

Baha'ism and Christianity; or, The Religion of 'The Splendour of God.'

BY THE REVEREND T. CROUTHER GORDON, D.F.C., B.D., PITLOCHRY.

ONE night, not very long ago, I was walking along a street in Haifa, and the glory of the Eastern night was shining down, when, lifting my eyes to the heights of Carmel, a clear white light shone forth from high up the side of the mountain. It was an exceptionally brilliant electric lamp, fixed on top of a flat building, and the beam shot across the Bay of Akka, and met half-way the light that streamed from a house on the outskirts of Akka. The first light was streaming from the Tomb of Abdu'l-Baha'. The second shone from the Prison and Tomb of his father, Baha'u'llah. Out of the star-spangled sky the light burst forth through the dim darkness, and in like manner, out of the gloom of the grovelling Arab life, out of the blankness of Syrian thought, dawns forth the faith of 'The Splendour of God.' For here in Haifa is the centre of a new 'ism.' Slowly but surely the number of the Baha'is is increasing, and in Persia and America and in Britain the followers of this new faith can be numbered by the million. It is worth while for men who are interested in religion to pay some attention to the movement.

Who was the founder of this new faith? Strange to say, it began with all the portents of a fresh Christianity. It had a John the Baptist. Mirza Ali Mohammed, a youth of twenty-four, began to announce in 1844 in Persia that he was the 'Bab,' or Gate, that prepared the way for a still greater prophet from God. This greater spirit would bring in the new era that was about to dawn. And yet so very narrow were the Muslims of Persia, that the hand of persecution never left the Bab; and, though he proclaimed a spirit of love and union and righteousness, he came to a martyr's death in Tabriz in 1850. Like the fiery John, his course was short and sharp and rough, but he left his greater spirit among his disciples.

The 'Splendour,' in fact, was two years older than his forerunner. He had the best blood of Persia coursing in his veins, but it was now mellowed and matured into the spirit of the liberal heart. But liberal heart or no, he soon entered the valley of malice, and suffered for what he believed to be right. His life in Teheran was made insupportable, and with some followers he was removed to Baghdad. Like Christ he found a long time in the soothing

silence of the desert an urgent need. Returning to Baghdad after two years, so charged was his soul with wisdom and grace that the old city was stirred, and to avoid turmoil the King of Persia had to arrange his transference to Constantinople. This was in 1863. On the outskirts of Baghdad was a beautiful garden, the pride of Najib Pasha, and here the 'Splendour' lingered for some days till his caravan was ready, and here he cheered his dejected followers by the news that he himself and none other was the 'Baha'u'llah,' 'The Splendour of God.' It is typical of the new spirit that such glad words should fall on men's ears in the glory and beauty of a garden. Somehow one feels the grace and charm of the new era coming down through the flowers. Visit the tombs of both the great leaders and the scent of pure white blossoms carries to the brain the fragrance of Paradise. It cannot be other. It is the ethos of the faith. And it is very alluring. But there in that sweet Persian garden the departing exile struck joy and fervour into drooping hearts. The secret was told that 'The Splendour of God' was treading the soil of our common earth, and his men felt it good to be alive.

So across the desert to Europe he was taken, but even in Europe the power of a holy life was too much to combat, and at last a safe and secluded prison was found in Akka. From 1868 till his death this caged spirit made his prison a very paradise, for men came to him from all parts and sat at his feet for the soothing of his words and the sublimity of his faith. Yet still the dogged spirit of the world hunted him down, and he and his kind had few comforts about them. But finally it sunk upon even the spirit of bigotry that no danger lurked here, and he was allowed to live in a house on the outskirts of Akka, and there in the shade of trees he lived, and still lies there in his silent tomb. Treading on borrowed ground, for he had passed the allotted span of threescore years and ten, he died in 1892, leaving behind him no less than half a million hearts that gave him full allegiance.

But if he was different from the Christ in living to a good round age, he was different also in leaving behind him a son who carried on the spirit of the message. His son took the title of 'The Servant

of the Splendour,' and, armed with the full credentials of deputed authority and intimate experience of the leadership, he never wavered from carrying on the teaching of his father, and he spread the cause by repeated visits to Europe and America. He claimed the full authority of his father, and he alone was able to interpret his writings when any doubt arose. But there was no arrogance in the son. Even more than the father, he showed that grace and charm, that breadth of sympathy and deep human love that went to the utmost limit in the service of the world. At first some disappointed sycophants brought false charges against him, and induced the Turkish Government to restrict his liberty, but by 1908 he was again a free man. By 1911 he had addressed large audiences in London and Paris, and in the following year he was putting the claims of the new faith before American hearers, ever stressing the alluring ethic, and screening the dogmatic side of the religion in the beautiful mysticism of Oriental language. Then came the War, and, though a Muslim of the Shi'ah sect, he wrought hard to cultivate the land about Tiberias. In this way he saved many from starvation. His life during these days was one constant effort after the welfare of others, and so unselfish were his motives, so potent his influence for good, that he was honoured with a Knighthood of the British Empire. His death in 1921 evoked tokens of universal admiration.

And again, the movement is not without its leader, for the eldest grandson of the 'Servant of the Splendour' is the acknowledged head of the new faith, and to-day is propagating its tenets with undiminished zeal.

But what are these tenets? What new revelation has this prophet given? What fresh conception of God has he flung forth out of the travail of his spiritual strife? Coming as the new faith does out of the heart of Islam, it is not surprising that it lays down the Unity of God as its primal tenet. There is One God. But what is more interesting is the other tenet that there is only one religion. Each religious leader has taught his faith to meet the needs of his age, but at bottom all religions are the same. There is and can be only one religion. The differences in religion are explained by the peculiar needs of each age, and every religion has done something to lift humanity. And because we are moving from age to age, and because truth is infinite, there can be no final revelation. Religion consists in revering all the prophets. In his last Will and Testament the Founder says of religions, 'Lo! All are of God.' There is a

third unity that lies at the basis of Baha'ism, and completes it, and it is the Unity of Mankind. We are all brothers. 'Glory is not his who loves his country, but his who loves his kind.' 'Ye must be as one soul in many bodies,' says the Founder in another place. Not only are men brothers one of another, but men and women are equal. There is no superiority of men over women in this new faith. And this, viewed, as it ought to be, in the Muslim background, is a very bold tenet to hold. I remember having a conversation with Madame Jellal, the sister of the present leader, Shoghi Effendi, one lovely summer morning in her house in Haifa. We two were the only ones in the room, and we spoke without reserve of the points of the faith, she without her Muslim veil, and I with uncovered head. It was a daring thing for her to do in the midst of so many fanatical Muslims. But it was a tenet of her faith. The unity of mankind deals the death-blow to all prejudices, religious, racial, and class. 'The ignorant one is not to be despised because he lacks knowledge. He must be trained, treated, educated, and assisted in love.'

Although there is a strong appeal in Baha'ism to the finer emotions, there is likewise an appeal to the higher intelligence. The search after Truth is imperative. Faith is good, but it must have reason as its other wing, for only thus can the bird of humanity fly. 'It cannot fly with one wing alone. If it tries to fly with the one wing of religion alone, it will land in the slough of superstition, and if it tries to fly with the wing of science alone, it will end in the dreary bog of materialism.' And just because of this sweep of the intellect the Founder of the faith saw far into the international problems that were arising. He openly proclaimed the need for a League of Nations, and he clamoured insistently for an international language such as Esperanto. The training of the intellect, he preached, was of prime importance, not so much in science and the arts as in the facts and messages of the prophets, for the prophets are 'the greatest educators of mankind.' Baha'u'llah says in his Tablet of Tajalliyat, 'To acquire knowledge is incumbent upon all, but of those sciences which may profit the people of the earth, and not such as begin in mere words, and end in mere words.'

A message too lies in Baha'ism for the modern world of industry. The old pagan doctrine of 'laborare est orare' is revived. Work is a religious duty. 'The Servant of the Splendour' says: 'In the Baha'i cause arts, sciences, and all crafts are counted as worship. The man who makes

a piece of notepaper to the best of his ability, conscientiously, concentrating all his forces on perfecting it, is giving praise to God. Leaving aside the question of whether this is new or old, no one can dispute that the message is needed. Another theme in industry was touched on by Abdu'l-Baha, when he visited Paris. 'The arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty will disappear. We see amongst us men who are overburdened with riches on the one hand, and on the other those unfortunate ones who starve with nothing. This condition of affairs is wrong and must be remedied. . . . The rich must give of their abundance; they must soften their hearts and cultivate a passionate intelligence, taking thought for those sad ones who are suffering from lack of the very necessities of life.' In America he made a strong appeal for the Abolition of Industrial Slavery. Arbitration is the secret.

And yet this new form of the world religion, attentive as it is to the needs of the modern world, remains true to the deepest religious temper, for on no point is it more insistent than that of holiness. The one need of man is devotion to God. The full impetus of Persian mysticism is felt in all the classics of the Baha'i faith. In his Words of Wisdom, the Founder says:

'The source of all good is trust in God, submission to His command, and contentment with His Holy Will and Pleasure.

'The essence of religion is to testify to that which the Lord hath revealed, and follow that which He hath ordained in His mighty Book.

'The essence of love is for man to turn his heart to the Beloved One and sever himself from all else but Him, and desire naught save that which is the desire of his Lord.'

It is clearly represented that God was revealing new truth through the Founder and his son, and the works which he has left are evidence of God's will. While the Baha was in Baghdad in A.D. 1857, there was revealed to him from God the book of 'Hidden Words.' The purest mysticism comes out in the following quotations:

'In My love is thy happiness, and in communion with Me is thy paradise.'

'If My will thou seekest regard not thine own, so shalt thou die in Me, and I live in thee.'

'Wert thou to run through the wilderness of Infinity, and speed throughout the plains of Heavens, thou shalt find no rest save in obedience to Our command and humbleness before Our Face.'

'The sincere lover longs for suffering, even as the rebel craves for forgiveness, and the sinner prays for mercy.'

'Hast thou ever heard of the Beloved and the stranger dwelling in the same heart? Then send away the stranger that the Beloved may enter into His abode.'

The machinery of the revelations is interesting. The messages that came to the prophet were read from Tablets 'preserved behind the veil of divine protection.' There is continually throughout the writings the use of the plural of majesty, which is one of the features of the Koran itself. And ever and again, to one who knows the original of the Koran, there is a kind of conscious imitation. Little wonder that the orthodox Muslim refused to tolerate such revelations. But whether the machinery is like that of the Koran or not, we ought not to blind ourselves to the very pure religion that breathes through each thought of the leaders of Baha'ism. It must rank as the highest expression of true faith that has emerged from the crass kernel of Islam.

The Baha, however, was a prophet in the most dangerous sense of the term. He did actually foretell events. A new age is dawning. He believed not only that

Each age is an age that is dying
Or one that is coming to birth,

but that we are standing on the threshold of a new stage in the life of humanity. Interpreting his father's prophecy, the Abdu'l-Baha says:

'In this marvellous cycle the earth will be transformed and humanity arrayed in peace and beauty. Disputes, quarrels, and murders will be replaced by harmony, truth, and concord; among the nations . . . love and amity will appear. Universal peace will raise its tent in the centre of the earth. Strong and weak, rich and poor, antagonistic sects and hostile nations, which are like the wolf and the lamb . . . will act toward each other with the most complete love, friendship, justice, and fairness. The world will be filled with science, with the knowledge of the reality of the mysteries of beings, and with the knowledge of God.'

It would be foolish to deny that this new faith has many merits. It would be unwise to shut our ears to its message for our age. It has a sweet morality, and uses no special propaganda. It has won many adherents through the power of its ethic alone, and it provides the atmosphere for fine spiritual culture. But sooner or later one must solve the problem, or at least try to solve it, of the relation of this Baha'ism to the Christian faith, and Dr. Esslemont has made a powerful plea for the claims of Baha'ism upon all earnest Chris-

tians. From an examination of the New Testament he lays down the three positions :

1. That Christians ought to expect the advent of further prophets, both true and false.
2. That it is incumbent upon Christians to examine the claim of any one professing prophethood, applying the simple but searching tests laid down by Jesus and John.
3. That if a prophet meets these tests satisfactorily, and thus proves his claim, it is a Christian duty to turn to him, accept his message and obey his instructions.

The first proposition is arrived at by the twofold method of showing, on the one hand, the awfulness of treating Baha' as the Jews treated Christ, and, on the other hand, by giving a favourable meaning to certain sayings of Christ. It would be a very easy matter to show that Jesus claims for Himself a unique and unparalleled position as the Son of God. According to the New Testament, He was 'only begotten.' But more than this, the heart of the gospel is that it meets every need in the human heart. Christ satisfies completely. That is what has made Christianity so confident. And to say that Christians must always be looking for further word from God is to say that Jesus Christ has left something undone. Christian experience goes to show that no further prophet is needed to go beyond the teaching of Jesus. No one can keep true to the New Testament and hold at the same time that another prophet, no matter how beautiful, shares with Christ the honour of His unique sonship.

The second proposition, which does not depend on the first, is worth taking on its own merits. Let us apply the tests of Jesus. And first we should recall that when Jesus refers to prophets, He does not refer to His own equals, men who occupy the same exalted position as Himself, but He treats of those humbler men who have a passing message for a passing age, men like Amos and Hosea and Isaiah and Micah. This appears in Christ's reference to John, where He says, 'But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet.'

Jesus' first test is that the person shall come in His name. This is not the final test, for 'many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many,' but it is a good test that 'every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God.' It is urged that 'it will not be enough for us to say we accept Christ, if we reject those who come after Him in the name of the Lord.' But here there is ambiguity. If

Dr. Esslemont means God, by the term 'Lord,' it is bad New Testament scholarship. If he means Christ by 'Lord,' then patently Baha does not come in the name of Jesus Christ, since he was a follower of Mohammed.

But the essential claim to prophethood lies, one would imagine, in the modern application of the message. There is always this note of novelty in prophecy. It is for the times. But what is there in Baha'ism that is not already in Christianity? To be quite frank, I cannot find one single item in its programme that differs from the message of Christianity that is being given from thoughtful minds. Arbitration, the spirit of humanity, the equality of men and of sex, the claim of each man to realize himself, education for all, social problems—the need for piety, what new thing is there in these that we have not got in a much simpler and clearer form in Christianity? Nor have we the unhealthy and hectic optimism that talks glibly of universal peace. Not by a mild morality shall the world be saved, and when finality is cut off, as it is by Baha'ism, the note of conviction departs. Christianity has nothing to learn from Baha'ism in the ethical sphere, and has little to learn from its cheap and easy evolutionism. Abdu'l-Baha himself says, 'Know that the principles of Christianity and the commandments of Baha'u'llah are identical, and that their paths are the same.' And it certainly looks as if in his interpretation of his father's religion, the son cast his eye more than once on the Christian system.

But Baha'ism is a sweet and noble religion. If it can bring men to a saner view of life, and assist in the disentanglement of modern problems, let it have a wide welcome. It is charged with a winsome ethic. It is suffused with a gracious spirit. And yet somehow one lacks that living fire of devotion to a leader that so dominated those hearts that first heard the words, 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.'

The cool and beautiful gardens that surround the old prison-house of the 'Baha' in Akka are the glory of all his followers, and like him they come and sit in the shade of the overspreading trees, sheltered from the burning heat of the sun and sand, and like him they never think that the gardens are watered by an unseen aqueduct stretching for many miles under the cool earth, an aqueduct built there nineteen hundred years ago. What if, after all, these blossoming spirits have been living on the unnoticed waters that burst fresh from the spirit of Jesus?