

WOMEN AND THE BAHA'I FAITH:

Ann Boyles

Après avoir brièvement expliqué les origines de la foi Baha'i en 1863, l'auteure examine ce qu'elle enseigne: l'unité de toutes les religions, l'éducation universelle obligatoire, l'abolition des préjugés, la création d'un gouvernement mondial fédéral, et l'égalité des sexes. C'est ainsi que les parents Baha'i sont encouragés, par exemple, à financer l'éducation de leurs filles (plutôt que de leurs fils, si un choix doit être fait) car les filles seront les agents socialisants des enfants. De plus, l'éducation devrait être la même pour les deux sexes puisqu'il n'y a aucune différence dans

THE RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY

leurs aptitudes. Dans un couple, les partenaires sont égaux et devraient se consulter sur tous les sujets. Les femmes Baha'i sont pleinement engagées dans le processus de décision de la communauté et de nombreux grands enseignants Baha'i ont été des femmes; trois canadiennes se sont ainsi distinguées.

Les femmes Baha'i sont des forces de dissémination et de défense de leur foi et, en Iran de nos jours, de nombreuses en sont mortes: l'explication en est peut-être que la foi Baha'i accorde un rôle égal aux femmes, à la fois dans ses textes et dans ses actions.

"You can kill me as soon as you like but you cannot stop the emancipation of women." These were the words of Tahirih, the great heroine of the Babi faith, spoken just before her martyrdom at the hands of the Persian authorities in 1853. An accomplished poet, acknowledged scholar (rare achieve-

ment for a woman in nineteenth-century Persia), courageous and eloquent defender of her faith, Tahirih was one of the original followers of the Bab, Mirza Ali Muhammad of Shiraz.

The Bab arose in 1844 and proclaimed himself to be the herald of another prophet who would soon appear. This second prophet would be the Promised One of all the religions of the past, and it was the Bab's task to prepare humanity for his coming. The Bab's teachings spread quickly and widely in Persia, but soon fanatical hatred on the part of the Muslim clergy resulted in the murder of over

20,000 members, both men and women, of this new religion. Like many of her spiritual brothers and sisters, Tahirih was required to die for her belief in the Bab. She met her fate fearlessly, attiring herself as if she were going to a wedding rather than to her death.

What were the teachings of this faith that caused such widespread hatred in its opponents and yet such staunch devotion in its adherents? The Bab, and later the Promised One to whom he alluded in his writings, Baha'u'llah, both called for the recognition that there is only one God and that he has sent messengers, or manifestations, into the world at different stages in its social evolution. These messengers, such as the Buddha, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, and finally the Bab and Baha'u'llah, have all come to teach mankind to know and love its Creator, but they have also delivered

social teachings commensurate with humanity's level of understanding.

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings include principles such as the oneness of humanity, the oneness of all religions, universal compulsory education, abolition of all forms of prejudice, the need for establishment of a world federal government, and the equality of women and men. The teachings of the Baha'i faith, founded by Bahá'u'lláh in 1863, state clearly:



Humanity is like a bird with its two wings, the one is male, the other female. Unless both wings are strong and impelled by some common force, the bird cannot fly heavenwards. According to the spirit of this age, women must advance and fulfill their mission in all departments of life, becoming equal to men. They must be on the same level as men and enjoy equal rights.



This message was delivered in the Western world by 'Abdu'l-Baha, son of Bahá'u'lláh and exemplar of the Baha'i faith, who travelled to Europe and America and spoke to many public gatherings in 1912 and 1913. (See J.E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, page 154.)

Indeed, in matters of education women are in some ways accorded an advantage over men in this new dispensation. While universal compulsory education is ultimately desirable, in cases where it is not practicable for financial or other reasons, Baha'i parents are encouraged to educate their girl children in preference to their boy children. Girls will, in most cases, be mothers themselves one day, and since the mother is the primary educator of the child, she should be well-educated in order to train her own children with knowledge and skill.

With respect to subject areas in which women should be trained, there should be no difference whatsoever in the curriculum offered to women and men, since there is no inherent difference between the abilities or capacities of the sexes. The Baha-i faith teaches:



Neither sex is superior to the other in the sight of God. Why then should one sex assert the inferiority of the other, withholding just rights and privileges as though God had given His authority for such a course of action? If women received the same educational advantages as those of men, the result would demonstrate the equality of both for scholarship ('Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, page 161).



Though less shocking today, teachings such as these were revolutionary in the Persia of the nineteenth century, where women were treated as property, married off in arranged unions at the age of thirteen or so, and were kept concealed behind the veil all their lives. An understanding of this climate is imperative to an appreciation of the impact made by the Babi and Baha'i faiths.

When Tahirih became a follower of the Bab, her husband rejected her and had her imprisoned in her own home, forbidding her to practise her faith. Eventually she escaped from this situation but was forced to leave behind her three children, whose minds were soon poisoned against their mother. She never saw them again.

Even Tahirih's spiritual brothers had trouble at times accepting these new teachings of equality. At a Babi conference in Badasht, Persia, Tahirih dramatically removed her veil as a demonstration of the principle of equality, and many of the men present were shocked at her behaviour. What was acceptable to them in principle was another thing altogether in practice and would require major adjustment in their thinking. Interestingly, it was Bahá'u'lláh — who was present at the conference, and who had not declared his own mission yet — who supported and ratified Tahirih's unveiling, heralding it as the dawn of a new age for women.

The role of Baha'i women in marriage provides another example of equality. In Baha'i marriage the partners are considered completely equal. The Baha'i wedding vow is simple: both the husband and wife repeat, "We will all, verily, abide

by the will of God." Such a vow commits both partners to equality in the unity of submitting themselves to God's will. Further, 'Abdu'l-Baha says, "The happiness of mankind will be realized when women and men co-ordinate and advance equally, for each is the complement and helpmeet of the other" ('Abdu'l-Baha, *Baha'i World Faith*, page 241). In a Baha'i home, active consultation between husband and wife is encouraged, so that each may have the benefit of the other's ideas and support in all matters.

Baha'is see marriage and family life as the cornerstone for building a new society, where the teachings of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh become the norm. Therefore it is not surprising that Baha'i women have always been and continue to be encouraged "to exercise to the full their privileges and responsibilities in the work of the community," in the words of the supreme Baha'i administrative body, the Universal House of Justice, in a letter to the Baha'is of New Zealand written in 1979. This emphasis is important, since "when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics, war will cease; for women will be the obstacle and hindrance to it. This is true and without doubt" ('Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, page 130).

The history of the Babi and Baha'i faiths from the time of Tahirih to the present day bears eloquent witness to the truth of this statement. In prison, under house arrest, and surrounded at all times by enemies who sought to attack the Baha'i faith on moral grounds, Bahiyyih Khanum, daughter of Bahá'u'lláh and sister of 'Abdu'l-Baha, led what would seem to many Western women a rather circumscribed life. Yet she quietly assumed the decision-making role at the head of the faith when required to do so on several occasions and capably directed global activities and plans, winning not only the respect but the devotion and love of Baha'is the world over. To many Baha'i

women she is the complement to the dramatic and fiery Tahirih, exemplifying in a quieter way the life of selfless service to God.

In the Western world, many great Baha'i teachers have been women: Martha Root, working journalist who travelled all over the world taking the message of Baha'u'llah to numerous prominent figures, including royalty; Lua Getsinger, who performed many delicate and difficult missions for 'Abdu'l-Baha in her travels to the Orient, Europe, Africa, and America; Dorothy Baker, eloquent speaker who lectured on the Baha'i faith in some fifty colleges and universities throughout India; Lady Sarah Blomfield, author and hostess to 'Abdu'l-Baha during his visit to England; Agnes Alexander, who travelled and taught the Baha'i faith in the South Pacific and in Japan; Sarah Farmer, founder of the first Baha'i educational centre. These are only a few of the Western Baha'i women who have achieved notable victories in the Baha'i world since the early years of this century. The first Baha'i monarch was a woman: Queen Marie of Romania, granddaughter of Queen Victoria.

Three Canadian women stand out in their service to the Baha'i faith. May Maxwell of Montreal was a member of the first group of pilgrims to visit 'Abdu'l-Baha in the prison at Akka, Palestine, where he spent over forty years of his life. She was the first Baha'i on European soil and is revered as the mother of the Baha'i communities of both France and Canada. She died in Buenos Aires, on her way to teach and serve the faith in South America. Another devoted Canadian believer who left her home to teach the Baha'i message was Marion Jack of Saint John, New Brunswick. To Baha'is, she is an "immortal heroine" whose "unremitting, highly meritorious activities shed imperishable splendour on contemporary Baha'i history," to quote the tribute paid to her when she died at an advanced age in Bulgaria, still serving her faith, in 1954. (See the compilation *Quickeners of Mankind*, page 129.)

The third Canadian woman who has achieved a high station of service in the Baha'i faith is Ruhyyih Rabbani, formerly Mary Maxwell of Montreal. Daughter of May Maxwell, she is the widow of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Baha'i faith from 1921 to his death in 1957. Her extensive travels around the world have taken her from the Canadian North to the Amazonian jungles of South America, from Samoa back to her home in Haifa, Israel.

Today, throughout the world, Baha'i women recognize and embrace the spiritual heritage bequeathed to them by figures such as Tahirih and Bahiyyih Khanum. They emulate the living example set by Ruhyyih Rabbani. In the four corners of the globe, women are serving actively on Baha'i administrative bodies. Many women, either with their families or alone, move to live in other parts of the world, following in the footsteps of Martha Root and Marian Jack and providing a practical example of the teaching, "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, page 251). The role of women in the promulgation of the Baha'i faith prompted 'Abdu'l-Baha to state:



I am moved. . . to stress the significance of such a preponderating share which women of the West have had and are having in the establishment of His Faith throughout the whole world. . . women have evinced a greater boldness than men when enlisted in the ranks of the Faith" (quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *Advent of Divine Justice*, pages 57-58).



In Iran, the birthplace of the Babi and Baha'i revelations, women are again being required to defend the strength of their faith up to and including the point of death. Of the approximately 140 Baha'is executed by the fanatical Muslim extremists since the revolution four years ago, a number have been women.

In whatever way they serve their faith, however, Baha'i women

work toward and long for the day promised in the Baha'i writings, where it says of women, "Her actions will show her power, there will no longer be any need to proclaim it in words. . . When men own (acknowledge) the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights." To this end, "Women must make the greatest effort to attain spiritual power and to increase in the virtue of wisdom and holiness until their enlightenment and striving succeeds in bringing about the unity of mankind" ('Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, page 163).

This concept of unity lies at the heart of the Baha'i faith, expressed by the poetic image of the bird of humanity with its male and female wings, able to soar to the heights it is capable of achieving only when the precious balance between the two wings is achieved. It is an exact as well as beautiful illustration of the unique and equal role accorded to women for the first time in the history of religion.

Further Reading

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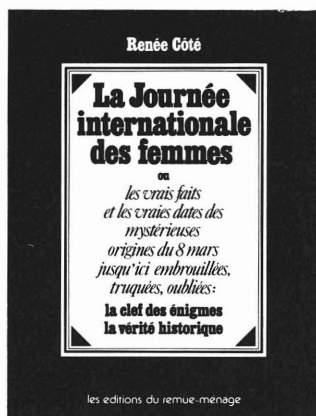
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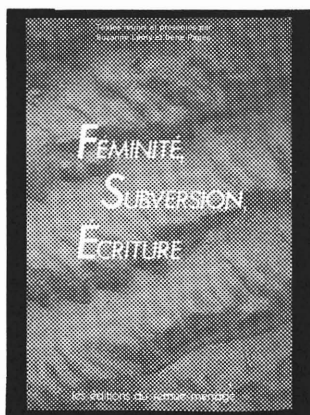
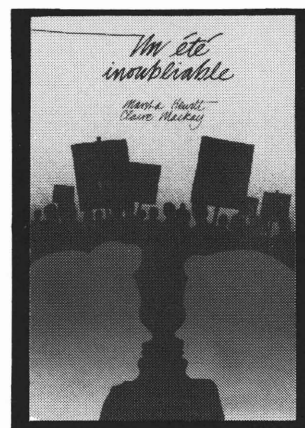
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