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## Tahirih Qurratul-ayn

Tahirih (The Pure One), also known as Qurratul-ayn (Consolation of the Eyes), was a leading figure in the Babi movement, the only woman among the "Letters of the Living" (the first and highest-ranking group of the Bab's disciples). Tahirih is considered the outstanding woman of the Babi religion and was regarded by the Babis as the return of Fatima bint Muhammad, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad, from whom she was descended through her mother. Her holiness may be thought to reside, at least partly, in the compelling manner in which she interpreted the sacred role of Fatima. She has become for many Iranian women a symbol and icon of the women's movement. For Baha'is she has come to symbolize their concern for the equality of women and social action, and girls are frequently named after her.

Tahirih was born in the Iranian city of Qazvin to a family of leading Islamic clerics in 1817. From her earliest years, she showed extraordinary abilities, memorizing the Koran and grasping abstruse points of religious law and theology. She was also very beautiful and a talented poetess. She was married to her cousin and had four children. She became an enthusiastic supporter of the teachings of Sheikh Ahmad al-Ahsai, despite the fact that her husband and father-in-law were virulent enemies of the sheikh. Eventually, in 1843, Tahirih left for Karbala to meet with Sayyid Kazim Rashti, the successor to Sheikh Ahmad. Unfortunately, Sayyid Kazim had died by the time Tahirih arrived, but, with his wife's permission, she set up in Sayyid Kazim's home and continued his teaching circle, teaching the men from behind a curtain.

In 1844, news reached her of the claims of the Bab and she immediately accepted these, becoming one of the 18 Letters of the Living. She began to teach this message in Karbala. At the end of 1847, she was arrested and sent to Baghdad, where she resided at the home of the mufti of Baghdad. The Ottoman authorities decided to expel her and she returned to Qazvin. Here, she was involved in further confrontations with her father-in-law and husband, which ended in their divorce. When in October 1847 her father-in-law was murdered, her husband accused Tahirih of complicity in the crime, and her life was in danger until Baha'u'llah, founder of the Baha'i faith, arranged for her removal from Qazvin.

Tahirih attended the Conference of Badasht in summer 1848, at which most of the leading Babis were present. Here she proclaimed the advent of a new religious dispensation by appearing unveiled. Shortly after this conference she was arrested and held at the home of the *kalantar* (mayor) of Tehran. She captivated her captors and succeeded in converting to Babism some women from the highest reaches of society, including a royal princess. In 1852, Tahirih, at the age of 35, was strangled and her body thrown into a well.

### Moojan Momen and B. Todd Lawson

#### Further Reading

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