

# LIVING RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

by

FREDERIC SPIEGELBERG



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was a necessity. The lack of toleration displayed later is to be blamed upon the successors of Mohammed, rather than upon him. Islam, like all other religions and human institutions, evolved, shifted, and changed in order to survive.

Mohammed, dealing with a nation of image worshippers, strictly prohibited all ikons, in order to wipe out the regional faiths of his time. He was thus an iconoclast, a smasher of images, having the mental attitude that we find at the flood of most faiths, when they are not only concerned with destroying the opposition, but are also in contact with the Being of Being that is beyond all images. Islam, in seeking to come into direct contact with God, had little use for secondary images. But as time went on, and as Islam spread from a stern Arabia to a softer and more indulgent Persia, things began to change. So we find the Persian convention of drawing religious scenes, but leaving the faces blank.

After 200 or 300 years of Islam the stern original commandments began to relax, and Islam divided into two major sects, the Sunna and the Shia. The Sunna is the strict, orthodox tradition, a fundamental adherence to the exact words of the Koran. The Sunna tradition is centered mainly in Cairo, at the great Al Asar University, and roughly may be said to control the western part of the Islamic world.

The eastern part is characterized by a freer spirit. What is important in Shia is the apostolic succession from the prophet through his son-in-law and progeny. Shia developed in Persia into a type of mysticism foreign to the original message of Mohammed, and Shia in turn produced Sufism, whose message is the oneness of the Divine with all creatures. In other words, the transcendence of God affirmed by Mohammed becomes, in the hands of Sufism, immanence. Since God is in all things, the ban against ikons is no longer either necessary or valid. So the Persian and Indian, or Moghul aspects of Islamic art are the higher ones, for with all representation strictly forbidden, Sunna Arabic Mohammedan art was limited to calligraphy. Calligraphy, it is true, was highly developed, to the point where the act of writing the name of Mohammed or a stanza of the Koran became in itself a supreme meritorious act. In this sense one might almost say that Mohammed created abstract art. Indeed, when we examine abstract art in our own day, an art that seeks the mystery of personality and emotion in some nonrepresentational

form, since representational forms have become meaningless, we may see much the same process at work. In one way, abstract art is an attempt to create another world, an answer to a repression of nature worship. In another, it is an attempt to depict the ineffable with non-depictive but all the same symbolic means.

Sufism is almost a contradiction of the teachings of Mohammed. Thus the two Sufis, Mohammed ibn Wasi and Shibbi once met. One said, "I have never seen anything without seeing God therein." The other replied, "I have never seen anything but God." So do mystics try to top each other with statements of their perception of the Divine.

If Islam had not developed into a mystic religion in Persia during the 12th and 13th centuries, it would probably not have been able to conquer India religiously as well as militarily. Once it had been converted into mysticism, Islam fitted the Indian way of thought in a way that the original doctrines of Mohammed could never have done. The physical conquest of India by the Moslems, though it had dwindled into impotence, was finally abolished only by the English. The religious conquest was much more thorough. There are today 68 million Moslems in India, a fair proportion of the 230 million Moslems in the world.

As an extremely late offshoot of Sufism, we should mention the recent sect of Baha'i, founded by proclamation at Shiraz, Persia, in 1884, by the Bab, who called himself "the gate." There had long been a popular belief among Mohammedans in a Mohammedan messiah who would lead Islam to complete victory; and emulation of Mohammed had been the object of the zeal of all later prophets. However Mohammed, once Mohammedanism had divided into sects, was regarded as the definitive Messiah, and therefore the mission of later messiahs and prophets, called Q'im, had been to purify the faith but never to alter its nature.

The Bab, however, revealed a new sacred book partly opposed to the Koran, and to the orthodox Mohammedans among whom he lived this act was heresy. The Bab sent out seventeen devoted disciples, called "the letters of the living." They were all executed, and the Bab himself was publicly killed in 1850, when 20,000 followers were also slain. In 1863 Baha' Ullah, the "glory of God," was accepted by his followers as the prophetic manifestation heralded by the Bab, and spent the next forty years, once he had been released

from prison, living in exile in Palestine. His son, Abdul Baha, or the "servant of Baha," the expounder and promoter of Baha'i, was appointed by his father at the center of the faith. He died in 1921, appointing his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, "first guardian of the cause." After that Baha'i had widespread success, and possesses today some 500 communities in Persia, (though they have recently been outlawed by the Persian government), and 90 in America.

The chief tenets of Baha'i are six in number, though longer lists have been given. Baha'i maintains that God is unknowable, except through the prophet, His manifestation; that divine revelation is continuous and progressive; that the faith is not opposed to earlier prophetic statements, but only to their exclusiveness; that the social and cultural evolution of Man proceeds in cycles of about 1,000 years in length; that though outwardly different, the various manifestations of the prophet are in essence one being and reveal one evolving truth; that there is a special divine command for each cycle, and that the command for this age is to unify humanity under one faith and one order; and that religion is not only a law for the guidance of the individual soul, but the supreme law of society and civilization.

Baha'i has accumulated a considerable literature, and in particular an extensive mystical literature, as an example of which we may briefly quote from *The Seven Valleys* of Baha' Ullah. The valleys are those of search, love, divine knowledge, divine unity, contentment, astonishment, and absolute poverty and annihilation. They represent the progress of the soul, as it passes upwards towards realization through various spiritual stages or degrees of insight, and are cast in the form of answers to questions posed by a Sufi mystic, a Mohammedan named Abdur Rahman:

He (the traveller) drinks from the cup of abstraction and gazes on the manifestations of singleness.

At this station he rends asunder the veils of plurality, flies away from the worlds of lust, and ascends to the Heaven of Oneness.

He hears with Divine ears, and beholds the mysteries of the creation of the Eternal One with God-like eyes. He steps into the retreat of the Friend, and becomes an intimate in the pavilion of the Beloved. . . .

He sees no commendation, name, or dignity of himself; he sees his own commendation in the commendation of the True One, and beholds the Name of the True One in his own name. He will know "all voices to be from the King," and hear all the melodies from Him.

He will be established on the throne of—"Say all is from God," and rest on the carpet of—"There is no power nor might but through God alone."

He will look upon things with the vision of oneness . . . and see the light of unity manifest and present in all existent things. All the differences which the traveller sees in the world of Being during the various stages of his journey, are due to the view of the traveller himself. We bring an illustration in order that this fact may become thoroughly evident:

Consider the phenomenal sun which shines forth on all beings with the same effulgence. . . .

But its appearance in every place and the light it sheds thereon, is in accord with the degree of the capacity of that place. In a mirror it reflects . . . it creates fire in the crystal . . . it develops everything according to the capacity of that thing; by the command of the Causer of effects.

. . . . . Peace be on whomsoever accomplisheth this supreme journey, and followeth the True One through the Lights of Guidance.<sup>7</sup>

This is the valley of Divine Unity. Baha'i is a gentle faith of brotherly love, moderation, unity, and, in practice, ethical culture.

<sup>7</sup> From Eric Hammond, ed., *The Splendour of God, Wisdom of the East Series* (London: John Murray (Publishers) Ltd., 1911), pp. 63-71.