BABISM.

A New Religion in Eastern Asia.

From Zell's Popular Encyclopedia.

Babism is the name of a new religion sprung up in Eastern Asia within the last few years, and which, having taken considerable hold of the more intelligent of the Persian people, has further developed itself in other countries of the East. Its tenets are spreading day by day over Turkey and India. Its pure morality, and the antagonism it offers to the enervated doctrines of Mohammedanism, are worthy of attracting attention. Speaking for ourselves, we believe that Babism will eventually supersede the doctrine of the Koran, and largely contribute to the future civilization of the East. Babism is not Christianity, certainly, but it may, perhaps, be considered a great step towards it; and it is from this dual point of view that we give to the history of a religion, till now comparatively unknown in our country, a more extended space than is accorded to those other theological matters with which almost every one is, or easily may be made, acquainted. In 1843 there lived at Shiraz, in Persia, a young man, about eighteen years of age, named Mirza-Ali-Mohammed. His parents possessed some fortune, and from after events it is supposed that Mirza-Ali was not brought up without education. While still very young, he undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca, in which holy city it is probable that his mind first gave room to religious impressions inconsistent with the orthodox Mohammedan faith, and where he also conceived the design of supplanting it by the substitution of another and more progressive religion. On his return, he communicated the particulars of his pilgrimage, and also a first commentary on the *Sourut* of the Koran, called *Joseph*, to a select assembly of persons at Shiraz. An immense impression was thereby created, and throngs of literary and religious people crowded to hear the discourses of Ali-Mohammed. In these he did not directly attack the doctrines of Islamism, but founded his themes generally on the sad, irreligious, and deplorable condition of humanity at large.

Certain allusions, however, adroitly introduced here and there in his declamations—which were so vaguely broached as not to disturb and irritate religious prejudices on the one hand, while they flattered self-esteem on the other—caused his teachings to assume an increasing attractiveness. Day by day new hearers came, and went away adherents to the new religious system. His fame spread all over Persia. The profoundly solemn and impressive nature of these scenes moved all who took part therein, and even those Mussulmans most bigoted in their own faith, spoke of them with a kind of awe. They unanimously confessed that the eloquence of Ali-Mohammed was both brilliant and convincing, and such as to be but faintly realized by those who had not listened to it. Ali-Mohammed now assumed a religious title of apostleship. He declared himself to be the *Bab*, *i. e.*, the *door*, by which it was alone possible to reach the presence of God. Later on, he assumed another title, but to the heterodox he is only known by his former one. The orthodox Mussulmans, at the instigation of the clergy, were disposed to put a summary end to the propagation of Babism; but upon reflection, the Shah, fearing to excite an insurrection, and, perhaps, in himself secretly favoring the new doctrine, adopted a temporizing policy. Converts then prodigiously increased, and the Bab, upon giving a more explicit account of himself, affirmed that he was not the *Bab*, as he had at first believed, or, in other words, the *door* to the knowledge and presence of God, but that he was the *Point*, *i. e.*, the generator of truth, a divine apparition, an embodied manifestation of omnipotence; and it was as the "Point" that his followers bestowed on him the name of Hezret-e-Ala, or *Sublime Highness*—Moullah Houssein-Mohammed—the most venerated of the eighteen disciples of the young prophet, and to whom his adversaries themselves accord the possession of vast knowledge and great energy of character—was sent to Ispahan, and afterwards to Kasan, where he made many converts. The Bab (we will follow the giving this title to Ali-Mohammed, according to the common use) also sent out two other missionaries in different directions. The first of these was Hadji Mohammed-Ali-Balfouroushy, esteemed as a saint among the Babists, and who was certainly a very learned man, equally remarkable for his purity of life and devotional character. The second missionary sent out was a woman, perhaps the most interesting personification of the new religion. She was named originally Zerryn Tadji, the "Crown of Gold," but she is known under the surnames of Gourret-Oul-Ayn, the *Consolation of the Eyes*, and Hezret-e-Taherah, *Her Highness the Pure*. Hadji Moullah, her father, was a distinguished legist, and had married her at an early age to her cousin Moullah. Both Mussulmans and Babists agree in extolling the extraordinary beauty of this young female, and it seems incontestable that her mind and character were even more remarkable than her personal charms. It was in the bosom of her own family that she first heard the Bab and his doctrines spoken of. She opened a correspondence with him, and very speedily became the confidante and advocate of all his ideas. She espoused publicly the new faith she had awakened to, and spoke, not only against polygamy, but also against the use of the veil, appearing at the same time in public places with an uncovered face, to the great scandal of her relatives and of all true Moslems; but, on the other hand, evoking the applause of the numerous people who participated in her religious enthusiasm, and whose numbers had been greatly augmented by her own example. At last, tired out by the importunities of her father and her husband, she quitted her home, and consecrated herself entirely to the apostolic duties which the Bab had confided to her. After this, her theological fame became greatly increased, and such was the estimate she had formed of her own impersonification, that one day, it is said, the Moullah Mohammed-Ali-Balfouroushy having turned himself towards the Mohammedan *Kiblah* (see this name), for praying, Gourret-oul-Ayn took him by the arm and said to him, "No! it is I whom you ought to worship; I am the Kiblah!" The purity of this singular woman was never doubted, even by the most fanatic of the Moslems. The death of the sovereign, Mohammed Shah, was an inauspicious event for the Babists. His successor, Nasreddin Shah, seemed at once inclined to extirpate the new religion; and, contrary to the counsel of the Bab, some of his followers rose in insurrection against the Persian government. The suppression of this revolt severely taxed the power of the executive, but in the end it was crushed, attended with all the treachery and cruelty so characteristic of Eastern countries. Babism, however, more than survived this blow; it sprung up into new and redoubled life, and the number of its followers so increased that Persia became full of them. Convinced that the cause of this evil was the Bab himself, as being the author of the new doctrines which had occasioned such discord throughout the empire, the Government resolved to get rid of him, although he had kept himself aloof from the insurrection, and it was impossible to find the smallest proof of its having met with either his incitement or approval. The Bab was accordingly lodged in prison, where he endured his captivity with the courage of a martyr, spending his hours in prayer or meditation. His tranquillity of mind was unalterable. All who approached him were vanquished, in spite of themselves, by the ineffable charm of his face, his manner, and his conversation. Even his very guards were not quite exempt from this weakness. He knew his death to be near, and spoke of it frequently as an idea that was not only familiar, but welcome to him. After a confinement of eighteen months, he was shackled with chains, and, surrounded by a strong escort, conducted to Tabriz, there to appear before the Chief Minister of State, together with two of his disciples, who had voluntarily shared his imprisonment, Seyd Houssein and Moullah Mohammed-Ali, the latter belonging to a family of rich and honored merchants in Tabriz. When before his judges, the Bab was interrogated by one of them respecting the traditions of the Prophet and of the Imaums, and, according to the evidence of spectators, triumphantly refuted both the arguments of his adversary, and the exposition of the cardinal principles of the Moslem creed, as there discussed. From this it would appear that the Royal Commission came off second best in the encounter. They, at all events, deemed it injudicious to enter into further controversy, which might be dangerous; and as the Bab refused, when proposed to him, to return to the faith of Islam, they announced to him that he was about to die. In Persia, the carrying out of a capital sentence does not involve much delay or ceremony. But, in this instance, the policy of the executive was directed to the taking away of his life openly, in order to gain the important step of convincing the public of his veritable death, and thereby cutting down any pretext for agitation. The Bab and his two disciples were, accordingly, strongly ironed, and conducted on foot through all the streets of the town to the place of execution. The Moslems, masters of the day, thronged the streets, abusing the prisoners both by reviling and striking them about the head and face, and when a stone, flung by a boy, struck the Bab or one of his fellow-sufferers, soldiers and mob, alike, burst out laughing. Seyd-Houssein, too weak for such a martyrdom, fell upon his knees and supplicated for pardon. He was commanded to curse the Bab, and he cursed him accordingly. He was required to spit in the face of his master, and he obediently spat; after which he was set free. The other disciple, being both young and rich, it was believed that it would be easy to obtain from him a renunciation of his heresy; but even the sight of his wife and young children, who were brought before him, did not shake his courage, and he only requested to die before his master. The two martyrs were then suspended at some feet off the ground by cords passed beneath their arms, and in the presence of an immense mob they were fired at by the soldiers. The disciple was killed instantaneously, but the Bab remained untouched. The cord which sustained him in the air was cut by a ball; he dropped on his feet, and instinctively commenced to flee, but he was pursued, and mortally stabbed without uttering a groan, A. D. 1850. Instead of their chief's death discouraging the Babists, it, on the contrary, exasperated them to such a pitch that they have ever since become irreconcilable enemies to the Persian dynasty. An assembly of the leaders of the sect was held at Teheran, and a new Bab, the actual chief of Babism, was not elected, so to speak, but recognized as such from exterior signs and certain moral faculties, which in him gave a divine indication of his right to the succession of the Bab. He, like his predecessor, was also a young man, being a youth of sixteen, named Mirza-Yahara, son of Mirza Bouzong-Noury, Vizier of Iman-Werdy-Mirza, Governor of Teheran. He took the title of "Hezret-e-Ezel," or Eternal Highness. After his nomination, he left the capital, and went from town to town to escape from the severity of the Government, and adjured his followers to attempt no new insurrection, declaring authoritatively that the time for engaging with material arms was not yet come. In 1852, an attempt by three Babists to assassinate the Shah, led the way to new arrests, and consequent penalties of death. Among the persons thus arrested was Gourret-oul-Ayn, the *Consolation of the Eyes*. Being of high rank, she was treated at first with some consideration, and conducted to the governor's house, who gave her into the custody of his wife. A few days afterwards she was conducted to Niaveran, and in presence of the princes, great officers of state, prisoners, and the general public, she was asked with gentleness and courtesy to declare that she did not belong to the new sect. But instead of complying with this request she broke into an eloquent profession of faith to God, and to the Bab. She was sent back to Teheran, and having been veiled against her will, she was placed upon a pile of straw in order to be burned alive; but before firing the funeral pile, the executioner suffocated her so completely with her own garments that her corpse only was left to be consumed. All the other prisoners, men, women, and children, went to execution with equal courage, singing, amid the inconceivable torment of a torture heightened with the utmost cruelty:—"In truth, we belong to God, and we go back to Him." This sacrificial day gave to Babism more secret adherents than a long period of doctrinal teaching would have done. Since the events of 1852, Babism has every day made immense progress; but now, in obedience to the command of their present chief, the Babists conceal their religious faith, deny it on occasion, and when it becomes necessary, are ready to declare that the Bab was a myth and an impostor. This systematic dissimulation, however, is perhaps fraught with more alarm to the Government than an open revolt would excite. In the latter case, it would be possible to count its enemies, and confront them. As it is, it sees, it knows, it can realize—nothing. The executive dares not make inquiries, fearing to find more parties implicated than it could well deal with, and, still more, perhaps discover them in places where it would rather not. The prevailing opinion is, that the Babists are numerous in all grades of society, and in all the religious sects of the empire; excepting the Nossayrys and the Christians. The educated and upper classes, and those skilled in the literature and sciences of the country, are more particularly suspected. The quiescence of the new sect is but apparent. Its professors write considerably, and their works, which are widely but secretly circulated, are read with avidity and gusto, and furnish new polemical weapons against the Moslem. Again, the "Eternal Highness," and those apostles who have survived the original Bab, follow out their programme with zealous perseverance, and are continually making many converts. Latterly, the supreme chief, when solicited to inaugurate a fresh and overt struggle, is reported to have answered, as before, that the time was not yet come. Thus, we have presented to us the bona fide existence of a new religion, founded by a mere youth, which in a space of five years (1847-1852) has become disseminated throughout Persia, and acquired innumerable votaries. In five years a nation of from ten to twelve millions of people, occupying a territory which anciently owned a population of fifty millions, a nation without newspapers, the great propaganda of modern ideas—which has not yet a postal system, nor even a good public road—has been permeated through all its parts by the spirit of a religious belief, which has in all places numerous partisans among the orthodox clergy, the rich and the learned of the laymen, the most fanatic Moslems, the sofis, and the philosophers; and lastly, as a remarkable and perhaps unique fact, even Jews in great numbers have been inspired by the new revelation. The only two religious denominations that have till now kept themselves apart from the general movement are the Nossayrys, a sect composed of the most ignorant class of the people; and the Christians, of whom it would be better not to speak. In the abject state to which the Christian, both clerical and secular, has been reduced in Persia, it would be desirable for the honor of the faith which he stains, to see him disappear altogether from that country. The rapid expansion of Babism is certainly an extraordinary fact, and it appears the more so if we consider that, in the first Bab's lifetime, very many of the professors of the new religion, even among its most convinced and devoted sectaries, never personally knew their prophet, and do not seem to have conceived it of vital importance to receive his instructions orally. The success of Babism must therefore be looked for in a study of its doctrines, and their comparative superiority over Mohammedanism. In 1848, Ali Mohammed, *the Bab*, digested his tenets in a book to which he gave the name of Biyyan (*the Exposition*), that is to say, an elucidation of all that it is important to know. It is from this work that we shall endeavor to give a succinct idea, or *rationale*, of the theory of Babism, setting aside all its mystical forms, adapted to Oriental taste, but which possess no interest for us. "There is but one God, immutable, eternal; He is without a fellow." This is the Mussulman formula, but with a different meaning. By it the Moslems understand that Christ is not God, and that the divine essence, concentrated in itself, is an absolute unity; whereas, Babism means only that there are not two distinct Gods; and it is easy to see that it conceives divine unity as a thing very different from a self-concentrated individuality. God is essentially Creator because He is the Life, because He expands it, and that the only method of expanding life is to create. All the attributes of excellence that we may imagine belong to God; but, in the act of creating, He makes use of only seven of them, viz., strength, power, volition, action, condescension, glory, and revelation. God may, at His will, either partially or wholly communicate His attributes without diminution of His divinity, but that which emanates from Him cannot convey the smallest portion of the Divine emanation; and this is the difference between God and His creature. But the creature, who is not God, from not possessing the plenitude of His attributes, and, above all, that of expansion, is not, nevertheless, entirely separate from God, from whom he came, because—"there is nothing out of Him"—and God says Himself, "In truth, O my creature, thou art Myself!" and further, "all that which has the name of a thing is a part of the creation, anp there is nothing intermediate between that thing and Me;" so that all which exists, all possessing a shape, all that bears a name, is in God, emanated from Him, but inferior to Him, less powerful and less complete, a mere accidental being that has position only in time and space. "At the day of the last judgment everything will be annihilated, save the divine nature." That is to say, all the imperfections resulting from the fact of emanation, or separation, although but temporary, from the pure essence—and it is in this that we must look for the cause of wrong-doing in this world—shall disappear in the day of the last judgment, and God will draw unto Him all that which is from Him. From this brief analysis, it results that the God of Babism is not a new personification of the Almighty, but rather the God of the Chaldæan and Alexandrian schools of philosophy, of the Mystics, and, in short, of all the varieties of Oriental religious speculation. He is not the God of the Pentateuch, but He is veritably the God of the Gemara and the Talmud; not Him that Islamism has endeavored to define from its deductions from Moses and Christ; but, undoubtedly, He is the God of all the philosophers, and critics produced by the Islamitic schools. Babism has done nothing more than drawn this God out of past obscurity, and restore and present Him. But this has been performed in a manner not wanting in amplitude and strength. The Bab did not assert that he was introducing a new conception of the Divinity, as the only true one, nor that he was able to give a full and entire definition of the Creator. He said that he, himself, was a new step to the knowledge of the divine nature; that all prophets have said more than their predecessors were entitled to do; that his mission was to be more complete and extended than that of Mohammed, who had been more realistic in his apostleship than Jesus, who, in his time, had surpassed all his predecessors. But the Bab adds that we ought not to flatter ourselves with the idea of a possible advancement into the knowledge of God; for He will remain unknown till the day of the last judgment. Consequently, to devote one's life to this chimera is not the aim that man ought to propose to himself. To obey God, to love Him, to aspire to Him, these things are those which he ought to do, instead of trying to penetrate into mysteries inconsistent with his human state. God will never ask for an account of our endeavors at knowledge in that matter; therefore, it behoves man to direct his mind and moral strength to other and more fruitful subjects. That which is unveiled of futurity is enough for the want of every period. Now—and this is one of the most original features of the new creed—the Bab, while being the prophet for this time, and all-powerful as he may be, is, in reality, only a part, and not the whole of the actual prophetizing entity. The cabalistic number of Babism is 19; and the unity of the prophecy requires 19 personal manifestations, of which the Bab is the *Point*. These 18 manifestations, which, with the Bab, will constitute the prophetic number, are not inferior to him, because no relations of superiority and inferiority exist in the nature of God; but they have other and lesser things to accomplish; wherefore *he* is the *Point*, *i. e.* the centre, apex, or light of the new prophecy. Now, what is the effect produced by death among the members possessing in common the prophetic *afflatus*? It is this: The Bab suffers martyrdom, whereupon the essence of prophecy departing from him is transfused into the spirit of one of the remaining prophets, who therefore, in *his* turn, becomes the "Point," and so preserves the unity intact. After the death of the first Bab the power of the *Point*, in the unity of 19, was transmitted to the *Eternal Highness*. We now come to the last important feature of Babism, which is, that the Bab, and the unity of which he is the Point, do not, in themselves, constitute a definite revelation; and the founder of Babism has been very anxious to make this clearly known. The *Biyyan*, being the Holy Book *par excellence*, ought necessarily to be constituted in the divine number; or, in other words, in the number 19. Therefore, on this principle, it is divided into 19 distinct unities or chapters, which are again sub-divided, each into 19 paragraphs. Of these 19 unities 11 only have been written by the Bab, the 8 remaining being left for the true and great revelator, who will complete the doctrine, and to whom the Bab *is* what John the Baptist *was* to Christ. The Bab's own doctrine is merely transitional, serving to prepare men for what will come later; it opens the way, it is tentative, but it is not conclusive. For instance, the Bab abolishes the *Kiblah*, or mode of turning to a certain point of the horizon, adopted by both Moslems and Jews, when praying; and it can be surmised that neither Mecca nor Jerusalem has any particular devotional attraction for the Babists. But he does not substitute a new Kiblah in place of the one he has abolished, and declares that in this matter he has nothing to command, it being a question which the future revelator will himself decide upon. Marriage is considered by Ali Mohammed as a thing of the highest importance, not from the Mohammedan point of view, which considers it merely with regard to the propagation of descendants, but taking a loftier sight, the reformer's aim is to constitute family ties, the great *desideratum* of Asiatic society, where they exist only in exceptional cases. Upon a man being first married, the Bab will tolerate his taking a second wife, but he does not urge or command the so doing; on the contrary, such is his manifest repugnance to polygamy, that Babists hesitate to use the toleration permitted them concerning a duality of wives. Concubinage is absolutely forbidden. The Bab has taken another step towards civilizing the East, by forbidding divorce, which is the greatest social disease of the Persian people. The facility for discarding a wife at any moment, and under the most trifling pretext, has done even more than polygamy for degrading women, and has so depraved society as to make a true and lasting union almost an impossibility. It is, indeed, in Persia, a rare occurrence to find a woman of twenty-two to twenty-four years of age, who has not already had two or three husbands. To conclude, what is little less important is, that the Bab has forbidden the use of the veil, which isolates women from the amenities of social life, and covers an existence of intrigue, indecorum, and disorder.

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