

"WHAT IS A BAHAI?"

Through the courtesy of Messrs. Brentano, American publishers of "Baha'u'llah and the New Era," the famous work of Dr. J. E. Esslemont of London, England, the Defender has been granted permission to publish the chapter entitled "What is a Bahai?" The book was revised and authenticated by Abdul-Baha and Shoghi Effendi, the guardian of the cause, who pronounced it the finest presentation of the Bahai movement so far given. Brentanos are also publishers of other standard Bahai works. Their Chicago branch is located at 218-224 S. Wabash Ave.

PART ONE

"Man must show forth fruits. A fruitless man, in the words of His Holiness the Spirit (I. e. Christ) is like a fruitless tree, and a fruitless tree is fit for fire."—Baha'u'llah, in "Words of Paradise."

Herbert Spencer once remarked that by no political alchemy is it possible to get golden conduct out of leaden instincts, and it is equally true that by no political alchemy is it possible to make a golden society out of leaden individuals. Baha'u'llah, like all previous prophets, proclaimed this truth and taught that in order to establish the Kingdom of God in the world, it must first be established in the hearts of men. In examining the Bahai teachings, therefore, we shall commence with the instructions of Baha'u'llah for individual conduct, and try to form a clear picture of what it means to be a Bahai.

Living the Life

When asked on one occasion, "What is a Bahai?" Abdul-Baha replied: "To be a Bahai simply means to love all the world; to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and universal brotherhood." On another occasion he defined a Bahai as "one endowed with all the perfections of man in activity." In one of his London talks he said that a man may be a Bahai even if he has never heard the name of Baha'u'llah. He added, "The man who lives the life according to the teachings of Baha'u'llah is already a Bahai. On the other hand, a man may call himself a Bahai for 50 years, and if he does not live the life he is not a Bahai. An ugly man may call himself handsome, but he deceives no one, and a black man may call himself white, yet he deceives no one, not even himself."

One who does not know God's messengers, however, is like a plant growing in the shade. Although it knows not the sun, it is, nevertheless, absolutely dependent upon it. The great prophets are spiritual suns, and Baha'u'llah is the sun of this "day" in which we live. The suns of former days have warmed and vivified the world, and had those not shone, the earth would now be cold and dead, but it is the sunshine of today that alone can ripen the fruits which the suns of former days have kissed into life.

Devotion to God

In order to attain to the Bahai life in all its fullness, conscious and direct relations with Baha'u'llah are as necessary as is sunshine for the unfolding of the lily or the rose. The Bahai worships not the human personality of Baha'u'llah, but the glory of God manifest through that personality. He reverences Christ and Mohammed and all of God's former messengers to mankind, but he recognizes Baha'u'llah as the bearer of God's message for the new age in which we live, as the great world teacher who has to carry on and consummate the work of his predecessors.

Intellectual assent to a creed does not make a man a Bahai, nor does outward rectitude of conduct. Baha'u'llah requires of his followers whole-hearted and complete devotion. God alone has the right to make such a demand, but Baha'u'llah speaks as the manifestation of God and the revealer of His will. Previous manifestations have been equally clear on this point. Christ said: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." In different words, all the divine manifestations have made this same demand from their followers, and the history of religion shows clearly that as long as the demand has been frankly recognized and accepted, religion has flourished, despite all earthly opposition, despite affliction, persecution and martyrdom of the believers. On the other hand, whenever compromise has crept in and "respectability" has taken the place of complete consecration, then religion has decayed. It has become fashionable, but it has lost its power to work miracles. True religion has never yet been fashionable. God grant that one day it may become so; but it is still true, as in the days of Christ, that "Straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be who find it." The gateway of spiritual birth, like the gateway of natural birth, admits men only one by one, and without en-

cumbrances. If, in the future, more people succeed in entering that way than in the past, it will not be because of any widening of the gate, but because of a greater disposition on the part of men to make the "great surrender" which God demands; because long and bitter experience has at last brought them to see the folly of choosing their own way instead of God's way.

Search After Truth

Baha'u'llah enjoins justice on all his followers and defines it as "The freedom of man from superstition and imitation, so that he may discern the manifestations of God with the eye on oneness, and consider all affairs with keen sight."—"Words of Wisdom."

It is necessary that each individual should see and realize for himself the glory of God manifest in the human temple of Baha'u'llah, otherwise the Bahai faith would be for him but a name without a meaning. The call of the prophets to mankind has always been that men should open their eyes, not shut them, use their reason, not suppress it. It is clear seeing and free thinking, not servile credulity, that will enable them to penetrate the clouds of prejudice, to shake off the fetters of blind imitation, and attain to the realization of the truth of a new revelation.

He who would be a Bahai needs to be a fearless seeker after truth, but he should not confine his search to the material plane. His spiritual perceptive powers should be awake as well as his physical. He should use all the faculties God has given him for the acquisition of truth, believing nothing without valid and sufficient reason. If his heart is pure and his mind free from prejudice, the earnest seeker will not fail to recognize the divine glory in whatsoever temple it may become manifest. Baha'u'llah further declares:

"Man should know his own self, and know those things that lead to loftiness or baseness, to shame or to honor, to wealth or to poverty."—"Tablet of Tarazat."

"The root of all knowledge is the knowledge of God; (Glory be to Him!) and this knowledge is impossible save through His manifestation."—"Words of Wisdom."

The manifestation is the perfect man, the great exemplar for mankind, the first fruit of the tree of humanity. Until we know him we do not know the latent possibilities within ourselves. Christ tells us to consider the lilies how they grow, and declares that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. The lily grows from a very unattractive looking bulb. If we had never seen a lily in bloom, never gazed on its matchless grace of foliage and flower, how could we know the reality contained in that bulb? We might dissect it most carefully and examine it most minutely, but we should never discover the dormant beauty which the gardener knows how to awaken. So until we have seen the glory of God revealed in the manifestation, we can have no idea of the spiritual beauty latent in our own nature and in that of our fellows. By knowing and loving the manifestation of God and following His teachings we are enabled, little by little, to realize the potential perfections within ourselves; then, and not till then, does the meaning and purpose of life of the universe become apparent to us.

(To Be Continued)