



How I Became a Bahá'í

Bábís in the Woods

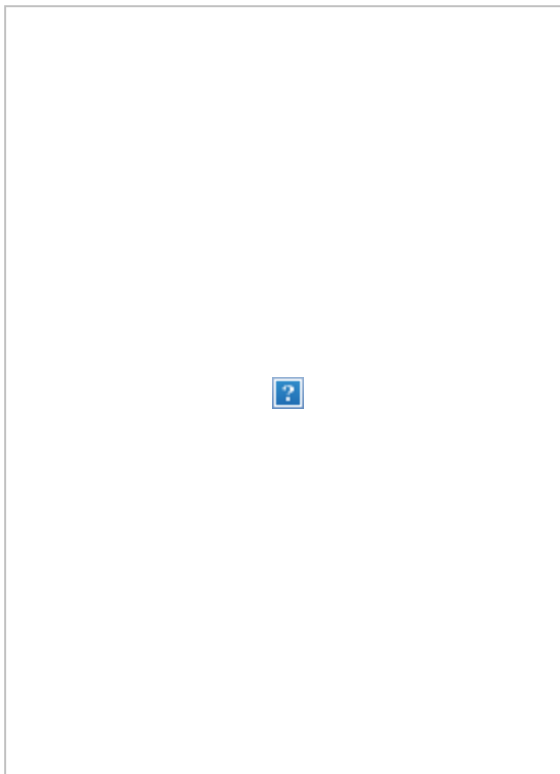
WE CHILDREN always had to sit on the front pew of the church during Mass, where the priest could keep an eye on us. By the age of fifteen, however, I had managed to move to near the back door, apparently by mutual agreement. It is not that I was less intent in my devotions by that time but rather my presence in the body of the congregation seemed to annoy the other worshippers and their obvious distaste for me put me off my devotions. I had always been a bit of a scruff. At that time I dressed in blue jeans and black leather biker's jacket, and in 1968 that was an anachronism because everyone else my age was into the Beatles. When I finally found myself sitting on a pew on my own, my faith broke. I not only rejected the congregation which had rejected me, I rejected the church which housed it. I decided that God could not reside in such a place, and since my religious upbringing had been Catholic, in rejecting the church I had no option but to reject God too. My atheism lasted less than

a fortnight. After this time I admitted to myself that God does exist and that means that there must be some form of guidance out there somewhere. I started to look for it.

I spent the next few years reading about various religions and visiting different faith groups. They mostly had something to offer but all had packages which I could not accept in their entirety. Around this time a new weekly magazine was launched called "Man, Myth and Magic" that claimed to cover all the religious beliefs of the world and which built up into an encyclopaedia, so I subscribed to it. In this I found an article on the Bahá'í Faith written by Philip Hainsworth. I read it avidly. It talked of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, and briefly explained the principles of the Faith. Here, I thought was a package I could accept – well almost.

From my previous experience I recognised that the Founders of the world's religions brought pure teachings, but these could be altered or corrupted by later figures. So I ignored all the later figures in the article and concentrated on the Báb. (Besides, this name

was easier to remember and I even knew how to pronounce it.) I decided I would become a follower of the Báb until I found something better. By this time I had evolved from my rocker image to become a hippy. It was 1969 and Scotland was beginning to experience the influence of the peace and love culture. My new-found dress sense still caused me to be looked on with disdain by most of the people around me, but there was a growing body



The author, on the right, on his way to a Feast, in 1976

of individuals who would embrace me and ask “Hi man, what are you into?” My answer was that I was “into” the Báb. By the summer of 1970 I had a group of about half a dozen people who shared my interest.

That summer I persuaded a friend that we should hitchhike from Glasgow to Guernsey, in the Channel Islands. So, with my boots on my feet and an old army blanket as a bedroll, we started out to travel across this land. We made good time as far as Weymouth (about four days), meeting some good people along the way and telling anyone who was interested about the Báb. At Weymouth we boarded a ferry for Guernsey. The boat stopped at Jersey en route and we decided to get off and look around. We deposited our packs in the left luggage office at the quay and walked around for an hour or so. When we returned to reembarc we discovered that the luggage office was closed and we had to watch the boat sail away without us. My friend was not amused but I was philosophical. What difference would another day make? Later that evening we retrieved our packs and slept on the beach.

We woke the next morning surrounded by sunbathers so I unwrapped my blanket, undid my shirt and tried to blend in. Along the beach came a string of hippies who somehow saw through our disguise and joined us for a pow-wow. It transpired that they had been ordered to leave the island by the last boat that evening and they invited us to join in their going away party. By the time we all got on the boat and were sailing happily for Guernsey I had been persuaded to join them in their proposed trip to Mevagissey in Cornwall. I spent a difficult hour convincing my friend that we should stay on the boat when it reached Guernsey, go all the way back to Weymouth and then hitch another 300 miles along the south coast of England to a little fishing port neither of us had ever heard of. He was even less amused. As there were about a dozen of us it was decided that we should split up in groups of two or three for the hitch to Cornwall. My unhappy companion and I set out once again on our travels.

Three hard days of silence (interspersed with recrimination) later we arrived in Mevagissey and my ex-friend had decided that he no longer wished to associate with me (though his terminology was more colourful). I looked around for the others, but as far as I know they never arrived. I never saw them again.

Finding myself alone and friendless in a small fishing town with a damp bedroll and a few pounds in my pocket I decided things could only get better. A lot of hippies had congregated in Cornwall that year, most of them sleeping rough in bivouac shelters they had constructed in the woods around Mevagissey. I met three guys from Welwyn Garden City who took pity on me and offered me a place in their “bivvy” for a few nights.

So that night I found myself in a damp shelter in the woods above Mevagissey with three strangers who wanted to know “what I was into?” I told them about the Báb.

Unbeknown to me, a group of Bahá’í travel teachers had set up a teaching group in a caravan in the town a week before. They recognised that the large group of disparate (desperate looking) hippies offered a unique teaching opportunity for their endeavours, but the hippies would not engage with the Bahá’ís. The travel teachers had decided to hold a 24 hour prayer vigil, seeking guidance on how to make contact with these groups. The day of the prayer vigil was the day I spent with the group from Jersey being persuaded to make this trip to Mevagissey.

The next morning I went down to town in a futile effort to find my erstwhile friends. In the evening I returned to the bivvy in the dark. As I approached the spot I saw a group of figures sitting round a campfire. There sat my three rescuers and two strangers, deep in conversation. As I approached the firelight an American voice said: “You must be the Bábí.” “Yes,” I replied, “are you interested in hearing about Him?” “We know of Him,” the American said. “We have something to tell you.”

The strangers were Bahá’í travel teachers, Dinney from California and Mandy from Wales. They had met my three new friends in town and when they started talking of the Faith, my friends mentioned that they had met me the day before, they knew about the

Báb, but had not heard of the Bahá'í Faith. Dinney and Mandy were amazed to hear that a feral Bábí was living in the woods above Mevagissey and asked if they could come and meet me that evening.

And so I got to hear more about the Bahá'í Faith and was invited to meet the other Bahá'ís the following day. For about a week I hung out with the group, joining them in travel teaching trips round the area and acting as the catalyst they had been praying for. At one point, on a trip to St Blazey, I said to someone, "Why do you still call me the Bábí? I'm one of you." He sprang up and ran into another room, returning with a Declaration Card. I read it and signed it right away. Everyone got very excited and hugged and kissed me. Needless to say, I asked if I could sign another one.

I never met Dinney or Mandy again after that week but I heard many years later, from an unremembered source, that they got married and were living in California. If anyone knows of their current address I would like to get in touch with them.

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