

THE FRINGE OF THE EAST

A JOURNEY THROUGH PAST AND
PRESENT PROVINCES OF TURKEY

BY

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spiritual dignity only. It was a Moslem Papacy bereft of its Temporal Power, and existed by and under the protection of Moslem Kings. Nevertheless, the title of Khalif ensured to its bearers the deep respect of all Sunis; and when the Turkish Sultan Selim I. took Cairo in 1517 and incorporated Egypt in his dominions, he regarded it as of such value that he acquired its reversion from the last 'Abbâsid Khalif, Motawakkil. Since then the Khalifate has remained an appanage of the Ottoman Sultans; and, as being borne by the rulers of the principal Mohammedan state, has recovered very largely its original significance. 'Abdu'l Hamid in particular owed much of his influence to its judicious exploitation; and although the claims of the House of 'Othman to it are not flawless, being rejected, for example, by the Moors, they are fully accepted by the vast majority of Sunis.

Meanwhile the Shiahs, who use the term Imâm in preference to that of Khalif, remained constant to the family of 'Alî; and were divided among themselves chiefly on the question as to which particular branch of his descendants had inherited the dignity. Their main body, the Imâmîyeh, whom we may regard as the exponents of Shiah orthodoxy, believe in a succession of twelve Imâms, who are 'Alî, Hasan, Husein, and Husein's direct descendants from father to son, ending with Mohammed 'Abu'l Qâsim. The latter is called the Imâm al-Mahdi, and is believed to be not dead, but only withdrawn from the world; he will reappear in the last days to reign over it for seven years with equity and justice, assuming the title of Mahdi or 'Director.' In the course of time not a few pretenders have appeared, claiming to be the Mahdi. The best

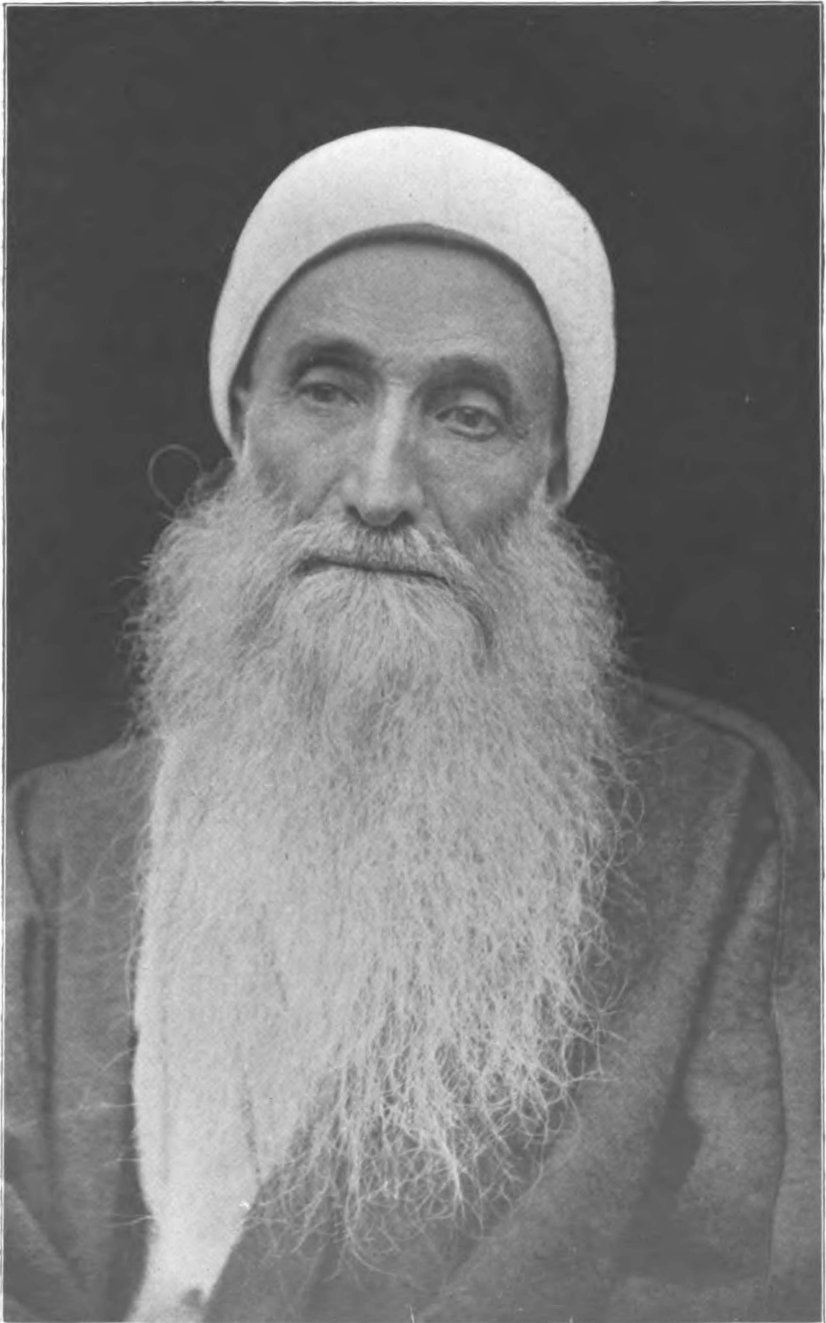
known to Englishmen, and perhaps the most successful, was the Mahdi Mohammed Ahmed of Dongola, under whose tyranny and that of his successor the Sudan was for so long the scene of bloodshed and desolation. Of another, Baha'u'llah, and of the remarkable influence exercised by his teachings, something will be said later. The Shiah heresies, however, do not recognize all of the twelve Imâms; and their most powerful sect, that of the Isma'îliyah, breaks away from the orthodox after the death of Ja'far as-Sâdiq, the sixth. Ja'far had disinherited his eldest son Isma'il in favour of the next son Mûsa for being seen in a state of drunkenness; and while the Imâmîyah accepted Mûsa as seventh Imâm, a number of dissidents, mystics, and others, adhered to Isma'il, arguing that his intoxication showed that he attached greater weight to the hidden precepts of Islam than to the observance of its outward formalities!

The Isma'îliyah emerged into prominence outside their native Persia in the tenth century, when one of their number founded the Fâtimite dynasty in North Africa. Their influence was increased by the arrival at the Cairene court of 'Omar Khayyâm's schoolfellow of Naishâpûr, the *Dai* Hasan ben Sabbâh. This remarkable man soon gained great ascendancy over the Fâtimite Khalif Mostansir, but was eventually compelled to leave Egypt by his enemies. He then established himself after many adventures in the mountain fastness of Alamût, south of the Caspian Sea, where he organized his followers into the secret society of the Assassins. The religious principles of the Assassins differed in no wise from those of their parent society, the Isma'îliyah. As with these, a rigid observance of Islam was enforced, for the sake of discipline, on the masses; while the

piquant, more suggestive romances of, say, Marz el-Prevô or Dum Afiz. Arrogant to those of his countrymen whom he considers less advanced, less progressive than himself, intolerably familiar with Europeans unless it suits his purpose to cringe, he becomes by his contact with Occidentals neither more trustworthy nor more polite than nature had intended him to be. I admit that I am describing the type probably at its worst, and I should deeply regret if my remarks were taken to imply criticism of the efforts of the high-minded and self-sacrificing missionaries who labour on the coast of Syria. Although the missionaries are not altogether fortunate in their material, for it would seem as if the Syrian peasant were designed by Providence to remain an Oriental, their educational work has been a true boon to the country. To them is due, for example, the introduction of the printing press; and were it not for the missionary Colleges of Beirût, the ignorant *hakim*, with his futile nostrums and preposterous remedies, would not have been replaced in Syrian country districts by competent native doctors. Nor are natives the only ones to be thankful for their presence, as I myself have good reason to know. For as I rode in to Tripoli, the fever which for several days had been upon me became very much worse; and my deep gratitude is due to Dr. Harris, the American Mission Doctor and Acting British Vice-Consul, who combined the skill appertaining to the former capacity with the hospitality of the latter, and set me on my feet once more.

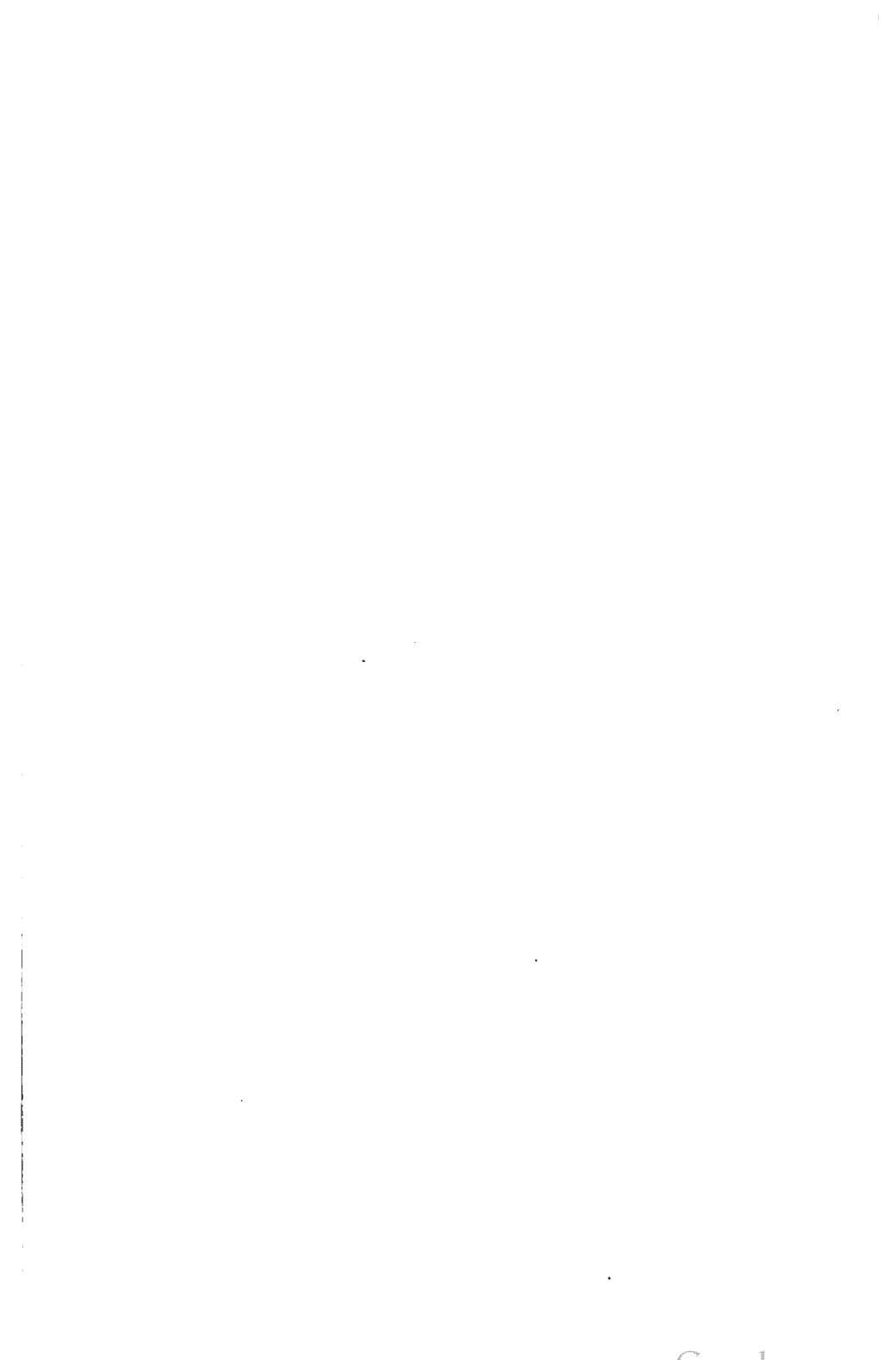
Before bringing the tale of this journey to a close, I think it right to pause for a moment at the little port of Acre; for with Acre is connected one of the few

religious movements of importance which have emanated from Asia since the birth of Islam. The Shiah belief with regard to the Messianic Advent of the Twelfth Imâm, or Imâm Mahdi, has been briefly stated in a previous chapter. In 1844 a young Persian, Mirza 'Alî Mohammed by name, proclaimed himself as the Bâb, or Gate, whereby communication was to be restored between the Twelfth Imâm and his followers on earth. A little later, he announced that he himself was the long-expected Mahdi; and as such he was accepted by his rapidly growing band of followers. From the outset the sect encountered the hostility of the Persian Government, and in 1850 the Bâb was executed by its order in Tabriz. Before his death he designated as his successor a lad named Mirza Yahya, upon whom he conferred the title of *Subh-i-Ezel*, 'the Dawn of Eternity'; and in 1852, in consequence of further persecution, Subh-i-Ezel, his elder half-brother Baha'u'llah, and such other Bâbi leaders as escaped with their lives, took refuge in Baghdad. Baghdad now became the headquarters of the Bâbis until the year 1864, when the Persian Government, alarmed at their increase, induced the Porte to remove them from their immediate proximity to the Persian frontier and to the shrines of Nejed and Kerbela. They were accordingly transferred, as political prisoners, to Constantinople and later to Adrianople, where they remained for a period of four years. Here, although in exile, they were unable to escape from the disruptive tendencies which seem to assail most religious bodies. In A.H. 1283 (A.D. 1866-67) Baha'u'llah, who had been slowly displacing the more retiring Subh-i-Ezel in the active leadership of the sect, declared that he was the Mahdi, 'He whom God shall manifest,' and not



SUBH-I-EZEL, *act.* 80

Facing p. 264.



only repudiated Subh-i-Ezel's position as the Bâb's successor, but asserted that the Bâb himself was only the herald of his, Baha'u'llah's, advent. The Bâbi community was rent in twain. Between the two parties, Ezelis and Baha'is, strife waxed fierce; and charges of attempted poisoning were freely exchanged between the brothers.¹ At this point the Turkish Government intervened by separating the factions. Baha'u'llah and his followers were despatched to Acre; Subh-i-Ezel and his party relegated to Famagusta, where they were found as State prisoners at the British occupation. Now occurred a curious phenomenon. Although doctrinally there was little to distinguish the two parties, the basis of the schism being a personal question, the one waxed exceedingly while the other waned. Rapidly the Ezelis dwindled to a handful, and soon were confined, almost entirely, to the members of Subh-i-Ezel's devoted family. Very austerely, and in poverty, Subh-i-Ezel continued to dwell in Famagusta, supported only by an allowance from the Government of Cyprus; and he died there on the 29th of April, 1912, at the age of eighty-two, and was buried half a mile outside the walls, in a field given by a friendly Turkish judge. With him the Ezele sect may be said to have expired.

Acre, on the other hand, has become the centre of a living force which is spreading far and wide, and is attracting to the little town pilgrims from many lands. Baha'u'llah died in 1892, and his son 'Abbâs, now known as 'Abdu'l Baha, was accepted as his successor by the majority of his adherents, among whom the designation of Baha'i has superseded that of Bâbi. The

¹ See E. G. Browne, *A Traveller's Narrative written to illustrate the Episode of the Bâb*, ii., pp. 365-9, Cambridge, 1891.

purpose of Baha'ism is twofold. It aims, in the first place, at the reformation of Islam, at shedding the dross of superstition and the tutelage of the priesthood, and at uniting Sunis and Shiahs into a regenerated whole. Its ultimate object is a wider one. By freeing all religions of doctrines and rites, by proclaiming as its only dogma a belief in God and in His manifestations, Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and Baha'u'llah, it hopes to join the whole world in a religion of neighbourly love, peace, and goodwill towards men, dispensing with creeds, liturgies, and ceremonial. It tolerates the clergy to a certain point, and up to that point even commends them. Man, it says, has in his earliest spiritual weakness to support himself by props; and his first prop is the priest. The priest is the tutor, the teacher, a very necessary person in the initial stages; but he is not to continue when the pupil has no further need of him, when he has become, that is to say, no longer a prop but a hindrance. As man gradually moves upwards, the mission of the priest is accomplished, and all mankind will become a community of priests.

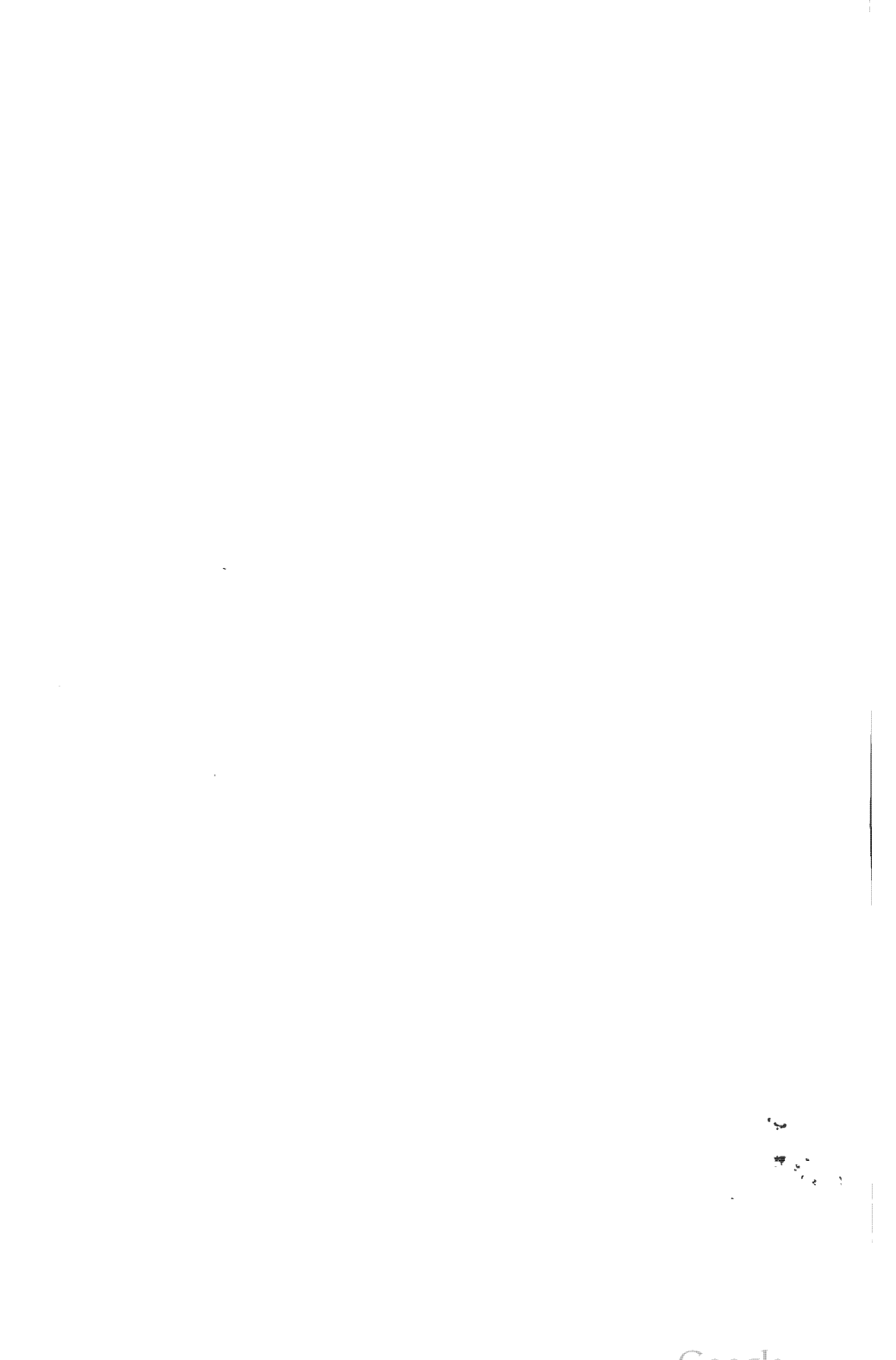
Baha'ism is now estimated to count more than two million adherents, mostly composed of Persian and Indian Shiahs, but including also many Sunis from the Turkish Empire and North Africa, and not a few Brahmans, Buddhists, Taoists, Shintoists, and Jews. It possesses even European converts, and has made some headway in the United States. Of all the religions which have been encountered in the course of this journey, the stagnant pools of Oriental Christianity, the strange survivals of sun-worship and idolatry tinged with Mohammedanism, the immutable relic of the



THE FUNERAL OF SUBH-I-EZEL : THE PROCESSION LEAVING FAMAGUSTA



THE INTERMENT OF SUBH-I-EZFL



Samaritans, it is the only one which is alive, which is aggressive, which is extending its frontiers instead of secluding itself within its ancient haunts. It is a thing which may revivify Islam, and make great changes on the face of the Asiatic world.



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