

THE MOHAMMEDAN WORLD OF TO-DAY

Being papers read at the First Missionary
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EDITED BY

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(Reproduction of a very rare Arabic Christian coin from the
Crusaders' period, discovered by Rev. W. K. Eddy of Sidon.
The inscriptions read: "The Father, the Son, and the
Holy Spirit, One God"; "One God, one Faith, one
Baptism." The original is now in the British
Museum. The significance of the inscription
is evident to the student of history.)

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VIII

Islam in Persia

Rev. W. St. Clair Tisdall, M. A., D. D.

“What testimony moreover could be so cogent as this to the inadequacy of Islam to meet the wants of the soul? Mohammed refused to believe in a crucified Christ, but his followers trust to the cleansing power of tears shed for his murdered grandson. Do not these frantic cries call for the gospel of the Cross?”—*Wm. A. Shedd, D. D.*



MOUJNERS ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF HUSSEIN'S DEATH, TEHERAN, PERSIA.

VIII

Islam in Persia

EVER since the Arabian conquest of Persia, about the year 640 of our era, the dominant religion of the country has been the Mohammedan, which was established by the sword. The Shiah form of Islam became supreme in the country during the tenth century. Although the Sunni faith was declared the religion of Persia under Nadir Shah in 1736, yet Agha Mohammed, the founder of the present Qajar dynasty restored the supremacy of the Shiah faith in 1796.

There is no such thing as a census in Persia and hence it is impossible to form accurate estimates of the population. Lord Curzon believes that it is between eight and ten millions. Of these some 750,000 or 800,000 are said to be Sunnis, though I consider this estimate too high. The Behais claim to number 1,000,000 adherents, and are certainly very numerous. There are some 10,000 Parsis, chiefly in Yezd and Kerman; about 20,000 Jews in Ispahan, Teheran, Hamadan and other large cities; 53,000 Armenians in the Armenian provinces and in Julfa (new) and its neighbourhood, and 30,000 Nestorians about Urmia. All the rest of the population are nominally Shiites, though the Bakhtiyaris and the nomad tribes know little

of Islam, and the educated classes are mostly Sufi free-thinkers. The leading sects are the Ismailis, the Ali-Ilahis (especially among the Kurds), the Akhbaris and the Shaikhis. It is from the latter sect that the Babis and Behais sprang. The Babis are now few in number, most of them having become followers of the Baha.

The social condition of Moslems in Persia cannot be said to be a high one. Women hold a very low position and have few rights. They are closely veiled when they go abroad, even in the lowest classes, except among the nomad tribes, whose women enjoy much greater liberty. Religiously, few privileges are granted them. They are not encouraged to attend service in the mosques, but in some instances have their own small places of worship. I have heard of a case in which a woman acted as the Imam to a small gathering of her own sex. The well-known Mohammedan law of polygamy and divorce holds in Persia as in other Mohammedan lands and hence a woman has practically no social rights. Jealousy frequently leads to murder and suicide on the part of woman. Men have been known to murder their wives with impunity and with hardly an effort to conceal their guilt, and that for no crime even alleged. In case of adultery, the husband and his wife's male relatives not infrequently punish the guilty woman with death. Of course adultery on the husband's part goes unpunished. For murdering her husband, a woman was crucified and then strangled

in Ispahan during my residence in Persia. Marriage often takes place when the girl is seven or nine years of age, in accordance with Mohammed's example in his marriage with Ayesha. The evil results of this are well known. The *muta'ah* (called in Persia *sigheh*) system of temporary marriages prevails under religious sanction among the Shiites, in accordance with traditions which they accept and the Sunnis reject. Hence at Qum and other "holy" cities to which crowds of pilgrims resort there are large numbers of women who have devoted themselves to this kind of life, the Mullas and Mujtahids there draw a large part of their income from the fees they receive for celebrating these temporary marriages. It is rare to find a woman who can read. It is hardly necessary to point out that such treatment of women has tended to the moral and social degradation of the other sex. Immorality is one of the great vices of Persia. Lying has been elevated to the dignity of a fine art, owing to the doctrine of *Kitman-ud-din* which is held by the Shiah religious community.

The Behais are far superior in morality to the mass of the Moslems of Persia. Except when the first wife has no children, a man is not allowed a second wife during her lifetime. Even under these circumstances, he is not thought of highly should he take a second wife. Divorce is permitted only for a wife's adultery. The Behais profess to place the Old and New Testaments on the same level as

the Koran and their own books. They are more liberal in their views with regard to women's education, and some Behai women have risen high in the esteem of the members of the sect. Some have become Behai missionaries to their own sect.

There is no political liberty in Persia. The people are not allowed to take any part in politics. The Shah is an absolute monarch and his decrees are the secular law of the country, the only secular law in force. The religious law of Islam is put in force by the Mullahs, so far as they have power and deem it safe to do so. At times the secular rulers have to yield to them and there is always a great distrust of one another between the religious and the secular authorities. Although two systems of law are in force, justice is not to be obtained under either. Every important position under government is sold year by year. No Persian subject's life or property is secure. Oppression is found everywhere; tyranny and injustice are so common as to occasion no surprise. But in these and other respects Persia resembles most other Mohammedan countries. There are no public works. The country is steadily retrograding towards barbarism, though European influence in some slight degree tends in another direction.

The people are intelligent and capable but there is no national system of education. The proportion of those who can read and write is very small and even men in high position have but an imperfect knowledge of orthography. Even the Mullahs

know but little of Arabic, and nothing of any other language but their vernacular. The secular authorities are not anxious for the education of their subjects, and the Mullahs fear education lest their people should "become infidels." Modern Persian literature is scanty and inferior. Yet the people themselves have great respect for learning, and take delight in hearing a book of any kind read aloud. This affords a great opening for the circulation of the Bible and of Christian literature in general. The language is copious and well adapted for the dissemination of Christian truth. One of the greatest obstacles to the spread of the gospel, however, is the great ignorance of the people at large. "Orthodox" Mohammedanism whether Shiite or Sunni, has always been opposed to intellectual progress, since it has been felt that such progress would be fatal to Islam.

The relation in which Islam in Persia stands to Christianity is that of unceasing opposition. The Koranic law which dooms to death any Moslem who embraces any other religion is in force, theoretically at least. The late Shah of Persia at different times published three edicts in favour of religious toleration, but the Mullahs compelled them to be virtually annulled, since they said that no one could repeal the Divine law above referred to. But of recent years the spread of belief in the gospel has resulted in the falling into abeyance of this Koranic law, at least to a great extent. The Moslems of Persia believe Christianity, as it exists

at present, to be an idolatrous and corrupt system of religion. They hold that the gospel has been repealed by the "descent" of the Koran upon Mohammed, and fancy that our Bible has been willfully corrupted both by Jews and Christians. We are accused of worshipping three Gods. Their knowledge of Christianity has, until comparatively recently, been in large measure derived from the commentators on the Koran, and from what they have seen of the worship of the Oriental and Roman Churches. But Protestant missionaries of the American Presbyterian Church and of the Church Missionary Society have already to some extent succeeded in showing them that Evangelical Christianity is not idolatrous. Hence the Persians are gradually coming to make a distinction between the two kinds of Christianity with which they have thus become acquainted; and their attitude towards us has now become much more favourable. Of course those who know anything of the gospel are well aware that Islam is in many respects antagonistic to it, and feel that one or the other must perish. There is not, however, nearly so strong an attachment to Islam in Persia as in India and Arabia. As a religion it is far less suited to the Aryan, than to the Semitic mind. Many Persians are well aware that the religion was forced upon their ancestors at the point of the sword by the Arabs, their hereditary foes. The influence of the Sufi philosophers and poets, like the author of the *Masnavi*, has also been ex-

erted in the direction of destroying faith in Islam. Ali is practically more revered than Mohammed, and in his name not a few ideas have been introduced which are very different from ordinary Mohammedan beliefs. The opposition between the secular and the religious authorities tends to prevent the former from seconding, with any zeal, the efforts of the latter to stamp out Christianity. All these matters have to be considered in attempting to define the attitude of Moslems in Persia towards the Christian faith.

The greatest event in the recent religious history of the country is the rise of the Babi or as we may now call it the Behai, faith. The Behais, generally speaking, are more or less friendly towards Christians, being themselves liable to persecution. Their use of the Bible has done much to spread a knowledge of parts at least of it in Persia. A spirit of enquiry has thus also been produced and this favours the cause of the gospel.

MISSIONS TO MOSLEMS IN PERSIA

The Church Missionary Society, though its work in Persia began later than that of the American Presbyterians, has always aimed at direct work for the conversion of the Mohammedans. The American missionaries, at first and for a considerable time, devoted themselves rather to direct evangelistic work among the Nestorians and Armenians, hoping that they would thus indirectly reach the Moslems. At first doubtless

this was the only possible method of proceeding. For a considerable number of years, however, they too have been labouring openly among the Moslems. Beside there is the "Orient Mission" of Dr. Lepsius. The Archbishop of Canterbury's "Assyrian Mission" has laboured to raise the Nestorian clergy and has endeavoured rather to preserve that ancient church, and prevent its members from leaving it to join the American Presbyterians or the Roman Catholics, than to do work among the Moslems either directly or indirectly. Recently, the Russian Church has won a large accession to its ranks from among the Nestorians; but they do not try to make converts from the Moslems. Nor do the Roman Catholics. Every one knows of Henry Martyn's eleven months in Shiraz in 1811, which was the first publication of the gospel in the country since the Mohammedan conquest. The Rev. Dr. Pfander of the Basel Missionary Society first arrived in Persia in 1829, but was soon expelled. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions began work at Urmia in 1835, its missionaries directing their attention almost entirely to the Nestorians. Tabriz, Teheran, Hamadan and other stations have since been occupied and much blessing has attended their noble and devoted labours. The Church Missionary Society in 1875 formally adopted the work begun in Julfa, near Ispahan, by the Rev. Robert (now Canon) Bruce in 1869. Its work has now greatly ex-



TYPES SEEN IN THE CAUCASUS.

tended and stations have been occupied at Ispahan, Yezd, Kirman and Shiraz. The London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews also has stations at Teheran and Ispahan. Invaluable work is also being done by the British and Foreign and the American Bible Societies.

Mission work in Persia among Moslems presents both difficulties and opportunities of a special kind. Of the former something has been said above. The ignorance of the people, the bigotry of the Mullas, and the presence of corrupt and idolatrous forms of Christianity (such as those which by repelling Mohammed himself in his earlier days of religious earnestness, had a great deal to do with the rise of Islam) are all serious obstacles to overcome. The want of religious liberty and the danger of persecution, though this has lessened of late years, make it difficult for us to preach the gospel freely in some places, and deter converts and enquirers from coming forward as they would otherwise do. The doctrine of *Kitman-ud-din*, which is taught to all Shiites, and is in a slightly modified form accepted by the Behais also, is popular, and believers have sometimes asked to be allowed to adopt Christianity with the same permission to deny or conceal their faith in order to save life and property. This tendency has been firmly and successfully resisted, but it is one of the difficulties peculiar to work in Persia. The law which renders English subjects liable to be sent out of the country by their

consular authorities, if accused of any conduct calculated to cause offense to the religious feelings of Moslems, has once or twice been held *in terrorem* over missionaries, and its terms are so vague that it would not be easy to prove innocence, however false the charge might be. Attempts have actually been made under this law to interfere with the work of American and English missionaries, but these have not been successful for long. There is at present a partiality for Islam, in contradistinction to most other non-Christian faiths, to be met with among people in England, and this does not assist us in our work in Persia. We have not many Europeans in the country and hence the scandal caused by the evil lives of professing Christians does not injure our work to nearly the same extent as is the case in many countries. We are not allowed, generally speaking, to erect churches, to preach in the open air or to publish controversial literature. In many places the Mullas, in some the civil authorities, have opposed our opening schools for Moslem boys. There are many other restrictions of a similar kind, all of which are of the nature of difficulties; but we define difficulties as "things to be overcome" and believe that Christ Jesus can enable us to do all things according to His own will.

The opportunities and encouragements which are afforded for prosecuting the work of the preaching of the gospel in Persia are now very

considerable, perhaps at the present day greater than in any other Mohammedan country. This, however, has been the case only during the last few years. When I succeeded Dr. Bruce as secretary of the Church Missionary Society Persia and Bagdad mission in 1892, it was considered impossible for any Persian to be baptized without almost absolute certainty that he would be put to death. Some of our first converts after that were actually sentenced to death, and others were in the very greatest danger. But for years past the persecution has been lessening. We attribute this largely to the work of medical missions, which have, in addition to more direct results, proved to even our most bigoted opponents that Christianity produces love and good works. It is not too much to say that missionaries are more popular now in Persia than are any other foreigners. For many years Julfa was the only station which the Church Missionary Society could get permission to occupy. It required years of effort to establish our work even in the neighbouring city of Ispahan. To one city, the capital of a province, we have since been warmly invited by the prince governor, and in other places we have been welcomed. It is hardly too much to say that the whole country is open to evangelistic effort, in itinerating and medical mission work especially.

Among the direct results of mission work may be reckoned the opening up of the country at large to the gospel. Converts have not yet been very

numerous, but there are small native Christian communities containing Persian converts, male and female, at every Church Missionary Society station and probably at every station of our American brethren, too. As no attempt is made to gather converts into such centres, but each man, when baptized, is urged to return to his home and there let his light shine before men, there are converts scattered in many other parts of the country. It would not be safe as yet for a Persian convert to be ordained, and the Church Missionary Society missionaries, following the example of our missionaries in Uganda, have decided to pay no Persian catechists for evangelizing their own countrymen. But all the more on this account does the gospel spread through the voluntary efforts of those who have themselves found life and peace in Christ. Their happiness and their changed lives produce a great effect on those who know them. Thus the influence of the gospel is spreading from day to day and prejudice is dying down. For years past the Mullas have been bewailing the fact that, as they say, "the *venom* of Christianity is spreading throughout the land," and they confess that Islam is doomed. At one time they used to preach the necessity of murdering both missionaries and converts as the only way to prevent the steady advance of the gospel, but this is much more rarely done now. Besides those who have been baptized, a considerable number of persons are known to us as secret believers, and



A MOSLEM CONVERT, PERSIA.

we hear of many who are intellectually convinced and who would probably come forward for baptism were religious liberty firmly established in Persia. Thus not only have direct results already been evident but the indirect are still more clear and full of hope and encouragement. That the Church Missionary Society at least fully realizes this, is clear from the very considerable and steady increase in the number of missionaries during the past thirteen years.

Among the most important methods used in spreading the gospel are the following: 1. Medical missions, with male and female doctors and trained nurses. 2. Itinerating. 3. Women's work among the women. 4. Visiting Persians who are friendly, receiving return visits from them, and in all such intercourse plainly and lovingly preaching Christ. 5. Services in missionaries' houses. 6. Friendly discussions with those who come to argue with and try to confute us. This is done lovingly on our part; great patience and courtesy are shown; care is taken to say nothing to hurt the feelings of our opponents, and an attempt is made to show how any truths that are half concealed in Islam are fully manifested in the gospel of Christ. Bitter controversy is carefully avoided. 7. Circulation of the Bible, nearly wholly by sale. 8. Literary work, publication and circulation of tracts and books in Persian. This is greatly aided by the establishment of the Henry Martyn Memorial Press at Julfa. 9. Careful teaching and

testing of enquirers and the preparation of candidates for baptism.

[Conditions vary in different parts of Persia. This is seen from the two paragraphs here appended to Dr. St. Clair Tisdall's scholarly article. The first of these paragraphs is written by the Rev. S. Wilson, and the second by the Rev. S. M. Jordan, both missionaries of the American Presbyterian Board and both long acquainted with northern Persia.—EDS.]

(a) A number of things might be mentioned in addition to the above, and new phases of the work which have developed in the six years since Dr. Tisdall left Persia. One of the most striking is the opportunity now afforded for education of Moslems. Dr. Tisdall, while mentioning in the last section nine ways of reaching Moslems, omits the school, whereas that is now one of the most hopeful means. For example in Teheran the mission school, which two years ago had forty or fifty Moslem boys, last year had one hundred and fifteen Moslem pupils, receiving regular Bible instruction and attending the religious services of the school. In Tabriz the Moslem pupils in the Memorial Training, Theological Schools, of which I am principal, have increased in three years from three to fifty. These Moslems are sons of officials and nobles of both cities, whose coming to our schools gives assurance that there will be no inter-

ference with them. The same is true in Urmia, where, even in the midst of the excitement due to the demand for the punishment of the murderers of Rev. Mr. Labaree, a special school for Moslem boys was opened with an attendance of fifty. The school for girls in Urmia has an attendance of thirty-five, and that of Teheran of twenty-five Moslem girls who have broken through the restraints of the harem to seek an education under Christian influence. These facts are indications of our large increase of liberty and of opportunity for Moslem work.

(b) So far as I know, none of the missionaries of Northern Persia share Dr. St. Clair Tisdall's opinion that the Behais are more open to the gospel than Moslems. In fact many consider them much less so, for although they profess to accept the whole Bible, yet, by their allegorical interpretation and denial of all miracles, they effectually change its meaning. Having incorporated into their books some of the moral precepts of Christ, and having adopted a semi-Christian vocabulary, they delight to discourse at length on love, on a tree being known by its fruits, and on kindred themes; but having left out Christ, the centre, they have missed the essential thing, and now in Persia they are notorious as being religious in word rather than in deed. In fact many of them are simply irreligious rationalists.

By neither Moslem, Jew, nor Christian are they considered morally superior to the Moslems, while

in some respect they rightly are judged less so. Up to some five years ago they professed to be seekers of the truth wherever found. Since that time the Behais in Teheran, at least, have been warned to have nothing to do with the missionaries.

They have grossly exaggerated the number of their converts so that the Moslems now say of them that the Behai claims for a convert every man who speaks to him on the street! I know that they have so claimed two of our missionaries. In Teheran there are not more than 10,000 to 15,000, while the outside figure for all Persia is 200,000, with the probability that half that number is nearer the truth.

The one promising aspect of the movement is that it is an opening wedge, making for religious liberty and a disturber of unquestioning faith in Islam. Many of those stirred up by Behais to seek for truth outside of Islam are not satisfied with the mere husk of the letter which the Behais teach and so continue to seek for the spirit which can be found only in Christianity.

The increase of numbers in our schools is in part due to the fact that many Moslem parents prefer that their children come under Christian rather than Behai influence, which is rife in other schools of the capital, for we are honestly open in our methods whilst they are the reverse.

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