

The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teachings

Reviewed by Warren Chastain

Why are the Baha'i so disturbing? What in this pacifist sect has stirred up violence from its beginnings to the contemporary persecution and murder in Iran today? Miller's extensive work, painstakingly researched, provides the basic information needed to understand and evaluate a world religion remarkable in its beginnings, unusual in its teachings, and enigmatic in its key personages.

Recently about 40,000 of the 300,000 Baha'i citizens of Khomeini's Iran have been forced to flee their homeland because of a nightmare of official repression, kangaroo trials, torture, and mob violence. What is there in the Baha'i faith that would provoke a Muslim mob to attack and kill an elderly Baha'i doctor who had treated and helped the Muslim community for decades? Or burn an old Baha'i farmer and his wife to death? Why do Muslims persecute these people even while many Baha'i serve to defend Iran in its struggle against Iraq?

Baha'i grew out of the militant Babi sect under the remarkable leadership of the Bab ("Gate"), Mirza Ali Muhammad of Shiraz, who stirred the whole nation of Persia and started a mass movement away from Islam in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Bab proclaimed a new scripture, the *Bayan*, which called for greater social justice, a higher status for women and better treatment of children, permission for lenders to charge interest (which would open the doors for a modern banking system), and restrictions on polygamy. The Bab even advocated a change of the calendar to be based on the number 19 (which for some contemporary Muslim apologetes is a sacred number used to prove the divine authority of the Koran).

You might say that the Bab, with such a radical program--somewhat reminiscent of the Shah's recent "White Revolution", was asking for trouble, so the violence surrounding the Bab--and later the Baha'i--is not a surprise at all. There is, nevertheless, an element of mystery surrounding the person of the Bab, and the "solution" that the Persian government devised in Tabriz on July 8, 1850. The vast crowds gathered to witness the execution of the noted Bab and a disciple, many no doubt wondering whether the Bab were truly the "Gate" to the Hidden Imam, or the Imam himself, or perhaps some later prophet to the Persian people, superseding even the Prophet Muhammad. Even the most obtuse peasant must have sensed a tension and excitement, and wondered about the significance of what was taking place.

The first disciple was made a spectacle, grotesquely stretched out and suspended by ropes against a wall in the public square. Then, as the Encyclopedia Britannica article narrates, "A regiment of several hundred soldiers fired a volley." The clearing smoke revealed a bullet-riddled body, making an effective statement as to the fate of anyone who endangered Islam in Persia. Finally the great "Manifestation" himself was firmly secured and disgracefully spread-eagled above the earth. Islam was ready to speak again in a thunderous explosion of gunfire. The noise of the crowd was overwhelmed by the thunder of the rifle volley--now the challenge of the Bab would be silenced forever. Or would it? The crowd strained to see the tattered, riddled body, but where was it? Running up to the bullet-pocked wall, officials were astonished to find that the Bab had disappeared! All that remained were the frayed ropes--the bullets had hit the ropes and released the Bab. Many in the crowd trembled in awe and fear and wondered what would happen next.

William Miller gives us the fruit of over a half-century of intensive study into Baha'i affairs, providing a mass of information that even contemporary Baha'i converts are unaware of. The fifteen chapters of his book carefully document the rise of the Babi movement, the manifestation of the Baha'u'llah and the growth of the Baha'i world faith, its missionary outreach to the ends of the earth, and its schisms, doctrines and decrees. The book concludes with an evaluation by the evangelical scholar with the greatest knowledge of Baha'i--Dr. Miller himself, who went to Iran at the end of World War I and who served there until retirement in 1962. Dr. Miller studied the origin of Baha'i at its source and in the original languages, and had personal acquaintance with key figures in the movement. Dr. Miller wrote his first book about the Baha'i in 1932, and his work is unsurpassed in English. As T. Cuyler Young, the Professor of Persian Literature and History at Princeton University, has affirmed: "No serious student of Baha'i faith, tradition, and community can afford to overlook this significant work."

The secular world has shown more interest in the emergence of the Bab-Baha'i movement than Christians have (Miller's work being the only serious study from a Christian point of view). The Babi movement could be interpreted as a "religiopolitical messianic movement" (Keddie--*Roots of Revolution*, 1981, p. 49), which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a result of the impact of the industrialized West. Indeed, even Europe was in turmoil with revolts in Paris, Vienna, Venice, Berlin, Milan, Rome, and Parma. In the same year Marx and Engels issued their *Communist Manifesto*. In America, the 1840's produced the Adventist messianic excitement, and Brigham Young led the Mormons from Illinois to Utah. When the Bab began his movement in 1844, the Afghans were fighting one of their wars against the British; the Maoris were in revolt against the Anglo invaders of New Zealand; China had succumbed to the British in the Opium War, and the stage was set for the 1850 Taiping Rebellion; the Moroccans were fighting the French; the Sikhs were at war with the British in India; and there were revolts in Poland, Germany, Silesia, Mexico, and Italy.

Probably there is some validity in comparing the Babi movement with other nineteenth-century responses to the West, such as the Indian Mutiny (1857), the Chinese Taipings, the Mahdist movement of the Sudan, the Anglo-Burman Wars, and the various uprisings in Africa and Latin America. However, religious influences may be underestimated. It is clear that the Bab was influenced by his reading of the Christian scriptures, and from a missiological point of view, the sudden conversion of thousands of Muslims to this new faith suggests some spiritual need that traditional Shi'ite Islam could not satisfy. Perhaps a greater presence of missionaries or more effective methods might have reaped a larger harvest to Christ than to the Bab-Baha'i movement.

What has been the Christian response to the challenge of some four million Baha'i in 166 countries around the world? The Christian community has not been disturbed at all--except perhaps in the early days in Persia when zealous Baha'i would try to infiltrate Christian groups to try to win converts. Since then the basic response has been one massive yawn! A check with the World Vision MARC research department and other mission sources reveals that there is not one known organized effort to reach the millions of Baha'i in the world.

The Baha'i themselves have been faithful in propagating their faith to even the most obscure corners of the world. Christians were surprised during the British-Argentine conflict over the Falkland Islands to discover the well-organized mission program and strategy the Baha'i had devised to reach even this most out-of-the-way place. A team of 12 adults and nine children had targeted the minuscule population of 2000 people in the Falklands. Working since 1954, the

missionaries had generated a small Baha'i community through their tentmaking missions. My own personal experience with Baha'i missions startled me when in 1978 I traveled to a string of islands that are obscure even to Indonesians. The Mentawai Islands, off the west coast of Sumatra, were neglected by missions until the twentieth century, and only since World War II has there been any significant response to Christ. I was astonished to find out that the Baha'i had a medical work there. I was even more surprised to find that Baha'i doctors were carrying on a medical ministry to the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, a people ignored by churches and missions until the 1950's.

What would be the Christian response if no witness or church were to be found in countries the size of Ireland, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, New Zealand, Laos, Honduras, Albania, Nicaragua, Libya, Uruguay, Paraguay, or Israel? Surely many Christians would be shocked into action and would move heaven and earth to bring Christ to such a needy and neglected people. But the number of Baha'i is roughly equal to the population of any of the countries listed above! And still there is no concerted effort to reach this hidden people group. The study of Miller's book is a good starting place for any would-be witness to the Baha'i, for research can be an act of love.

The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teachings|, by William McElwee Miller. William Carey Library (1984, first printing 1974) .444 pp., \$10.95x. Address inquiries to William Carey Library, 1705 N. Sierra Bonita Ave., Pasadena, California 91104.