religions et Sociétés*. Alcan, 1905.

as is always the case in such circumstances, remained firm, and the faith gradually spread to Turkey and Egypt. In 1852, however, someone attempted to assassinate the Shah. This outrage was traced to a Babi who wished to avenge the death of his leader. He had taken a friend into his confidence, and the two discharged their pistols at the Shah as he was coming out of his palace at Teheran. They were at once seized and put to death; and the incident afforded an excuse for a redoubled campaign of violence against the Babis. Amongst others who were tried and killed in the course of this campaign was the female disciple of the Bab, Kurrat-ul-Ayn.

When the Bab's execution became known throughout Persia, one of his best-known followers, Sobh-I-Ezel, was appointed to succeed him; but the latter's half-brother, Mirza-Hussain-Ali, was destined to exercise even greater influence on the sect and its progress. His father, although connected with the Court by several strong ties, took little interest in politics or worldly matters of any kind, and preferred to lead a quiet life, devoted to his books, and his studies, a

characteristic which did not descend to his children. Mirza-Hussain-Ali was one of the first to ally himself with the Bab when the young prophet began to preach, and he suffered imprisonment with his leader during the early stages of the propaganda. When the massacres in Persia grew to such a pitch as to call forth much disapprobation from Europe, certain prisoners, who would otherwise have almost certainly been executed, were exiled, and among them was Mirza. The Babis combined to form a little colony at Bagdad under the surveillance of the Ottoman Government, and in a short time Mirza had successfully proved his superiority over his half-brother, in spite of the belief of the members of the sect that all men were equal. Sobh-I-Ezel was only too willing to relinquish his authority as leader in favour of Mirza, under whom the little colony prospered exceedingly.

It is then that the new leader of the sect started to codify its principles, his object being to efface anything of an Oriental nature from the doctrine of the Bab, in order that a declaration or confession of faith might be drawn up to suit every nation in the world. He thus hoped that in time the doctrines promulgated by the Bab might spread through the five

continents and embrace the inhabitants of the universe in a single religion. This grandiose scheme was unfolded in two books, the MSS. of which may be seen in the British Museum. One is the Kitab-el-Ikan, or the "Book of Certainty," the other is the Kitab-el-Akdas, the "Book of Laws." They form a sort of Moslem New Testament, with all the defects that such a work might be expected to contain. They were not, however, long in procuring for the author the title which he has ever since borne, viz., Beha-Allah (the Glory of God).

In 1864 the Sultan deemed it prudent to have the Babis moved from Bagdad to Constantinople and afterwards to Adrianople. Being now in Europe instead of Asia, the religion was perceptibly changed in the direction desired by Beha-Allah, *i.e.*, it tended to throw off its Asiatic character. The Babis were gradually becoming Behais. But a schism took place. Those who viewed with some suspicion the "liberal" ideas advocated by Beha-Allah grouped themselves round his deposed half-brother, Sobh-I-Ezel, and from this moment the two sects became deadly enemies. The distinction, trivial and unimportant as it may seem to us, was clearly

visible to those concerned. The doctrines preached by the Bab tended to make Islam "liberal," as the New Testament tended to turn the degenerate Jews of the time of Julius Cæsar and Augustus into Christians. The Bab's faith, however, remained strongly Moslem and Shiite in character. A Holy War against unbelievers, for example, was still preached; and infidels were still infidels and subject to the restrictions imposed by Mohammed himself. But Beha-Allah swept away these and other Oriental characteristics and endeavoured to give the religion a stamp of universality, hence the division in the ranks.

When the followers of the two sections began to disturb the peace of mind of the Ottoman Government, another removal was effected. Sobh-I-Ezel was sent with his followers to Famagusta, in the Island of Cyprus. Beha-Allah and his party were taken to Saint Jean d'Acre, where they arrived at the end of August 1868. They at once set themselves, under the direction of their energetic leader, to sink wells and to cultivate the then barren surrounding country as much as possible; and in a short time the colony was once again thriving. They had pledged their word not to attempt to make converts in the Sultan's

dominions ; but, as they thought they would soon make their cause known much further afield, this did not seem to distress them. It is on record that orthodox Moslems of the neighbourhood did not view them with very great favour, but that their most bitter opposition came from the most intolerant of all people, the Christian foreign missionaries.

Beha-Allah died on 29th May 1892, leaving his power to his son, Abbas Effendi ; but not without having seen his faith spread into nearly every country in the world. The propaganda of the new religion was peaceful : indeed, the post-office must have benefited to a considerable extent, in view of the number of letters, tracts and pamphlets distributed hither and thither by the little colony at Saint Jean d'Acre.

It is as yet difficult to speak definitely on the future progress likely to be made by the faith : it is of too recent growth for us to do so. A small literature has grown up around it in England, France, and Germany ; and it would seem that, while Babism is practically extinct, Behaism has come to stay for some time yet.

The Behais, or neo-Babis, endeavoured to reconcile the different messages preached by the various prophets who have made their

appearance in the world. They believe that at the proper time humanity will be combined into one religious family, basing their conduct on one single law ; swords will be transformed into ploughshares, and the secret truths written in the different religious books will be revealed to us. To them Buddha, Moses, Christ, Mohammed, and Beha-Allah are all emanations from the same spirit, incarnated in successive human forms, bringing a new message on each occasion, but always a message based on the same eternal principles. God is represented in the works of Beha-Allah rather as an essence or infinite Spirit than a Supreme Being : an entirely indefinable something, which we can only know by His attributes, as we know certain things by their qualities when we cannot grasp their substance.

Everything on earth, according to the Behais, reflects the attributes of God, even if only to a slight degree, but as the prophets are the most perfect of His creatures, they reflect Him to the greatest extent. It is on certain principles such as these, which, broadly speaking, may be considered as common to Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism that the Behais profess to appeal to the whole world, and not merely to one particular country

or continent. There are no special rites ; the religion must be manifested in a person's daily life and not in any special ceremonies. There is therefore no sacerdotal hierarchy, for, since all men are equal, they may all turn towards the Almighty and worship Him in any manner they may think fit. Since, too, all men are equal, all wars must in the course of time cease ; hence the invitation extended to the different nations to enter into reciprocal relations. Any difficult question which may crop up is to be settled by arbitration. Men and women are to be treated alike, and monogamy is to be insisted upon. The charming manner of the sects may be imagined from the Persian saying : " You cannot drink a cup of tea with a party of Behais without wishing to join their society."

It will thus be seen that Behaism is not so much a collection of dogmas as a rule of life, in which respect it may be compared to Confucianism ; but surely the ironical gods must have acted strangely indeed when they caused these curious principles to develop as an offshoot from Mohammedanism.

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