

# Chronicles of a Birth

## Early References to the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions in Spain (1873-1895)

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On a previous occasion<sup>1</sup> we reviewed Spain's earliest references to Babism. We saw, for example, how news of the uprising in Zanján and the Báb's martyrdom received some national press coverage in 1850. We also demonstrated how the assassination attempt against the young monarch Násiri'd-Dín Sháh in August 1852 received the same amount of coverage in Spain as in other parts of the West. Daily newspapers also gave extensive coverage to the persecution of Bábís in Persia as a result of the foiled plot against the monarch, and, even as late as July 1853, some Spanish dailies continued to offer related news, a fact which gave us the opportunity to comment briefly on what might have been the actual extent of such persecutions. Finally, after considering the readership of each of the daily newspapers reporting stories about the Bábís, we ventured a guess as to the potential number of readers that might have learned about the new religion for the first time.

As we shall now see, additional stories about the infant religion continued trickling into Spain.

### *Enciclopedia Moderna*

Between 1851 and 1855, Francisco de Paula Mellado, a prolific author, was finishing in Madrid what was to become the first truly comprehensive Spanish encyclopedia of the nineteenth century, the *Enciclopedia Moderna, Diccionario*

*universal de literatura, ciencias, artes, agricultura, industria y comercio* [Modern Encyclopedia/Unabridged Dictionary of Literature, Science, Art, Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce]. The work was actually an adapted and enlarged version of a French encyclopedia bearing the same name and published by the Firmin Didot brothers several years earlier (1846-1851). The Spanish version comprised forty volumes in total. Volume 30 was published in 1854 and contained a reproduction of the definition pertaining to “Persia.” The French version identifies the author of the article as A. Bouchot, about whom no further information has yet come to light.

The author’s exposition on the history of Persia concludes with the reign of Muḥammad Sháh, to wit: “The son of Feth-Alí, Abbas Mírzá (1831-1833) did nothing of great account and was succeeded by Mahomed-Mírzá [*sic*] (1833-1848). The events surrounding this prince’s reign are too recent to warrant any further analysis.” Bouchot then immediately describes briefly Persia’s fragile state at the time, concluding the final paragraph of his article as follows:

Today she thus finds herself gripped by a decadence that cannot last much longer, inasmuch as the prince now governing her is incapable of asserting his power; he has neither revenues nor a navy nor an army to speak of, unless these are the terms applied to a bunch of unruly soldiers whom he calls upon at his pleasure and on whom he relies so infrequently that he chooses to live among his tribesmen, the only ones he feels safe and secure with. If we add to this the ruin of her trade and commerce, so vibrant in times past, a weakened agriculture, excessive taxation, setback after setback, anarchy, and the subversive doctrines propagated by the Báb’s disciples, who preach communion of their property and their women, we cannot but admire how Persia has resisted for so long such powerful forces of destruction.<sup>2</sup>

Thus we have here a reference to Babism that could not have been penned any later than 1851, and which is very likely older.

Bouchot's statement that the Bábís practiced "communion of their property and their women" was not gratuitous; rather, his article merely reflects a fairly typical misunderstanding about Babism during the movement's early years.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for such an accusation are varied, Lord Curzon would comment years later: "Certainly no such idea as communism in the European sense, i.e., a forcible redistribution of property, or as socialism in the nineteenth century sense, i.e., the defeat of capital by labour, ever entered the brain of the Bab [*sic*] or his disciples. The only communism known to and recommended by him was that of the New Testament and the early Christian Church, viz., the sharing of goods in common by members of the faith, and the exercise of almsgiving, and an ample charity. The charge of immorality seems to have arisen partly from the malignant inventions of opponents, partly from the much greater freedom claimed for women by the Bab [*sic*], which in the Oriental mind is scarcely dissociable from profligacy of conduct..."<sup>4</sup>

## 1857 – False Rumors

For certain, the assassination attempt against Násiri'd-Dín Sháh in 1852 did little to dispel this misunderstanding about Babism. As we already saw, Persia's religious and political authorities took advantage of the incident not only to rid themselves of as many Bábís as they could, but also to foster an aura of ill will against their movement.

In October 1856, Persia annexed the predominantly Shi'a Afghan province of Herat. This maneuver by Násiri'd-Dín Sháh helped to destabilize the region's fragile balance of power and eventually led to war with Great Britain. Persia's defeat was swift, and the impact which the conflict had on the state's coffers led to nationwide public disaffection bordering on civil war.

The Spanish and European press alike provided extensive, in-depth coverage of the conflict. On November 17, 1852, *El Estado*, a Madrid daily newspaper, published the following story in an article about the country's domestic situation:

Several foreign newspapers have written about a plot against the life of the shah [*sic*] perpetrated by an individual belonging to the Bábí [*sic*] sect. *Le Pays* categorically denies this account.<sup>5</sup>

This denial probably reached Spain by way of the news agency Havas, which likely was not the one that distributed news of the alleged attempt against the Sháh, or at least that is what can be deduced after verifying that Spain's major daily newspapers that subscribed to the Havas Bureau did not publish such information.<sup>6</sup>

It would not be the last time that the Western press wrongly implicated the Bábís in assassination attempts, whether real or imagined, against the Sháh of Persia. It happened again in 1869,<sup>7</sup> 1878,<sup>8</sup> and twice again in 1896.<sup>9</sup>

## The 1860s

In 1862, an expanded translation of Charles Dreyss's *Cronología Universal* was published in Madrid. Its author, Antonio Ferrer del Río, based his translation on the second French edition (1858). The entry for the year 1852 mentions the assassination attempt against the Sháh and the execution of 400 Bábís. That we are aware of, no mention of the religion is made again in any Spanish reference works other than the *Enciclopedia Moderna* and *Cronología Universal* until 1876.

In 1865, two highly significant works were published simultaneously in France that would have a decisive influence on the West's understanding of Babism. One was Mírzá Kazem-Beg's *Báb et les Bábís*, which, beginning that year, was published in installments in the *Journal Asiatique*. The other was *Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie centrale* by Count Joseph A. de Gobineau.

Gobineau's work achieved much greater popularity. Though not exempt from historical errors or critical omissions, the book greatly influenced oriental studies of the period and awakened a certain sympathy toward the nascent religion in intellectual and public opinion circles.

Few in Spain came to know Kazem-Beg's work. Gobineau's book, on the other hand, was very favorably received. Most Spanish authors, as well as the mass media that mentioned Babism from that moment on, based themselves on Gobineau's work, mirroring both its vices and its virtues.

The first publication in Spain taking material directly from Gobineau in its coverage of Babism appeared in 1868, when the first Spanish translation of Ernst Renan's *Les Apôtres* [The Apostles] was published in Barcelona by the printer "La Ilustración." It is quite probable that this publication was originally a supplement in one of the daily newspapers and journals distributed by that publisher, although no such proof has yet been found to substantiate this suspicion. One year later, the same work was published by José Codina, another Barcelona printer.

## Juan Valera

One of the nineteenth century's most outstanding writers and thinkers was Juan Valera (1824-1905). Holding degrees in philosophy and jurisprudence, Valera had a long diplomatic and political career. He worked in several consulates in Europe and South America prior to his being appointed ambassador in Frankfurt (1865). He would later serve as ambassador in Lisbon; Washington, D.C.; and Brussels. In 1858, he was elected as a member of the Spanish Parliament, and in 1872 he accepted a senior post within the Ministry of State Education. Also worthy of mention, from a cultural standpoint, are his inductions in 1861 into Spain's Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, and in 1904 into the Royal Academy of Moral and Political Sciences.

As a writer, he was a prolific novelist and essayist. He was also a renowned correspondent. Among his most famous novels are *Pepita Jiménez* and *Juanita la Larga*.

In 1868, he submitted his article titled *Sobre el concepto que hoy se forma de España* [*Perceptions of Spain Today*], which was published simultaneously in the magazines *La América* and *La Revista de España*.<sup>10</sup> In it, Valera attempted to tackle the issue of Spain's decadence at the time and how the country was

perceived by the rest of Europe. In the first section of his article he posits his theory about the fate of civilizations. To Valera, peoples and races do not perish, but rather alternate between periods of decadence and remarkable achievement. He perceives the peoples of Aryan descent as best exemplifying his theory and, after reviewing the cases pertaining to other nations, has this to say about Persia:

Persia succumbs to Alexander's rule, but once again becomes a powerful, formidable, and feared rival of the Roman Empire under the Sassanid dynasty. In the time of the Ghazna sultans, during the Middle Ages, Persia's civilization shines with extraordinary splendor. Her epic and lyrical poets, her arts and sciences of the time are superior to those of the rest of the world. Later on, her philosophical and religious schools and sects begin to flourish, as well as the lyrical, and even dramatic, poetry that comes into being there in our own age. Recently, the strange historical phenomenon marked by the appearance and spread of *Babism* [*sic*] has made evident the intellectual and moral vigor of that race, that perchance it may become regenerated and arise anew to the heights of its sister European races, when a more fertile and noble coming into being arrives to awaken and bestir it.<sup>11</sup>

Valera was not to be the only Spanish author that would see in Babism a new hope for Persia's progress. Nor would this be his last reference to the new religion.

In October/November 1889, he published an article titled *La Religión de la Humanidad* [Humanity's Religion] in *La España Moderna*.<sup>12</sup> It was in fact a letter addressed to Chilean philosopher Enrique Lagarrigue (1852-1927). Both authors maintained an interesting correspondence in which they debated the role and future of religion. Valera, contrary to Lagarrigue, believed in the vigor and usefulness of religion. Throughout the development of his argument, he writes:

I believe that we are living squarely in an age of faith, and that if losing it signifies progress, then we could scarcely boast about progress. Even now, in the middle of this century, in 1847, a new religion has appeared in

Persia, one which has made rivers of blood to flow and given the world untold martyrs. This religion's moral core is very pure and tender-hearted; its sacred writings, highly poetic; its beliefs and its love in god and of god [*sic*], profound. Count Gobineau and Mr. Franck, of the French Institute, have set out its doctrines and written the history of this recent religion, Babism, whose cardinal dogma is god's [*sic*] incarnation in nineteen persons.

Upon comparing these two excerpts from Valera's writings against excerpts about Babism from other Spanish authors of the period, we see that they are highly representative of the approach taken by Spanish intellectuals in the final decades of the nineteenth century toward Babism.

### *Diccionario Universal*

Following the publication in 1862 of Charles Dreyss's *Cronología Universal*, we know of no other reference work in Spanish that mentions Babism until 1876, the year in which the second volume of the *Diccionario Universal* edited by Nicolás María Serrano was published.

Said volume contained definitions for the entries *Bab* and *Babism* [*sic*]. All of the information contained in both volumes is clearly taken from Gobineau's *Religions et Philosophies*. The term *Bab* [*sic*] is defined thus:

**Bab** [*sic*]: *Biog.* Celebrated Persian reformer born in 1825 and killed when he was barely thirty years old; his actual name was Mírzá-Alí-Mohammed [*sic*]; he belonged to the middle class and had received a rigorous education; he planted, so to speak, the seeds of a new doctrine destined perhaps to transform Islamism; always occupied with pious works, he had extraordinarily simple habits and a pleasing tender-heartedness, revealing these gifts through a marvelously enchanting personality and a kindly and penetrating eloquence of speech: he was incapable, those that knew him attested, of uttering anything without shaking the very core of the hearts of his listeners; his doctrine,

which borrows somewhat from Greek philosophy, is full of flowery phrases reminiscent of a “Paradise of roses.”

In defining the term *Babism* [*sic*], the dictionary provides an article comprising ten columns divided into two sections—*Historia del Babismo* [History of Babism] and *Exposición de la Doctrina del Babismo* [Exposition of the Doctrine of Babism]—preceded by a preamble. In total, the article comprises four pages summarizing point by point the very topics Gobineau covered in the chapters he devoted to Babism. As can be gleaned from the quote above, the tone that is used is highly positive. Indeed, it is the very tone that has been generally employed since then, and well into the twentieth century, by all dictionaries and encyclopedias containing an entry pertaining to Babism. Consequently, it replicates those same conceptual and historical errors committed by Gobineau.

It is especially interesting to see how the figure of Táhirih is dealt with: “Not for nothing has a woman been one of the staunchest of apostles, one of the most valiant of martyrs of this new religion; in Guret-ul-Ayn [*sic*] (the Eloquent, the Beautiful), the entire female sex has been liberated, ennobled, glorified; reduced by Islamism to the condition of mere objects, women in Asia will henceforth be considered as persons.” And further on: “Her beauty, her spirit, her eloquence, her knowledge, her singular exaltation is forever engraved in the memory of those that witnessed this drama.”

In late 1876, Francisco García Ayuso published his *Iran* [*sic*] *o del Indo al Tigris* [Iran or From the Indus to the Tigris], devoting three pages to Babism. Meanwhile, his pupil, diplomat Adolfo Rivadeneyra, was making his way to Persia. His chronicle of the trip included a lengthy explanation of the faith taught by the Báb. Several years later, in 1889, Násiri'd-Dín Sháh visited Europe for his third and final time. As a result, the Spanish press, as it had done in 1873, made mention of the Bábís yet again. One important writer, Countess Emilia Pardo Bazán, was able to meet the Sháh. On account of this encounter, that same year she would write *Un Diocleciano* [A Diocletian (alluding to Roman emperor Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus, noted for his persecution of Christians)], a work



whose title hints at its stirring content. We will, on another occasion, deal with this and other subjects in greater detail when we explore references made to the Faith from late 1876 until 1895.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Chronicles of a Birth, Early References to the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions in Spain (1850-1853), in *Lights of 'Irfán*, Vol. V.
- <sup>2</sup> *Enciclopedia Moderna, Diccionario universal de literatura, ciencias, artes, agricultura, industria y comercio*. Establecimiento Mellado, Madrid, 1854, Vol. XXX, p. 102.
- <sup>3</sup> This accusation is also reflected in diplomatic correspondence of the period; see Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, George Ronald: Oxford, 1981, pp. 5-8.
- <sup>4</sup> George N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, Vol. I, Longmans, Green & Co., 1892, pp. 501-502.
- <sup>5</sup> *El Estado*, Madrid, November 17, 1857, p. 1. On November 18, this same story was published in at least two other Madrid daily newspapers: *El Clamor Público* and *La Esperanza*.
- <sup>6</sup> The author is aware of two other news stories published that year mentioning the Bábís. Both appear in the Finnish daily newspaper *Allmänna Tidning*. The first one is dated March 13, 1857, and is based on information from the *Indépendant Belge*; the second one is dated April 16 and is based on information from the *Journal de Constantinople*.
- <sup>7</sup> See *The Times*, London, August 19, 1869, p. 10.
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, *El Monitor Republicano*, Mexico, July 2, 1878.
- <sup>9</sup> The events of 1896 will be dealt with briefly on another occasion. Suffice it to say that the "Bábís" were accused of assassinating Náşiri'd-Dín Sháh on May 2 of that year and of allegedly plotting against Muzaffar ad-Dín Sháh in June of that same year.
- <sup>10</sup> *La América*, Madrid, March 28, 1868, Vol. XII, Issue 6; *Revista de España*, Madrid, March 13, 1868, Vol. I, Issue 1.
- <sup>11</sup> Valera lists Gobineau's *Religions et Philosophies* and Adolph Franck's *Philosophie et Religion* in a bibliographical footnote.
- <sup>12</sup> *La España Moderna*, Madrid, November 1889, Vol. I, Issue 40. The article was later published in the book titled *Nuevas Cartas Americanas* (Madrid, 1890), which went through several reprintings.