



37. What is the Baha'i Faith?

Baha'ism, which has been in the news recently, originated from a radical sect of Shi'a Islam, known as Babism. 'Bab' is Arabic for gate, and its founder Sayyid Ali Muhammad (1819 - 1850), an Iranian, declared himself to be the Bab or 'gate' through which the faithful could gain access to the divine.

In 1844, in Mecca, he proclaimed that he was the 'Hidden Imam' awaited by the Shi'ites. He declared that it was the duty of his followers to work for a new and more just society, including an improvement in the status of women. All previous holy books, including the Koran, were abrogated. The faithful must await the coming of the Messiah, who would be greater than he, and would complete the reform of religion. The Bab was arrested, tried for heresy, and eventually executed, after an uprising by his followers, many of whom were rounded up and massacred.

Some escaped to Iraq, then part of the Ottoman Empire, where the majority followed a disciple of the Bab, Mirza Hussein Ali (1817 - 1892). In 1863, in Baghdad, he declared himself to be the Messiah of whom the Bab had spoken, and assumed the name Baha'ullah ('Glory of God'). He taught that there was one God, who was unknowable. All the great religious teachers, including Jesus, the Buddha, Krishna, Moses and Mohammed, were manifestations of that God. 'The differences among the religions of the world', he said, 'are due to the varying types of minds.'

The Koran still held pride of place among holy books after his own and that of the Bab, but its teachings were modified, and traditional Muslim rituals modernised and simplified. He rejected the idea of *Jihad*, or holy war, polygamy, and slavery, and preached equality between the sexes. His followers must work for a more just society, a peaceful world order and a world government.

From 1868, Baha'ullah was interned by the Turkish government, first at Adrianople (now Edirne in European Turkey) and then at Acre in Palestine. He continued to organise his religion, which took the name of Baha'ism, by correspondence from his places of internment and his successors spread his message in Europe and the United States.

The Baha'i could no longer be accepted as true Muslims by either the Shi'a or the Sunni. The very qualities that made theirs an attractive faith to the Western mind, particularly in the commitment of its followers to work for social change and world peace rendered it heretical in the eyes of Islam. As a consequence, it is still persecuted in Muslim lands, particularly in Iran since the fall of the Shah. Although there are Baha'i Houses of Worship in all the continents (except Antarctica), ironically its headquarters are at Haifa in Israel, near Baha'ullah's final place of imprisonment.