

## **Sects and Cults**

### **Baha'i**

A few years ago, Hammid (not his real name) had a government job, a family, a comfortable house and his own homeland - Iran. Today, he lives in Singapore as an exile - separated from his wife and a newborn son he has never seen. His crime?

He is a Baha'i. Since the overthrow of the Shah, Baha'is have been harassed and persecuted for their faith. Shrines have been destroyed, welfare centres taken over and even cemeteries confiscated. Though the largest religious minority in Iran, some 450,000 members, the Baha'is seem to have suffered most. Hammid testified: "Every night, revolutionary guards (vigilants loyal to the Muslim clergy) come and take a man or a woman or a child with them. Many of our women have been raped."

In August, 1980, Baha'is throughout the world protested the arrest of all nine members of Iran's National Spiritual Assembly who were accused of conspiring a coup against the government. None have been heard of since, and Baha'is fear that they have been executed. Under the Shah, the Baha'is fared well as the Shah had no great love for the Mullahs. The Baha'is even landed top civil-service jobs. After the revolution, the Muslim clergy took revenge.

Hammid told a reporter that he could have stayed in Iran only on the condition of converting to Islam and refunding his government salary from the previous 10 years. The third option was jail. "Once you go to jail, that's the end," he said, "and I would never convert to Islam. I would rather die a Baha'i than to convert." "It is ironic," says Dr. Sreeni, a Baha'i physician from Kuala Lumpur, "that the Baha'i faith has been recognized in most countries except for the place where it was founded."

### **Historical Background**

Baha'i is a messianic faith that reveres May 23, 1844, as the Anniversary of the Declaration of the Bab. In that year a devout Persian, Mirza Ali Mohammed (1819-50), called himself the "Bab" ("Gate"). He was a member of a Muslim sect known as the Shaykris, who believed in "the imminent appearance of a Divine Messenger." Bab began to teach that God would soon "make manifest" a world teacher to unite men and women and nations in an age of peace. So the Bab became the John the Baptist figure of the Baha'i faith.

The Bab attracted so many followers that the Persian (Iranian) government felt threatened, and together with the Muslim clergy, decided to kill him. He was executed in Tabriz by a firing squad, twice as it turned out. The first time, the soldiers hit the ropes from which he was suspended and he dropped to the ground unhurt. The second time the Bab's body was riddled with bullets. More than 20,000 of his followers were massacred.

Among Bab's followers was a certain Mirza Husayn Ali (1817-92), a Persian nobleman born in Tehran. In 1883 he proclaimed that he was the great prophet Bab had prophesied to come. His name became Baha'u'llah (the Glory of God). He was no longer satisfied with the attempt to reform Islam from within. He preached and through him Islam was overcome and proclaimed a new world religion and the brotherhood of all mankind. Baha'u'llah's claim to be the latest prophet is at the heart of the Baha'i's conflict with Islam.

From the outset, Iran's strict Shi'ite Muslims considered Baha'i's teachings as heretical. Baha'u'llah was implicated falsely in an assassination plot against the king and jailed in a Tehran dungeon called "the Black Pit." Afterwards he was driven into exile, first to Baghdad, then Istanbul and finally Acre modern (Akko) in Palestine. He spent the rest of his life in relative freedom as was allowed to roam Acre, Haifa, Mount Carmel area almost at will. For several years he even lived in a mansion, which remains as one of the Baha'i's world shrines today. Said Baha'u'llah: "Verily, verily, the most wretched prison has been converted into a Paradise of Eden." From Haifa he sent letters to the kings of the world pleading for the need of a league of nations and in this way come to world peace.

Baha'u'llah was a prolific writer. His books in English are: *The Hidden Words*, *the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, *the Book of Certitude*, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, *Prayers and Meditations*, and *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*. A selection of his writings is in the anthology called *Baha'i World Faith*.

Baha'u'llah was succeeded by his son Abdul-Baha (1844-1921), who was born on the date designated by his father as the time of the new dispensation. Abdul-Baha was a compassionate, impressive, able leader and of high moral character. He was called the "Father of the Poor." Prior to World War I (May, 1914) he called for international disarmament.

## **Resurrection**

Baha'ism explains away the literal, physical resurrection of Christ. His victory over death is nullified. "The Reality of Christ, which signifies His teachings, His bounties, His perfections and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for 2 or 3 days after His martyrdom ... The cause of Christ was like a lifeless body, and, when after 3 days the disciples became assured, and began to serve the cause of Christ, and resolved to spread the divine teachings, the reality of Christ became resplendent, His religion found life."

## **Sin**

Evil is the absence of the divine qualities that are appropriate to any particular level of existence, as darkness is absence of light. "The only difference between members of the human family is that of degree. Some are like children who are ignorant and must be educated until they arrive at maturity. Some are like the sick and must be treated

with tenderness and care. None are bad or evil. We must not feel repelled by these poor children. We must treat them with great kindness, teaching the ignorant and tenderly nursing the sick."

## **Salvation**

Man doesn't need salvation; he needs enlightenment. If there is no sin and guilt, Christ's atoning death is not necessary. Salvation then doesn't come through Christ, but through Baha'u'llah. How can one come to love God? Through coming to know and love the Manifestation of God, Baha'u'llah. "The revelation of Jesus was for His own dispensation - that of 'the Son.' Now it is no longer the point of guidance to the world. We are in total darkness if we are refusing the revelation of the present things both good and bad - everything. Now all is changed. All the teachings of the past are past. Abdu'lBaha is now supplying all the world."

How tolerant is Baha'i? What they teach and practice are two different things. A person who wants to join a Baha'i assembly has to renounce first his church or organization. In one of Baha'is books it clearly states: "For a Baha'i to belong to an organization ... membership of which implies holding beliefs or approving aims out of harmony with the teachings of Baha'u'llah, would amount to a denial of faith in those teachings. Anyone applying for membership of the Baha'i Community who is unwilling to relinquish membership in such an organization proves ... that he has not fully understood the Baha'i teachings, and consequently he is unacceptable ... There are very few organizations whose beliefs and aims are wholly consistent with the Baha'i teachings. Virtually all religious organizations ... require some sort of belief to which a Baha'i cannot subscribe."

Baha'i cannot unify all religions. Its doctrines are in direct conflict with Christianity. Baha'u'llah and Jesus cannot both be right. For the Christian, Jesus is the Lord of all. There is none other. "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him, to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col. 1:19,20 N.I.V.).