

BOOK REVIEW

MUSIC, DEVOTIONS, AND MASHRIQU'L-ADHKÁR

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This book's title describes its content well: it is about music, devotions, and the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* (Bahá'í House of Worship). These are three separate subjects, treated in three separate sections of the book. The overarching idea connecting the three is the adaptation of the Bahá'í Faith to North American Protestant culture. But the reader is also warned that "although the actions of Bahá'ís should be based on the teachings of the Faith, there is no necessary connection between those teachings and the activities of the Bahá'ís" (p. xviii). The warning is well justified, for the author is more intent on portraying how he feels the Bahá'ís have misinterpreted the Bahá'í teachings (often deliberately, he thinks) than on discussing the Faith's adaptation to western culture.

This approach will present difficulties to most readers. The book's editing is another difficulty; one gets the impression that the author resisted all efforts of the editor to improve his prose. Dangling clauses, pronouns that refer to the wrong antecedent, and split infinitives are frequent. The narration is usually in a standard impersonal scholarly tone, but it occasionally lapses unexpectedly into sentences where "I," "we," and in one case "you" (p. 57) function as subject. The narration is uneven; sometimes it provides too little information to make its point clearly, and at other times it provides so much that the narrative flow is impeded. On the one hand, there are references to "Yinger," "Jones," and "Cohen" in the introduction. Presumably they are scholars, but it is not said what their fields are, nor are their first names given anywhere (even in the footnotes). Some may assume they are Bahá'í scholars, which presumably they are not. There are also references to "Remey" (presumably Charles Mason), "the Hearst party," "May Maxwell," and "Louise Waite" without saying who they are.

On the other hand, pages 38-44 reconstruct the details of which editions of Louise Waite's *Bahá'í Hymns of Peace and Praise* were published and when, including how many copies were sold per year and what songs were included in each. Perhaps in the future, biographers of Louise Waite will appreciate the information; but even they could have read such details in an appendix. As a result of the uneven narration, specialists—let alone the lay reader—will find this book difficult to follow.

Fortunately, the book contains very few typographical errors. One error is of note, however: the House of Worship in 'Ishqábád is said to have been damaged by an earthquake in 1968 (p. 17), when the date was actually 1948. It was razed in 1963.

Because the book lacks a single narrative thread, it is easiest to review chapter by chapter. The work begins with a chapter describing the devotional practices common in the nineteenth century Iranian Bahá'í community. It does a good job of assembling information from scattered sources, particularly regarding

the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád. It would be helpful, especially for arguments found in subsequent chapters, to know more about the practice of Bahá'í obligatory prayer at the House of Worship. The author quotes a Western Bahá'í Orientalist who had visited the House of Worship as specifically saying that it had no "pools for ablutions" (p. 13) and suggests that obligatory prayers were not regularly performed at the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. This major departure from Muslim practice implies that Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá had specified that Bahá'í worship would not follow the old pattern.

Chapter two examines the development of Bahá'í devotions in North America, especially the hymns of Louise Waite. The description of her life and works and the printing of a selection of her hymns constitutes one of the book's most important contributions to Bahá'í Studies.

Bahá'í hymn singing has died out, but there is no reason why it cannot be partly revived; many Bahá'ís love hymns, and before the publication of this book virtually no Bahá'ís were aware of the fact that Bahá'í hymns had once existed. Bahá'ís are often inclined to object that hymns are Christian and that the Bahá'í community should not adopt old forms. But one can just as easily argue that hymns are an expression of European culture—not all hymns are Christian, after all—and that there is no reason why Bahá'ís cannot adopt European cultural forms to express their religious feeling, just as they enthusiastically sing Bahá'í songs written in the genre of African spirituals or enjoy native American Bahá'í music. The reviewer's own local community has started singing these hymns at Feasts.

Chapter three explores the role of Bahá'í hymnody (hymn writing and singing) in community life by surveying the practices followed in every Bahá'í community for which information is available. Some historical context about the Bahá'í communities and their practices would have been helpful here. For example, the author mentions that the Chicago Bahá'ís used Brewer's edition of *Sacred Songs and Hymns* from 1905 to 1908, but he does not describe its style or contents. This reviewer attempted to locate a copy of the hymnal but was hampered by the fact that the author never gave a complete reference.

Chapter four considers why hymn singing ended in the North American Bahá'í communities. The author says that "the most extraordinary feature of the era of Bahá'í hymnody" was that it ended at all and that it ended "overnight." This is an exaggeration; the text describes hymn singing as ending gradually, from about 1920 to about 1940, which is a period longer than when hymn singing was popular (1903-1920). The author attributes its demise to neglect of, and opposition to, hymn singing on the part of the national Bahá'í leadership, which was of "high church" background and from the East Coast. The argument may be true, but it is made in a disorganized and often illogical fashion. For example, the anti-hymn statements of a single traveling teacher are quoted, and it is implied (without justification) that they are typical of the Bahá'í "power structure." (The teacher is also termed "immensely ego-centric" [p. 105].)

The book notes that in 1938 the National Spiritual Assembly wrote Shoghi Effendi to ask if Louise Waite's hymnbook could be reprinted. The letter, which is quoted in the book, seems quite fair and even-handed. However, the author dismisses its positive comments about music as "ritual statements" (p. 109)

and criticizes the National Spiritual Assembly for opposing the reprinting without offering evidence that they did oppose the reprinting. The author also alludes to “anti-hymn forces” (p. 114), which he never demonstrates existed, and refers to the “rumors” (p. 114) they were spreading, none of which are described or footnoted.

Even more surprising than the conspiracy theory offered to explain the demise of hymn singing is the complete lack of consideration for any sociological or cultural factors that might have been at work. Considering that the book is a rewriting of a doctoral dissertation in ethnomusicology, one would think that the author should at least be aware of social and cultural factors, and only dismiss them with good reason.

It seems to the reviewer that changes in the musical habits and religious interests of the American population were powerful forces eroding the popularity of Bahá’í hymnody. The first generation of American Bahá’ís were raised in the nineteenth century, when mass entertainment had not yet developed. Hymn singing was a common practice at home; the author quotes several Bahá’ís about how meaningful hymns were to them while children. Furthermore, the first generation of Bahá’ís reproduced the worship life of their Protestant churches in their Bahá’í communities; Sunday Bahá’í services were common and were usually held in a rented hall where a piano or organ was present. Feasts were usually held in the hall as well, and their devotional portion was structured similarly to the Sunday worship.

In the 1920s, major changes occurred in both mass entertainment and in Bahá’í worship practices. The spread of the radio inaugurated a new era of popular music. The development of jazz and the blues, and the refinement of country music created new musical genres. The rise of the musical introduced many new popular songs. After World War One, society itself took a much more secular turn. Church attendance decreased. With the increased emphasis on the Bahá’í social teachings and less emphasis on biblical prophecy (which had been the focus of Bahá’í teaching efforts until about 1910), the Bahá’í community began to attract persons who were more secular and probably less familiar with hymn singing. Furthermore, Bahá’í communities stopped holding Sunday worship services and moved Feasts to private homes, where pianos and organs were rare. An era of Bahá’í music that relied on portable instruments—such as guitars and flutes—and that was based on popular music began. It is difficult to sing hymns to guitar accompaniment. Consequently, the era of Bahá’í hymns came to an end.

Chapter five abruptly begins part two of the book, which focuses on the House of Worship. The chapter opens with the supposed exposure of an untruth by Corinne True about how the Wilmette site was found. The author implies that True lied; he neglects the fact that True was a highly intuitive woman and could occasionally make illogical or inaccurate statements without meaning to mislead others.

The author claims that True’s lie is symptomatic of the problems connected with selecting a location for the Temple, but the chapter does not argue the case successfully. Corinne True’s motivation for “lying” is never adequately explained. In the concluding pages the author suggests that her disagreements with the Chicago House of Spirituality, and with other members of the Bahai

Temple Unity, were caused by the fact that she “was of higher social standing” (p. 172) than they. But this statement is never proved. The facts speak otherwise. True married a middleclass salesman of encyclopedias, not a wealthy man. She associated with many poorer Bahá'ís—one of her closest friends was Nettie Tobin, who was poor—and she was the first Chicago Bahá'í to attempt to teach the Faith to blacks. Furthermore, the Bahá'ís with whom she worked and often disagreed were arguably of equal or higher social standing than she. Thornton Chase was an important business executive from a well-off New England family, a published author who had attended college. Many members of the Bahai Temple Unity were socially prominent: Charles Mason Remey came from a wealthy family of Washington socialites; Helen Goodall was quite wealthy and well connected in California; Albert Hall was a prominent lawyer and Republican party leader in Minnesota. Finally, if True were an upperclass snob, someone contemporary would have said so. Thornton Chase—who frequently disagreed with her, who frequently mentioned in letters to his friends his clashes with her, and who was a shrewd observer of human character—would probably have discussed such a tendency. But neither he, nor any other Bahá'í, ever accuses her of being socially pretentious.

The author then adds that it was “not an uncommon pattern” in the Bahá'í community for women of high social standing to resist organizational attempts by “social inferiors” (p. 172). He refers to “one local community” where “the most socially prominent woman refused to permit the development of any local institutional organization of the Faith for years” (p. 172) but does not support this general statement by naming the community, citing the evidence that the reason for opposition to organization specifically was class differences, and giving the sources of evidence.

The author goes on to say that “for some reason” True felt that the Temple “must be located on the North Shore” (p. 173). This statement is based on the fact that the House of Spirituality proposed a temple site located in Jackson Park, south of Chicago. The author speculates that “largely through True’s actions” (p. 173) the option had to be abandoned. However, the author notes that minutes of meetings and other documents do not say anything at all about why the site was dropped (p. 133).

One reason chapter five is difficult to follow is that the author does not directly address an issue that is very important to him: whether the House of Worship in the Chicago area was to be a local House of Worship or a national House of Worship. A local Temple would be the focal point of worship of a single community, which would hold its Holy Day observances, the devotional portion of its Feasts, and other religious services in it. A national House of Worship would not serve a single local community but would carry out an entirely different role: to serve as a symbol of the Bahá'í religion; to be the spiritual focal point of a national Bahá'í community; and to serve the public as well as the Bahá'ís. In Christian terms, it was a question of whether the Bahá'ís would build a local church or a cathedral.

Throughout the book’s remaining chapters, one encounters the author’s assumption that the decision to make the House of Worship a national temple was a disaster. He believes that had a small Chicago temple been built, it could have been completed by the 1920s, and the North American Bahá'í community

would have had before it the example of a community with a thriving worship life.

Thus it is unfortunate that the process whereby the Temple shifted from a local Chicago project to a national project is not systematically examined, especially when one considers that the hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is everywhere to be seen in the change. He was the one who encouraged other North American communities to drop their own temple plans and support Chicago's. He was the one who seized upon the idea of the Temple as an instrument for organizing the Bahá'ís on a continental basis, thereby taking Chicago out of the center of the construction effort and inevitably making the Temple national in scope.

And lest one argue that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was merely encouraging everyone to support the construction of a temple for the Chicago Bahá'í community, one must consider 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words to Arthur Agnew, when the latter was on pilgrimage: "It is not necessary to build it [the Temple] in the center of the city where lands are expensive. Let it be built where the lands are cheaper" ("Extracts from notes taken by Mr. Arthur Agnew, Acca, April 16, 1907, Midday meal," in Chicago House of Spirituality Records, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois). For the Chicago area, that meant building the Temple a considerable distance from downtown, especially if a site along the lake was to be chosen (as 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in the same interview, urged). Even the Wilmette site was so expensive that it took the North American Bahá'ís, with considerable help from Persia, six or eight years to pay for it. Finally, the author never quotes 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi as saying that the project had taken a major wrong turn and should be considered a project to build a temple for a local Bahá'í community.

In chapter six the author turns to the question of selecting a design for the temple. Louis Bourgeois—by all accounts an impetuous and intuitive man—is treated even worse than Corinne True was in the previous chapter. The author examines the influences on Bourgeois's architecture and argues convincingly that Bourgeois's final design was shaped by three factors: his study of Charles Mason Remey's designs; his appreciation of the works of the famous architect, Louis Sullivan; and his earlier design for the Peace Palace at The Hague. However, the author goes a step farther and accuses Bourgeois of plagiarizing these other architects. How one defines plagiarism in architecture is an important question that is never discussed; architects influence each other all the time, after all. Clearly, Bourgeois did not steal drawings from anyone, but familiarized himself with their published plans and completed buildings, and modified what he saw in his own fashion. Does that constitute plagiarism? He notes that Bourgeois had been informally accused of plagiarism and discussed the issue with a prominent Bahá'í, Carl Scheffler, a professional artist, who became convinced that the charge of plagiarism was not valid. The author notes that this "says more for Bourgeois' powers of persuasion than Scheffler's perspicacity as a professional artist" (p. 197), surely an unwarranted attack on Scheffler, not a rebuttal of his professional opinion.

The chapter contains two other questionable generalizations. On page 200 the author says that it "was widely accepted" by the Bahá'ís that Bourgeois had received his design through the process of direct revelation. That Bourgeois made such a claim seems clear; but the author presents no evidence that it was

widely accepted, even in the form of quotations from persons saying they believed his claim. On page 209 Bourgeois is described as “an elemental force rather than a rational being,” a vague and unnecessary insult.

The chapter closes with a peculiar harangue that “the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár was not to be considered a place for Bahá'ís, indeed they were discouraged from using it themselves” (p. 215). Nothing in the previous chapters constitutes an elaboration on this assertion; rather, it seems to refer to arguments in the three later chapters, and even those allege little about how the Bahá'ís have been discouraged from using the building. The author's conclusion that the building had come to be perceived “in an almost talismanic way, and the functions it had originally been planned to shelter had been largely forgotten” is a code for saying that since the Temple serves no local community, it serves no real function at all.

Chapter seven starts the third and last section of the book, on devotions in the Bahá'í community. It begins with 1908, when the Chicago Bahá'ís first organized a choir. Much of the chapter elaborates the allegations that the National Spiritual Assembly was “indifferent” (p. 270) or even opposed to Bahá'í music because its members were from a “high church” background. Much information on the relationship between Horace Holley and liberal Protestants is given, but none on other members of the National Spiritual Assembly. Furthermore, it is not clear whether any of the information is relevant to the issue of singing. Even “high church” services occasionally include singing by the congregation. Indeed, one could argue that “high church” Bahá'ís might be in favor of communal singing, as an antidote to the starkness of a Bahá'í service consisting solely of reading the Word. Again, no overt statements by Horace Holley against singing Bahá'í songs are produced.

Chapter eight examines the devotional use of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. It criticizes Horace Holley for being ignorant of the correct uses of the House of Worship. The author claims that “preaching” (giving speeches) was “the surest way to acquire status” in the Bahá'í community (p. 280) and adds that “we might suppose that for an institution of the status of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár that banned the exercise of the principal means to recognition within the community, the ability to make speeches, and focused on producing spiritual cohesion through prayer in spoken and sung form to become operational could be seen as threatening” (p. 281). It seems farfetched to insinuate that anyone would be threatened by the House of Worship, unless evidence for such a perception can be adduced; and the chapter makes no effort to do so.

The chapter also implies that Horace Holley acted dishonestly by quoting a statement by himself about the House of Worship as if it were an “authoritative source” (p. 283). It is not at all clear why Holley should resort to such a device in a letter addressed to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who presumably would be indifferent about the use of the House of Worship. The evidence adduced for the misrepresentation is that Holley placed the citation “within quotation marks”—which is something one might normally do when quoting any source—and that Holley didn't attribute the quotation, which one doesn't often do in letters.

Chapter eight closes with a discussion of the problem of using a building open to tourists for Bahá'í functions, especially holy days, which do not occur

when tourists might expect them, such as Sunday. The book notes that the House of Worship faced the perpetual problem of attracting enough Bahá'ís to the services. As a result, tourists often made up a substantial portion of the audience for Bahá'í services, and the House of Worship then faced the problem of making the services comprehensible and interesting to them. The author faults the House of Worship for being more concerned about non-Bahá'ís than Bahá'ís, a perception that strikes the reviewer as unfair and unsupported.

The ninth and final chapter, "Scripture and Culture in the Development of Western Bahá'í Devotional Practice," purports to explore the western bias in understanding the statements of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá concerning how Bahá'í devotional practice is to be conducted. It notes that Islam makes a sharp distinction between *ṣalāt*, "obligatory prayer," and *du'á*, "prayer or communion." The chapter mentions that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in a tablet about devotions in the Bahá'í House of Worship, says that Bahá'ís should perform *ṣalāt* there. In another tablet about community worship 'Abdu'l-Bahá is quoted as saying that at a Bahá'í worship service the Bahá'ís should first recite *munáját*, then *namáz*. (The author does not mention his assumption that *munáját* is synonymous with *du'á*, and that *namáz* is synonymous with *ṣalāt*.)

These tablets imply that Bahá'ís should, or can, perform their obligatory prayers en masse. The author makes much of the North American's "misunderstanding" of this Bahá'í teaching, which he attributes to a Protestant bias against ritualistic behavior and a western misunderstanding of Bahá'u'lláh's prohibition of congregational prayer. He notes with consternation that no provision for obligatory prayer has been made at the Wilmette Temple and that Bahá'í worship services are sterile without its communal performance.

The author also notes that the Bahá'í writings do not always use technical terms in the same way as Islam (p. 312) but does not seriously consider the possibility that the Bahá'í writings do not always use these four words for prayer in their usual Muslim manner. This may be the case in these texts. The Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre, when translating for the reviewer the same tablet on community worship that the author quotes, translated *namáz* as "silent prayer," not "obligatory prayer." When the reviewer asked why the technical meaning of the word was not translated, they explained that *namáz* in Persian does not always mean obligatory prayer—it is commonly used by Christian Persians simply to mean "prayer"—and that there was no evidence that in this tablet 'Abdu'l-Bahá was specifically endorsing the practice of the entire Bahá'í community saying their obligatory prayers together. They noted that the original translator, who would have been familiar with the word's technical meaning, decided not to translate the term as "obligatory prayer," possibly because he was familiar with the context in which the tablet was written. Furthermore, one would have expected that if 'Abdu'l-Bahá had meant community worship to include obligatory prayer, he would have elaborated on the subject, and the Guardian would have explained this to Western Bahá'ís.

The publication *Music, Devotions, and Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* raises several important issues for the Bahá'í community's consideration. What is the nature and purpose of Bahá'í scholarship? Should it focus strongly on personal weaknesses and controversies in the Bahá'í community? While the scholar cannot ignore personal weaknesses and disagreements, it seems to the reviewer that

the scholar has an obligation to document these instances thoroughly and carefully. If scholars believe they have found an example of the Bahá'í community seriously misinterpreting the Bahá'í writings, it is probably wise to consult with other scholars or with the Bahá'í World Centre for clarification before publishing such a conclusion. It is also important for readers to examine an author's judgments carefully and critically before accepting them.

Finally, there remains the important question of the nature and efficacy of the devotional life of the Bahá'í community. Throughout the book the author hints at a vision of a Bahá'í community life characterized by uplifting and inspiring worship. The book does not offer specific steps for improving Bahá'í worship, but by raising the questions the book helps us to think about the Bahá'í community's devotional life and consequently may help us make it even more spiritually satisfying.

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