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Báb, Martyrdom of the (July 9)

The yearly commemoration of the Martyrdom of the Báb is one of the nine major Bahá’í holy days on which work is suspended. Observed by Bahá’ís in the Middle East on 28 Sha‘bán—in accordance with the Islamic lunar calendar—the occasion is annually observed on July 9 throughout the rest of the Bahá’í world. For many participants, it is a deeply moving experience.

Sayyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz (1819–1850)—known by his spiritual title as “the Báb” (“the Gate”) and regarded as the precursor and herald of Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí, known as Bahá’u’lláh (the “Splendor” or “Glory of God,” 1817–1892)—was martyred on July 9, 1850, in Tabríz, Persia (now Iran). The circumstances of the Báb’s martyrdom, and its subsequent commemoration as a Bahá’í holy day, will be discussed below.

The Báb founded the 19th-century movement generally known as Bábism, an independent (albeit short-lived) religion that clearly broke from its parent religion, Persian (i.e., Twelver Shi‘i) Islam. As Orientalist Edward G. Browne observed regarding the Bábí phenomenon, “whatever its actual destiny may be, is of that stuff whereof world-religions are made.” As Browne predicted, the Bábí religion emerged as a “new world-religion” through its eventual transformation into what is now known as the Bahá’í Faith.

While the Bábí and Bahá’í religions are distinct, they are intimately related both historically and doctrinally. The writings of the Báb, for instance, are considered sacred scripture by all Bahá’ís. A number of the Báb’s religious laws were adopted and adapted by Bahá’u’lláh, as was the Bábí calendar (a solar calendar of

19 months of 19 days, each named after godly attributes to foster goodly virtues, which the Báb had created. Because the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are so historically and doctrinally related, they are actually called the “Twin Founders” of the Bahá'í Faith.

According to Armin Eschraghi, the Báb established a new, post-Islamic faith that fulfilled all the criteria of an independent religion. These include a new founder, newly revealed scriptures, a new set of metaphysical and theological teachings distinct from those of Islam, new religious laws and principles. In revealing his new code of laws, the *Persian Bayán* (1848), the Báb intended to pave the way for the advent of the Promised One; to provoke the clerical establishment and shatter the foundations of their often-abused institutionalized authority; and to prove the independence of his own religion as distinct from Islam.

The Báb declared that he was a messenger from God sent to proclaim the imminent advent of one greater than himself. Religious and state persecution fell upon his followers, leading to the torture and religious martyrdom of thousands. In July 1848, the Báb was summoned to Tabríz to stand trial before Muslim clerics. Ordered by Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí, prime minister of Persia, the trial was doubtless intended to publicly discredit the Báb. Presiding over the trial was the young Crown Prince, who later became the reigning monarch of Persia, Násiri'd-Dín Sháh. The Báb was pressured to recant his writings and claims.

Instead, the Báb openly proclaimed that he was the promised Qá'im, the expected deliverer in Shi'í Islam (and, as the Mahdí, by Sunni and Shi'í Muslims alike). To subject him to public ridicule by exposing his supposed ignorance, the Báb was then questioned about abstruse points of Arabic grammar, theology, and religious law. Throughout the course of the trial, the Báb staunchly refused to renounce his messianic claims and writings. After the trial reached its unsuccessful conclusion, the Báb was bastinadoed and again imprisoned. In their verdict, the clergy pronounced the Báb insane, thinking that a declaration of madness would quell the religious furor that the Báb had created.

However, a series of Bábí defensive clashes with the attacking state militias at Shaykh Tabarsí, Nayríz, and Zanján persuaded the new prime minister Mírzá Taqí Khán that the unrest would endure unless the Báb was put to death. The prime minister therefore ordered the execution of the Báb, who was then brought to Tabríz. When, at the house of Mullá Muhammad Mamaqání, the Báb still would not recant his claims, a leader of the Tabríz Shaykhís, Mamaqání, issued the Báb's death warrant by public execution at an army barracks in Tabríz.

Imprisoned with the Báb in the barracks cell were his secretaries, the two brothers Siyyid Hasan and Siyyid Ḥusayn Yazdí, along with a young Bábí mullá of Tabríz, Mírzá Muhammad-Alí Zunúzí, who was called Anís (“Companion”) by the Báb. Arrested for openly proclaiming the Báb's new religion, the young Anís refused to recant and so was sentenced to death with the Báb. The Báb chose Anís to die with him together as companion martyrs in a single execution, rather than in separate executions.

At noon, the Báb and Anís were brought out into the barracks square, and, bound by ropes, suspended from a spike driven into the wall of the barracks. The surrounding rooftops were thronged with an estimated 10,000 onlookers.

The Russian Armenian Sám Khán commanded the Christian Bahádurán Regiment, which was ordered to carry out the execution. Although accounts of the Báb's execution vary in details, all agree that, after thick smoke—from the volley of 750 muskets—had cleared, the Báb had vanished, with Anís standing before the astonished multitude, unhurt. The Báb's escape from the first volley of musket fire is beyond doubt, as his ropes were cut by the shots. One witness to this extraordinary event, Sir Justin Shiel, Queen Victoria's Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, in Tehran on July 22, 1850, records:

The founder of this sect has been executed at Tabreez. He was killed by a volley of musketry, and his death was on the point of giving his religion a lustre which would have largely increased his proselytes. When the smoke and dust cleared away after the volley, Báb was not to be seen, and the populace proclaimed that he had ascended to the skies. The balls had broken the ropes by which he was bound, but he was dragged from the recess where after some search he was discovered and shot. His death, according to the belief of his disciples, will make no difference as Báb must always exist. (Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844–1944*, 78)

A frantic search ensued, and the Báb was found back in his cell, evidently completing dictation to his secretary that was earlier interrupted. Soldiers swiftly cleared the barracks square, and the Báb was once more suspended by ropes for execution, with Anís placed in front of the Báb. But Sám Khán refused to order his troops to fire again and so the Muslim Nádírí Regiment was summoned. On the second attempt, the Báb and Anís were instantly killed. Their bodies, in fact, were fused together by the sheer number of bullets that struck them.

Despite the claims of some two dozen Bábís in their rival bids to succeed the Báb, the majority of his coreligionists, the Bábís, turned to Bahá'u'lláh, who effectively led the Bábí community until such time as he formally established the Bahá'í religion in 1863 by his announcement that he was the messianic figure the Báb foretold, although the designation “people of Bahá” (i.e., followers of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bahá'ís), was not current until March 1866. In 1873, Bahá'u'lláh subsequently incorporated a number of the laws of the Báb, in modified form, in his book of laws, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (“The Most Holy Book”).

Although not one of the holy days mentioned in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the martyrdom of the Báb was observed by Bahá'u'lláh. Two practices are associated with the observance of the Martyrdom of the Báb. First, commemorations should take place at noon, the time of the Báb's execution. Second, the “Tablet of Visitation”—a special commemorative prayer—is usually recited. Typically, it is Nabíl's narrative of the events surrounding the martyrdom of the Báb that is read

on this occasion, although it is not a requirement to do so. Nabíl's narrative, which describes the prophetic passion of the Báb's martyrdom in detail and is based on eyewitness accounts, is remarkably objective in style, yet never fails to stir deep emotions in the hearts of participants in this solemnly commemorative holy day.

Christopher Buck

See also 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Bahá'í Faith; Bahá'í Fast; Bahá'u'lláh, Ascension of; Bahá'u'lláh, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Babaji Commemoration Day (July 25)

In his autobiography, Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) introduced his readers to a mysterious Indian saint known only as Mahavatar Babaji. Yogananda, one of the founders of Hinduism in North America, had been the student of Sri