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August Forel defends the persecuted Persian Baha'is, 1925–27

By John Paul Vader

August Forel was one of the greatest scientific minds of the latter half of the last century and the beginning of the present century. He gained world renown during his own lifetime for his studies in the fields of entomology, brain anatomy, psychiatry and mental hygiene. He was active in many social reform movements as well as temperance, women's rights, and world-peace movements. He has been described as "one of the last representatives of a generation of encyclopedists, of open and curious minds, who took interest in almost all human activities", as "a glory not only to his Swiss fatherland, but to the whole human race", and as "the strongest and purest voice of the world's conscience".[1]

In 1920 August Forel encountered the Baha'i Faith and immediately recognized the striking similarity between his own principles and those proclaimed by Baha'u'llah, founder of the Baha'i Faith[2]. He wrote directly to ʿAbdu'l-Baha, Baha'u'llah's eldest son and appointed successor, expressing his admiration for the Baha'i principles and asking whether he could be considered a Baha'i with his agnostic and darwinian tendencies. The answer he received constitutes one of the most comprehensive statements of the Baha'i conception of the nature of God, of man and of the universe[3].

Forel became a member of the Baha'i Faith in 1921 and in August of that year he added the following paragraph to his will and testament (which he had written in 1912):

> I wrote the preceding lines in 1912. What must I add today, in August 1921, after such horrible wars have reduced humanity to fire and blood, and at the same time, unmasking as never before, the terrifying ferociousness of our hateful instincts? Nothing, except that we must remain all the more steadfast, all the more unshakable in our struggle for the common good. Our children must not become discouraged; on the contrary, they must take advantage of the present world chaos in order to further the painful organization, higher and supranational, of mankind, with the help of a universal federation of peoples.
>
> At Karlsruhe, in 1920, I first came to know of the supraconfessional world religion of the Baha'is, founded in the East more that seventy-five years ago by the Persian Baha'u'llah. This is the true religion of human social good, without dogmas or priests, uniting all men on this small terrestrial globe of ours. I have become a Baha'i. May this religion live and prosper for the good of mankind; this is my most ardent wish[4].

For the next ten years, until his death in 1931, he undertook activities supporting the Baha'i teachings that are truly impressive. Nothing thwarted his resolve to fulfil his "most ardent wish". Among his many activities in favour of these teachings was his defense of the Persian Baha'is during the wave of persecutions against them in the 1920s. This is particularly interesting when one considers that this community is, at present, once again the target of barbaric cruelties, pogroms, persecutions and martyrdoms. Ever since its inception in the middle of the last century, the Baha'i Faith has been subjected in Persia to waves of open and ruthless persecution. These outbreaks are often associated with periods of political upheaval, as at present, when the Baha'is in particular are singled out as scapegoats. In the 1920s, Persia had recently deposed the Qajar dynasty and chosen, with the support and sanction of the Shiah ecclesiastical hierarchy, Reza Pahlavi, father of the late shah, as hereditary sovereign. Such an initial period of instability and uncertainty afforded the traditional enemies of the Baha'i Faith their longed-for opportunity to give open vent to their evil schemes[5].

The first stirrings of the persecutions occurred almost simultaneously in several provinces in the first months of 1925. Forel learned of these persecutions through Shoghi Effendi, great grandson of Baha'u'llah and Head (Guardian) of the Baha'i Faith from 1921 to 1957. He undertook immediate action to call the atrocities to the attention of the European public. In the following undated letter, sent to the French foreign minister and received on 10 April 1925, Forel wrote:

The universal religion of the Baha'is, whose twelve principles are enclosed, was founded in 1851 by Baha'u'llah. It is spreading more and more throughout the world. In spite of the persecutions to which the Baha'is have been subjected by Muslims, the Baha'i Faith has gained about 500,000 followers in Persia. But 'Abdu'l-Baha was forced to take refuge in Haifa in Palestine; he died there in 1922[6]. 'Abdul'l-Baha's successor, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, is presently head of the movement in Haifa. Two years ago, during an international congress, a Persian *Muslim* affirmed to me personally the high esteem which the Baha'is have gradually won in Persia.

But, alas! The world war has brought in its wake personal, economic and regional discords which have ignited, once again, the irrational and fanatical hatreds of the Muslims against innocent Baha'is. Shoghi Effendi writes us that among other things, in the provinces of Fars, Yazd and Khurasan, etc., Muslims are destroying or burning the houses of the Baha'is, and murdering, mutilating or martyring the Baha'is themselves who offer only passive resistance in keeping with their broad principles. At times they must flee.

I will not go into the details of these atrocities. I will merely attempt, with the weakening forces of a crippled old man, to call the attention of the European press and governments to these sad happenings, requesting them, urgently, to exert themselves, wherever possible, in

order to put an end to these unspeakable cruelties, or at least to limit them as much as possible. I can hereby attest that *all* the Baha'is I have known have deeply impressed me as pure and shining examples of high moral standards, of disinterested devotion and of truly international bounty.

The following address is sufficient: Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, Haifa, Palestine.

(signed) Dr. A. Forel

P. S. I had the honour of hearing your talk in Geneva in 1923 on the subject of world peace and international arbitration[7].

We do not know what the reaction was to this appeal. The minister in question was none other than Edouard Herriot, premier of France at the time.

A few days later Forel addressed an almost identical plea to the *Neue Freie Presse* of Vienna. This was published on 26 April 1925 under the title "A Persecuted Religion: Islamic cruelties against the Baha'is", and contains Forel's explanation of the Baha'i teachings:

The Baha'i Religion, which was born in Persia, now has followers the world over. It is a religion with neither dogmas nor priests. Its twelve principles were proclaimed by Baha'u'llah in the year 1851. Among other things one finds: *All mankind is to be considered as one;* all prejudices against other peoples, other nations, other races must be abolished. All religions must unite in a superior unity which represents the Godhead. A firm federation of all peoples with an international tribunal must establish and maintain a universal and lasting peace. In addition to the different national languages an international language must be introduced and taught everywhere. Every human being has the same rights to the spiritual and physical necessities that his existence requires. All have the duty to seek out the truth for themselves; between true religion and true science there can be no contradictions. Both sexes should receive the best possible education corresponding to the development of their individual talents. Men and women have the same rights everywhere; all forms of slavery and subservience are strongly forbidden. All human beings have the duty to work; for invalids and people without a means of livelihood, the state must provide the latter through the enacting of laws.[8]

On 11 May Dr. J. E. Esslemont[9] wrote Forel on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, thanking him for the helpful article and inquiring if arrangements could be made to have it published in other newspapers. Forel replied, according to notes on the letter, and authorized translation and reproduction of the article. According to Forel himself, an "impartial Turkish translation of this article was published in a 'progressive' Istanbul newspaper". On 21 May Shoghi Effendi cabled Forel: "Delighted your article Viennese journal, it achieved notable result."[10]

During the following year persecution of the Baha'is in Persia intensified, and Forel wrote the following article, which appeared in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (May 23) and *Droit du Peuple* (15 May), in slightly different versions:

New Persecutions and Martyrdoms of Baha'is

I have learned from Shoghi Effendi, the present Head of the interdenominational Baha'i religion, that, alas!, in spite of their innocence, twelve precious members of the Baha'is have just been subjected to a long and atrocious martyrdom and were killed in southern Persia. This is a repetition of previous persecutions without any justification, for the Baha'is refrain from provoking anyone, in keeping with their sacred principles. They accept in their midst Muslims as they do all other confessions.

When, I ask, will Western Europe awake from its indifference and its heedlessness towards this flower of humanity which, by its principles, is fervently exerting itself in order to achieve, all over the earth, a true and effective love of one's fellowman, regardless of his religion.

The press of all parties is urgently requested to help us by publishing these lines in order to awaken the consciences.

The governments are requested to act with all their power in order to prevent the renewal of such atrocities: they can do this if they wish, of a common accord, by putting pressure on the Persian government.

The League of Nations is also requested to take up this matter. This is part of its international and supranational duty of keeping peace among all peoples. In unity there is force. Let us not lose this wonderful opportunity for unity in common action for the good. I will say no more—that should be sufficient.

Whoever has doubts can write to the Baha'i Bureau ... in Geneva for information and documentation.

Dr. A. Forel
former Professor at the
University of Zurich[11]

The same appeal was also sent to the League of Nations, addressed to Sir Eric Drummond, secretary general, along with the following hand-written message:

Yvorne (Vaud) Switzerland
12 May 1926

Honoured Sir,

I am sending you herewith a short but urgent appeal on behalf of the poor Baha'is, urgently requesting that you take note of it as well as of the explanations on the other attached sheet. I would particularly like to draw your attention to the penultimate paragraph of my appeal which concerns especially the League of Nations. I have been a Baha'i since 1921; the Baha'is number today over 500,000 adherents. I am counting on you to inform *as rapidly as possible* the organs of the League of Nations, whom it concerns, of the plight of the persecuted Baha'is in Jahrum; there is no time to lose.

Please accept, honoured Sir, the expression of my noblest sentiments. Dr. A. Forel

P.S. Please excuse my bother and my poor handwriting; my right arm is paralyzed and I am 78 years old[12].

Forel's letter and a copy of the answer he received are on file in the archives of the League of Nations. The reply must have been a disappointment:

... I am obliged to inform you that, concerning petitions on behalf of minorities, the League of Nations is only competent if the concerned States have accepted an international agreement concerning the protection of minorities and if this agreement has been placed under the guarantee of the League of Nations. Such is not the case of Persia, and the League of Nations is thus not competent to undertake action concerning the facts submitted in your request.

The following year, in a letter dated 27 April 1927, Shoghi Effendi again appealed , through his secretary, to Forel for his assistance and intervention on behalf of the persecuted Baha'is in Persia.

My dear Dr. Forel,

I am taking the liberty of sending you enclosed a copy of Shogi Effendi's letter to the Assemblies in the West, in connection with the martyrdom of still another brother of the Faith in Persia.

The horrible news of this evil happening has just broken upon us and Shogi Effendi would be very grateful if you could communicate the news to some papers in Switzerland and Germany for publication. With all our grief and feelings we can extend no helping hand to our fellow-Baha'is in that distracted country. All that we can do is to help through publicity, and acquaint humanity in the civilized world with such terrible tales of horror.

In the event of publication of the news contained in the enclosed letter, Shoghi Effendi would deeply appreciate it if you could send him a copy of it.

Shoghi Effendi added in his own handwriting:

My dear and valued co-worker:

Your letter dated March 24 and the copy of ‹Der Freidenker› have safely reached me and I thank you warmly for your continued efforts for the spread of the Baha'i Faith. I trust that the journals with which you are in touch will publish the account given in my letter, and I shall be pleased to receive copies of such publications. Their sufferings, so heroically borne, surely deserve the most strenuous efforts on our part to give them the widest possible publicity.

Your true and grateful co-worker,
Shoghi[13]

Forel's notes on the letter indicate that the news was sent to the 'Freidenker', to his printer and to Vienna. An account of the execution appeared in the *Neues Wiener Abendblatt* on 10 June 1927 under the title "Martyr of a new Religion: Murder of a Baha'i".[14]

Forel had earlier published in the *Neue Freie Presse* of Vienna still another article entitled "Persecution of the Baha'i Religion: A Letter from Persia". In it he quotes portions of a letter from a Baha'i in Hamadan that describe the various forms of open and subtle persecution to which the Baha'is there were being subjected daily. The article ended with this paragraph:

Be happy, friends. You are the free servants of God.
Fly free, sing happily, serve joyously, remember us always—and pray for us.
We all look forward to the day when we will, unhindered, be able to practice our Faith. This hope is strengthened through our Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, that the thick clouds oppressing the horizon of Persia will be dissipated and the sun of freedom will shine on our land, for it is the homeland of Baha'u'llah[15].

Forel seems to have taken this request for prayer to heart. In the unclassified documents of the Forel papers at the University of Lausanne there exists a small scrap of paper on which he wrote, in French on one side and in German on the other:

Baha'i Prayer for October 1927

O Thou, universal and unknowable God! Suffer us, poor humans on this small terrestrial globe, to work *relentlessly* for the *social good* of all mankind, just as Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha, and so many other courageous martyrs have done before us. Suffer us to struggle against our hereditary, voracious, hypocritical and egotistical instincts. No sweet-sounding slogans, whether spoken or written. Rather good, great and resolute acts. Only then, shall we overcome. Amen

(signed) A. Forel[16]

On the French copy of this prayer there is a note: "sent, 8 September 1927", but there is no indication to whom it was addressed.

It is a tragic coincidence that, in 1978, shortly before the recent recrudescence of cruel persecutions against the Persian Baha'i community, August Forel's portrait and symbols of his awe-inspiring lifework were printed on the new one-thousand-franc Swiss banknote. Though efforts to alleviate the sufferings of these innocent servants of humanity often seem (today as in Forel's day) fruitless and frustrating, we can, and certainly must, follow Forel's example and continue to do our utmost to awaken the world's conscience to this crying injustice.

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Notes and References

[1] Oscar Forel, *Auguste Forel* (Lausanne: Imprimerie Populaire, 1928), p.3; Julius Donath, «August Forel», *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie*, 136 (1931), 642–44; Arthur Kronfeld, «August Forel, der Mann und sein Werk», *Psychotherapeutische Praxis*, 1 (1934), 227–28.

[2] The Baha'i Faith is a monotheistic religion, founded in the 19th century by Baha'u'llah (The Glory of God) and based on the principles of the oneness of God, the oneness of religion and the oneness of mankind. Cf., e.g., *Baha'u'llah and the New Era* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980).

[3] 'Abdu'l-Baha, "Tablet to Dr. Auguste Henri Forel", *The Baha'i World, Volume XV, 1968–1973* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1976), pp. 37–43.

[4] «Oraison funèbre», *Fonds Forel*, Document no. IS 1925, I-12, Département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire, Lausanne.

[5] For a detailed treatment of the present-day persecutions, see *The Baha'is in Iran: A report on the Persecutions of a Religious Minority* (New York: Baha'i International Community, 866 U.N. Plaza, 1982).

For a treatment of the persecutions in the 1920s, see Douglas Martin, "The Baha'is of Iran Under the Pahlavi Regime, 1921–1979", *Middle East Focus* (March 1982), 7–17.

[6] 'Abdu'l-Baha did not flee to Palestine. Rather, as an exile, he shared the successive banishments of his father, Baha'u'llah. Palestine was for them the final destination of a series of exiles decreed by the shah of Persia and the Ottoman sultan. 'Abdu'l-Baha died in 1921, not 1922. The Baha'i Faith was actually founded in 1844, not 1851.

[7] August Forel to French foreign minister, 10 April 1925 (date arrived), Archives diplomatiques du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris, Document no. NS E, Asie, Perse, 1918–1929, vol. 11 – Questions religieuses, cote E-368-1.

[8] August Forel, «Eine verfolgte Religion: Islamitische Grausamkeiten gegen die Baha'is, *Neue Freie Presse*, Vienna (26 April 1925).

[9] J.E. Esslemont, M.D. (1874–1925), Medical Director of Home Sanatorium, Bournemouth,

England, from 1908 to 1923, author of *Baha'u'llah and the New Era* (see note 2), now translated into 58 languages.

[10] J. E. Esslemont to August Forel, 11 May 1925, Shoghi Effendi Letters, International Baha'i Archives, Haifa; August Forel to Mustapha Kémal Pacha, 18 November 1927 (draft), *Fonds Forel,* Document no. IS-1925, V A. 39, Lausanne; and Shoghi Effendi to Forel (telegramme), 21 May 1925, Fonds Forel, Documents no. IS-3765, IV-52, Lausanne.

[11] Auguste Forel, «Nouvelles Persécutions et Martyres des Baha'is», *Droit du Peuple,* Lausanne (15 May 1926).

[12] August Forel to Sir Eric Drummond, 12 May 1926, Archives of the League of Nations, Geneva, document no. 41/51398/51398 (also contains answer to Forel from G. C., Directeur de la Section des Minorités, pour le Secrétaire général).

[13] Shoghi Effendi to August Forel, 27 April 1927, Shoghi Effendi Letters.

[14] «Märtyrer einer neuen Religion: Ermordung eines Bahais», *Neues Wiener Abendblatt,* Vienna (10 June 1927).

[15] August Forel, «Die Verfolgung der Baha'i-Religion: Ein Brief aus Persien», *Neue Freie Presse,* Vienna (21 February 1926).

[16] August Forel, «Notes Diverses», *Fonds Forel,* Document no. IS-1925, II-G. 46, Lausanne.

Summary

August Forel was one of the greatest scientific minds of the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the present century. He also worked actively for many social reforms and for world peace. He embraced the Baha'i Faith in 1921 and did much to further these teachings in the remaining ten years of his life. Among these activities one finds his defense of the persecuted Persian Baha'i community in the 1920s, including letters to the secretary-general of the League of Nations, the French Premier, as well as articles in leading European newspapers.

Zusammenfassung

August Forel trat 1921 der Baha'i-Religion bei. Diese wurde 1844 von einem Perser gegründet als eine überkonfessionelle monotheistische Religion, die in Persien selbst mehr als eine halbe Million Anhänger gewann und sich auch in vielen andern Ländern ausbreitete. Als in den Jahren 1925–1927 im Gefolge eines politischen Umsturzes die Baha'i-Mitglieder von den Muslims in Persien grausam verfolgt wurden, versuchte Forel die Weltöffentlichkeit aufzurütteln, indem er in zahlreichen Zeitungsartikeln für die Verfolgten eintrat. Er wandte sich auch an den französischen Außenminister Edouard Herriot und an den Generalsekretär des Völkerbundes, Sir Eric Drummond. Diese historischen Fakten gewinnen heute eine tragische Aktualität durch die gegenwärtige Verfolgungswelle gegen die Baha'i unter dem Komeini-Regime im Iran.

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