

8. BAHÁ'U'LLAH AND THE FOURTH ESTATE

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IT is little known in the West among students and adherents of the Baha'i Faith that Bahá'u'llah addressed Himself to the public press. It is necessary to set aside squeamishness to depict the circumstances which brought about His doing so.

A spring day in Yazd, a Persian city dating from the fifth century, the seat of numerous mosques, an important centre for the production of silk carpets. It was the 19th of May, 1891.

Exhilarated by the violence it had witnessed, the excited mob called for the shedding of more blood of the hated Bahá'ís. Only two victims remained, young brothers in their early twenties.

Already the crowd had been treated to a thrilling spectacle. A young man of twenty-seven, 'Alí-Aşghar, had been strangled and his body dragged through the streets to the accompaniment of drums and trumpets. Then Mullá Mihdi, a man in his eighty-fifth year, had been beheaded and his corpse hauled in similar manner to another quarter of the city where a considerable throng of onlookers, their frenzy mounting with the music, witnessed the decapitation of Áqá 'Ali, the youthful brother-in-law of the two young men who had thus far escaped harm. From there the people rushed to yet another sector of Yazd where they relished the sight of Mullá 'Alí-i-Sabzivári having his throat slashed. They then fell upon his body, hacking it to pieces with a spade while he was still alive, and pounded his skull to a pulp with stones. At the moment he was seized he had been addressing the tumultuous gathering, exhorting them to recognize the truth of the New Day, fully aware of his imminent martyrdom and glorying in it. Then, in yet another quarter, the townsfolk rejoiced in slaying Muhammad Baqir.

It is reasonable to feel compassion for this rabble. Theirs was a profound and manipulable ignorance easily inflamed by fanatical rhetoric and capable, with encouragement from figures of authority, of finding expression in acts of depravity and barbarism. The calculating would be among them—those with

vested interests, fearful of loss of power and office—and ruffians and idle thrill-seekers; but no doubt many of their number were utterly convinced that their actions were meritorious in the sight of God, would win the approval of His Prophet and priests, and secure their position in the all-important after-life. And so their sincere devotion led them to participate in these murders of supposed, enemies of the established order. It is a classic example of what scholars of the phenomenon call 'enantiodromea', the principle by which any extreme—even virtue—if pushed to the limit, grotesquely crosses over into its opposite.

Five had died. But two young men remained and these were to receive the full force of the crowd's savage fury. The music grew wilder, drowning the shouts of the swirling mob which propelled the youths brutally to the public square, Maydán-i-Khán, where an especially theatrical fate, matched to the mood of the crowd, awaited them.

The youths, sons of Áqá Husayn-i-Káshání, known as Baktáshí, were silk weavers. They had been raised by affectionate parents and had always lived close to the bosom of their family. Everything about them was conventional for that time and place save that they and their parents had embraced the Faith of Baha'u'llah. It was this circumstance which brought them to the horrific scene on that spring day in Yazd. The young men, with the five other Bahá'ís whose deaths they had just witnessed, had gathered for a meeting when a surprise raid was conducted on the house and all were carried off. It is said that some ill-disposed neighbours had alerted the authorities. Good citizens, these, for the pogrom had been instigated by the mujtahid of the city, Shaykh Hasan-i-Sabzivári, acting on instructions of the Governor, Jalalu'd-Dawlih, and the slaughter of the victims—sanctioned sport for the Muslim populace—could be averted only by their denial of faith. The seven were, in a caricature of trial, invited to renounce their religion. How can the true believer barter or dissemble? Having spurned the offer, all seven were condemned to death

and surrendered to the executioner and the mob who were eager to aid him in his grisly task.

The elder brother, age twenty-three, bore the same name as his friend who had died earlier that day—'Alí-Aşghar. He had recently married and was the father of an infant daughter. The younger, Muhammad Ḥasan, age twenty-one, has been described by those who knew him as a youth of extreme beauty, delicacy and masculine grace. The official executioner, Afrasiyab, and the chief constable, Mubárah-Khán, had been urged by the Governor to spare Muhammad Ḥasan's life, if possible, by persuading the young man to recant. Were he to do so, he would be welcomed at the residence of the Governor and showered with favours.

'Alí-Aşghar was dealt with first. Having swiftly affirmed his refusal to recant, he was beheaded. Then it was his younger brother's turn. The Governor's enticement was extended by the constable to the handsome young man from whom it drew an impatient reply: 'Hurry up! My friends have all preceded me! Do what you are charged to do!' He was then decapitated. In a burst of showmanship—playing to the cheering crowd—the executioner slit open the boy's stomach, plucked out the heart, liver and intestines, and held them aloft. This exhibitionist gesture inspired the audience to commit further atrocities. The head of Muhammad Ḥasan was impaled on a spear and paraded through the city—again with the accompaniment of music—and suspended on a mulberry tree. The multitude stoned it so viciously that the skull was broken. His body was then cast before the door of his mother's house. Some women darted from the crowd, danced into the room where the mother sat, and mocked her. Pieces of the boy's flesh were carried away to be used as a medicament. Then the head of Muhammad Ḥasan was attached to the lower part of his body and borne with the remains of the other martyrs to the outskirts of the city where they were pelted with stones and finally thrown into a pit in the plain of Salsabil.

The elder brother, 'Alí-Aşghar, was not spared ignominy. In an especially cruel gesture, the crowd carried his head to the home of his mother and cast it into the room where

she sat with her son's young wife. The mother arose, bathed her son's head, and set it outside, admonishing her jeering torturers not to attempt to return to her what she had given to God.

The frenzy had at last reached its climax, and now a carnival atmosphere prevailed. The Governor declared a public holiday and by his order the shops were closed. When evening came the city was illuminated and the populace gave itself over to festivities.

The name of the mother of the two young men has not come down to us; we know her only as Umm-i-Shahíd, the mother of the martyr, though she lost more than one member of her family that day. But the magnificence of her gesture will fire the imagination of generations to come. She lived on into the period of the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and received from Him at least one Tablet extolling her courage and fortitude, and consoling her in her loss. The young widow of 'Alí-Aşghar, Sakinih Sulţán, chose not to remarry, though she had offers and was urged to do so. Apprised of her plight, 'Abdu'l-Bahá invited her and her infant daughter, Fátimih Jan, to come to the Holy Land where she had the bounty of serving in His household.

Thus all seven lost their lives. It was not, alas, the only occasion upon which a septet of believers was slain in Yazd; similar episodes occurred in July 1955 and as recently as September 1980. There were also many isolated martyrdoms in that city over the years, and an especially devastating upheaval took place in 1903 when many Bahá'ís lost their lives in various ways, including stabbing and axeing, and one even being shot from a cannon by a direct order of Jalal'ud-Dawlih, the Governor. Bahá'u'lláh stigmatized this man—son of Zillu's-Sultan 'The Internal Tree', and grandson of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh—as 'The Tyrant of Yazd'.

The deaths of the seven plunged Bahá'u'lláh, then living out the penultimate year of His life in the mansion of Bahji, into profound grief. The late Hand of the Cause H. M. Balyuzi, in *Baha'u'llah, the King of Glory*, recounts:

'When news of the death of the Seven Martyrs of Yazd reached them, it brought great sorrow to Bahá'u'lláh. Hájí Mirza Ḥabíbu'lláh [a great-nephew of the wife of the

Báb] writes that for nine days all revelation ceased and no one was admitted into His presence, until on the ninth day they were all summoned. The deep sorrow that surrounded Him . . . was indescribable. He spoke extensively about the Qájárs and their deeds. Afterwards, He mentioned the events of Yazd; thus sternly did the Tongue of Grandeur speak of Jalalu'd-Dawlih and Zillu's-Sultán . . . Then He said: *Do not be sad, do not be downcast, do not let your hearts bleed. The sacred tree of the Cause of God is watered by the blood of the martyrs. A tree, unless watered, does not grow and bear fruit . . .*'

Bahá'u'llah also revealed a Tablet, as yet not fully translated into English, honouring the seven martyrs. Sometimes popularly referred to as the 'Tablet to *The Times*' because of its reference to the most respected and influential newspaper of the day—*The Times* of London—it is a document of astonishing power. The tone is one of impassioned anguish, the 'Tongue of Grandeur' giving divine expression to our human responses, reflecting even our indignation and bewilderment, our sense of outrage and inconsolableness. Specific reference is made to the two young brothers and an unusually full description is given of their torture and martyrdom. The Governor's offer of protection for the younger man is mentioned and even the sector of the square where the youths died is named. Such atrocities, Bahá'u'lláh exclaims, have not been witnessed in the past nor will again be seen in future. He describes the mutilating of the bodies, alludes to the reward given to the executioner, the taunting and reviling of the families of the victims, the parading of the head on spear-point through the streets to celebratory musical accompaniment, the lighting of the city by night, the festival air which prevailed. God knows, He laments, what the oppressed innocents suffered.

Then He calls upon the public press of the world—newspapers, in the Bahá'í Revelation are exhorted by Bahá'u'lláh to mirror truth, and all those responsible for their production 'to be sanctified from malice, passion and prejudice, to be just and fair-minded, to be painstaking in their enquiries, and ascertain all the facts in every situation'—to take note of these happenings, to launch an enquiry, to faithfully record these facts and, in effect, to

aid in awakening human consciousness to these sacrifices. The Tablet was not delivered to *The Times* (nor perhaps was intended to be), but in the following excerpt that newspaper is singled out, it would seem, as representative of the rational spirit of enquiry, of all that is true, praiseworthy and humane in Western thought:

O 'Times', O thou endowed with the power of utterance! O dawning place of news! Spend an hour with the oppressed of Írán, and witness how the exemplars of justice and equity are sorely tried beneath the sword of tyrants. Infants have been deprived of milk, and women and children have fallen captive to the lawless. The blood of God's lovers hath dyed the earth red, and the sighs of His near ones have set the universe ablaze.

O assemblage of rulers, ye are the manifestations of power and might, and the fountainheads of the glory, greatness and authority of God Himself. Gaze upon the plight of the wronged ones. O daysprings of justice, the fierce gales of rancour and hatred have extinguished the lamps of virtue and piety. At dawn, the gentle breeze of divine compassion hath wafted over charred and cast out bodies, whispering these exalted words: 'Woe, woe unto you, O people of Írán! Ye have spilled the blood of your own friends and yet remain in ignorance of what ye have done. Should ye become aware of the deeds ye have perpetrated, ye would flee to the desert and bewail your crimes and tyranny.'

O misguided ones, what sin have the little children committed? Hath anyone, in these days, had pity on the dependants of the oppressed? A report hath reached Us that the followers of the Spirit [Christ]—may the peace of God and His mercy be upon Him—secretly sent them provisions and befriended them out of utmost sympathy. We beseech God, the Eternal Truth, to confirm all in accomplishing that which is pleasing to Him.

O newspapers published throughout the cities and countries of the world! Have ye heard the groan of the downtrodden, and have their cries of anguish reached your ears? Or have these remained concealed? It is hoped that ye will investigate the truth of what hath occurred and vindicate it.

In His *Tarázát Bahá'u'lláh*, Who had, on more than one occasion, been personally slandered and maligned in the press, and His Cause misrepresented in stories fabricated by His avowed enemies, recorded His awareness of inaccurate, perhaps even irresponsible, reporting:

Concerning this Wronged One, most of the things reported in the newspapers are devoid of truth. Fair speech and truthfulness, by reason of their lofty rank and position, are regarded as a sun shining above the horizon of knowledge. The waves rising from this Ocean are apparent before the eyes of the peoples of the world and the effusions of the Pen of wisdom and utterance are manifest everywhere.

It is reported in the press that this Servant hath fled from the land of Ta [Tíhrán] and gone to 'Iráq. Gracious God! Not even for a single moment hath this Wronged One ever concealed Himself. Rather hath He at all times remained steadfast and conspicuous before the eyes of all men. Never have We retreated, nor shall We ever seek flight. In truth it is the foolish people who flee from Our presence. We left Our home country accompanied by two mounted escorts, representing the two honoured governments of Persia and Russia until We arrived in 'Iraq in the plenitude of glory and power. Praise be to God! The Cause whereof this Wronged One is the Bearer standeth as high as heaven and shineth resplendent as the sun. Concealment hath no access unto this station, nor is there any occasion for fear or silence.

In the same Tablet He extols knowledge and describes the integrity and regard for truth which should govern those who write for newspapers:

Knowledge is one of the wondrous gifts of God. It is incumbent upon everyone to acquire it. Such arts and material means as are now manifest have been achieved by virtue of His knowledge and wisdom which have been revealed in Epistles and Tablets through His Most Exalted Pen—a Pen out of whose treasury pearls of wisdom and utterance and the arts and crafts of the world are brought to light.

In this Day the secrets of the earth are laid bare before the eyes of men. The pages of swiftly-appearing newspapers are indeed the mirror of the world. They reflect the deeds and the pursuits of divers peoples and kindreds. They both reflect them and make them known. They are a mirror endowed with hearing, sight and speech. This is an amazing and potent phenomenon. However, it behoveth the writers thereof to be purged from the promptings of evil passions and desires and to be attired with the raiment of justice and equity. They should enquire into situations as much as possible and ascertain the facts, then set them down in writing.

Among the indicators that 'appear as the outstanding characteristics of a decadent society', corruption of the press is cited by Shoghi Effendi, together with 'the degeneracy of art and music' and the 'infection of literature', in his masterful and succinct analysis in 'The Unfoldment of World Civilization'. In that same essay, in sketching the broad outlines of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, whose goal is the unification of the planet, he does not fail to mention the lofty and constructive role to be played by a truly free press. 'The press will, under such a system,' he writes, 'while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples.'

No 'mirror of the world' more dramatically reflects the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith from obscurity than the press. With the renewed persecution of the Bahá'ís in the land where the Faith was born—persecution which, despite its instigators' seeming sole concession to enlightenment in the adoption of polite refinements such as closeted firing squads, private hangings and diabolical, exquisitely designed secret tortures, has the same demonic force and malicious purpose as earlier episodes—the media, and particularly the press of the world, on an unprecedented scale, locally, nationally and internationally, has sympathetically, emphatically, eloquently, insistently and for the most part accurately

reported the situation, expressed shock and dismay editorially, striven to alert readers to the gravity of the oppression, condemned its

barbarity and demanded its cessation. Among them, it is noted with gratification, is *The Times*.

Bahai communities worried about fate of members seized in Tehran and accused of role in coup plot

Eleven vanish into unknown jail

By Michael Coleman

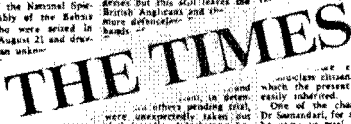
Though short of political or economic muscle, Bahai communities throughout the world are vigorously trying to draw attention to the fate of nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Iran who were seized in Tehran on August 21 and dragged off to an unknown jail.

Senior officers, certain Bahais and other counter-revolutionaries. Mr Bahadour said he had documented in years his accusations.

The British Embassy has dismissed the accusations as far-fetched but this will leave the British Anglicans and the more determined Bahais.

It is acknowledged that a number of Bahais were assigned, during the Shah's regime, to important posts in medicine, management administration.

...and its... relegated to... which the present regime has easily indented. One of the charges against Dr Soudjani, for instance, had to do with his role in the promotion of prostitution. The evidence for this was his signature as a witness on Bahai marriage certificates. In a telegram addressed to both President Bam-Sadr and to the new Prime Minister, Mr Muhammad Ali Reza, British Bahais denounced the arrest of their leading Iranian colleagues as further evidence of the rising tide of persecution against the Iranian Government's avowedly that peaceful law-abiding citizens need have no fear. For their part, the British Bahais assured President Bam-Sadr of the unquestioned loyalty of the Iranians who happened to be Bahais.



The Times of London, 30 August 1980, reported the seizure of the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran.