



'ABD-AL-BAHĀ' II. TEACHINGS

ii. Teachings

Modern Baha'i opinion tends to view 'Abd-al-Bahā' simply as an inspired interpreter (*mobayyen*) or expounder of his father's teachings. While there is a fundamental truth in this, it obscures somewhat his own original contributions to Baha'i thinking, particularly as it came to be expressed in Europe and North America. Bahā'allāh's large corpus of writings deal in the main with a limited range of topics: ethical and mystical themes, the interpretation of traditional Islamic beliefs, the fulfillment of Bābī and other religious prophecy in himself, his replacement of Bābī use of force and intolerance with an ethos of human brotherhood, world peace, and inter-religious toleration, and the provision of a new *šarī'a* for the Baha'i community.

'Abd-al-Bahā' plays variations on many of these themes. But, in the course of his correspondence with European and American converts (from the mid-1890s), and, more particularly, his travels in the West, he began to introduce new concepts or, at least, to give prominence to ideas which had been mentioned only in passing by his father, although described as "the teachings of Bahā'allāh." Most notable among these are the principles of equality of the sexes, the need for independent search after truth (*taḥarri-ye ḥaqīqat*), harmony of religion and science, oneness of all religions (an extension of the essentially Judeo-Christian-Islamic-Bābī-Baha'i progressive revelation of Bahā'allāh), and the solution of the economic problem. His enumeration of these and other points termed "fundamental Baha'i



principles”—often expressed as the ten or twelve principles—created one of the basic elements in the presentation of the Baha’i religion in later years, especially in the West. References to scientific and social progress, labor relations, socialism, education, or the problems raised by Western civilization and deteriorating international relations are increasingly common in his lectures and discourses in Europe and the United States and in the tablets (*alvāḥ*, *tawqī‘āt*) written after his return to Palestine. There is a similar increase in the amount of space devoted to the discussion of Christian doctrine, biblical prophecy, and, to a lesser extent, questions concerning reincarnation, astrology, faith healing, spiritualism, occult practices, vegetarianism, and so forth (which are generally condemned) raised by early Western Baha’is from a theosophist, spiritualist, new thought, or similar background (see particularly *al-Nūr al-abhā fī mofāwazāt-e ḥazrat-e ‘Abd-al-Bahā’*).

In terms of style, ‘Abd-al-Bahā’'s written works often stand in marked contrast to those of his father. Brought up for the most part in an Arab environment (Baghdad from 1852 to 1863, Palestine from 1868) and educated in Arabic literature, his Arabic style is purer than that of Bahā’allāh; in both Persian and Arabic, he displays considerable skill in developing a consciously literary manner. Works such as the *Resāla-ye madaniya* and *Resāla-ye sāsiya* show an affinity with the writings of many reformers of the period (such as Malkom Khan), although the question of influences remains to be studied in depth. The general atmosphere of early 20th century internationalism, pacifism, and humanitarian liberalism imbues the later lectures and letters (see particularly the *Tablets to the Hague*), while there is throughout a growing concern with the internal organization of Baha’i movement. By contrast with the letters, the talks are couched in a simple, almost naive style, partly influenced by the demands of speaking through an interpreter. In consequence, the Western Baha’i understanding of ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ , largely based on these talks and on translations of relatively straightforward letters to converts in Europe and North America, is ignorant of the more urbane, literary exponent of 19th century reformism.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

The original texts of many talks given by ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ in Europe and America may be found in *Keṭābāt ḥaẓrat ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ fī Orobbā wa Amrīkā* (Cairo, 1340/1921) and *Keṭābāt-e mobāraka-ye ḥaẓrat-e ‘Abd-al-Bahā’* (as vol. 2 following the previous title; Tehran, 1971).

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The most recent translation of letters by ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ is by Marzieh Gail, *Tablets of ‘Abd-al-Bahā’* (Haifa, 1979).

Early translations and memoirs may be found listed in the New York Public Library *List of Works in the New York Public Library Relating to Persia*, New York, 1915, pp. 103-07 (note especially the entries of ‘Abd-al-Bahā ibn Bahā Allāh, Chase, Goodall, Grundy, Johnson, Lucas, and Stevens).