

Ottoman Reform Movements and the Baha'i Faith

The banishment of Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, by the government of his native land Iran to the Ottoman Empire, i.e. to Baghdad (1853-1863), Rumelia (1863-1868) and Palestine (1868-1892), brought him and his son 'Abdu'l-Baha in contact with the reformist thoughts and modernist ideas among Ottoman intellectuals. In their writings Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha refer to topics discussed in the Ottoman Empire and Persia, like consultation, parliament, constitutional monarchy etc. Historically, the social teachings of Baha'u'llah's religion can be embedded in Iranian millenarianism, Ottoman and Iranian reformism and European modernism.

The 'Young Ottoman' reformers in the 1860s and 1870s were in opposition to the reforms imposed by the Ottoman government from above. Among them, leading intellectuals and statesmen such as Namik Kemal and Midhat Pasha, wanted to replace the autocratic Ottoman government by a constitutional monarchy based on European models of parliament and consultation. Namik Kemal, Ebüzziya Tevfik, Bereketzade Ismail Hakkı and Nuri Bey, who were exiled to Cyprus, Rhodos and Akka in Palestine, met the Baha'is there or communicated with 'Abdu'l-Baha, son of Baha'u'llah, who was very in touch with reformist ideas and contributed his views in writing.

Later, early 'Young Turk' leaders in the 1890s, heirs of the previous generation of Ottoman reformers, discussed among themselves Babi-Baha'i ideas and had contacts to Iranian reformers in Istanbul. One of the founding members of the Young Turkish 'Committee of Union and Progress,' Abdullah Cevdet, aroused considerable agitation with an pro-Baha'i article that he had published in his journal *Ictihad* in March 1922 during the transition from Empire to Republic. He was accused for attacking Islam. At the same time Cevdet expressed his feelings and thoughts in favour of the Baha'i-Religion and recommended it as a world religion to replace Islam. He was sentenced to two years imprisonment but made an appeal from the decision. The procedure lasted until the first years of the newly established republic and was suspended in 1926 when the law against disparaging Islam was abolished. Cevdet is usually depicted as a materialist who made use religion only to educate the Muslim masses and lead them to Positivism. By portraying his case, I shall try to show that he not merely saw the Baha'i faith as a tool but deeply sympathised with it.