

Book Review

The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies. Edited by Dominic P. Brookshaw and Seena Fazel. London: Routledge (Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies), 2008, xv + 283 pp.

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Despite the fact that, since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, the Bahá'í Faith has been the largest religious minority in Iran, and despite the significant role that members of this community have played in important fields in modern Iranian history (such as education, health, women's advancement, and so on), the historiography on modern Iran, up to a decade ago, was devoid of any serious and thorough study of this community. The main reason for this academic abnormality has been the fact that no Iranian regime or government ever recognized the Bahá'í Faith, because recognizing it would mean acknowledging that the same God who sent previous prophets (among whom are Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad) has sent a new prophet. This, in itself, would practically mean pulling down one of the main pillars of the Islamic religion, namely that the Prophet Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets."

Furthermore, for the Shi'a (who have comprised the vast majority of the Iranian people since the Safavid period, in the sixteenth century) and especially the Shi'i clerical establishment, it would have meant acknowledging that God has sent down a new order in which there is no necessity for clerics. It is due to this main reason that anything related to the Bahá'í Faith or to Bahá'ís has become taboo in Iran, and this, obviously, includes any study that sheds light on any constructive and positive role the Bahá'ís have played in Iran. One should, therefore, welcome this book, which is one of the more serious attempts not only to shed new light on the Bahá'í

community in Iran, but also to analyze its role in the development of modern Iran.

The book in question is a collection of eleven articles. The articles concern the latter Qajar, the Pahlavi, and the Islamic Republic periods. Thematically, they concern a range of subjects such as the conversion of other religious minorities in Iran to the Bahá'í Faith; Bahá'í ideas on, and the role of Bahá'ís in, the promotion of the status of women, the advent of modern education, health, and constitutionalism; the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran; and secular and Islamist anti-Bahá'í discourse in Iran.

Apart from converts from the majority Shi'í population in Iran, converts to the Bahá'í Faith also came from the other two recognized religions. Mehrdad Amanat and Fereyduñ Vahman, in their articles, try to analyze the reasons that brought Jews and Zoroastrians, respectively—namely, members of two recognized and protected minorities in Iran—to convert to a new religion which not only was not officially recognized by the state and the Shi'í clerical establishment, but which also came out of Shi'í Islam and which had been persecuted in Iran during most of its history since its inception.

According to Mehrdad Amanat, the main reasons Iranian Jews converted to the Bahá'í Faith seemed to be their messianic expectations coupled with the belief that their own religion did not provide the means to meet the challenges posed by the modern world. For those Jewish converts, the Bahá'í Faith seemed to meet those expectations and challenges. Messianic expectations as a reason explaining conversion to the Bahá'í Faith seems not to have been limited only to Iranian Jews, but as Vahman explains, also applied to Iranian Zoroastrians. Also, coming from an Iranocentric religion, members of the Zoroastrian community in Iran were attracted to the Bahá'í Faith because of its Iranian character (that is, its use of Persian as a sacred language alongside Arabic; the adoption of Naw-Rúz, the Iranian New Year, as the Bahá'í New Year as well; Iran being the birth place of the religion; and so on).

Each of the next four articles in the book concerns Bahá'í perspectives and roles in a major field. The first article in this group could fit into the field of gender studies; in it the author, Dominic Brookshaw (who is also

one of the co-editors of the book), surveys some 250 letters sent between 1870 to 1921 by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Bahá'í women from prominent Bahá'í families in Iran and India. In these letters they praise the addressees for converting to the Bahá'í Faith and for their contribution to the evolution of Bahá'í ideals, encouraging them to take a more active role in the Bahá'í community.

The second article in this group, by Moojan Momen, deals with the important role Iranian Bahá'ís played in the advent of modern schools and education in Iran. After the various foreign Christian missions and religious minorities in Iran, the Bahá'ís were the last religious minority permitted to open schools in Iran at the very end of the nineteenth century. According to Momen, the main impetus for the Bahá'ís to open such schools was their own religious belief, which gives a very important place to education, and of a universal kind. Momen provides important details about those schools, which operated till their closure in 1934 by Reza Shah Pahlavi. Since the role played by the Bahá'ís in the field of education has not been recognized in the vast majority of studies on modern education in Iran, Momen's article is a welcome and important addition to the existing literature in this field.

The third article in this group concerns Bahá'í perspectives in the field of health and hygiene and the role played, and initiatives taken, by Iranian Bahá'ís in this important field. Again, as in the case of education, the authors, Seena Fazel and Minou Foadi, reach the conclusion that the main drive for such role and initiatives was the Bahá'í sacred writings, which contain some medical and health directives. These inspired Bahá'ís to build, for example, new and more hygienic bathhouses and hospitals, which operated till 1979, when they were closed along with other Bahá'í-run institutions.

The fourth and last article in this group, written by Kavian Milani, delves into Bahá'í views on, and attitudes towards, constitutional government in general and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11 in particular. Milani stresses the fact that although the Bahá'ís favored a constitutional type of government, they refrained, by the order of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, from taking an active role in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution

simply because he believed that an active Bahá'í role in it would have associated the entire movement with the Bahá'ís, and this would have proved detrimental to the cause of the Iranian pro-constitutionalists. Still, Milani states that in their teachings and the practice and spread of their faith, the Bahá'ís not only contributed to the conditions that made the Constitutional Revolution take place, but also to the development of the constitution.

The last five articles discuss various aspects of Bahá'í persecution and discrimination in Iran. The first article in this group, by Eliz Sanasarian, makes a comparative analysis of the situation of the Bahá'ís with that of the other religious minorities (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians) since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. She finds little change, over the course of the last three decades, in the social and legal status of these minorities, and calls for some changes to be adopted by the Iranian regime.

The second article, by Abbas Amanat, relates to a much earlier period of Bahá'í history: he looks into the historical roots of Bábí–Bahá'í persecution in Qájár Iran. Unlike the other religious minorities, who were officially recognized and protected under the wing of Islam, the Bábís and Bahá'ís lacked such a status for they “were seen as a post-Islamic heresy whose very existence militated against the Islamic notion of prophetic finality” (175). Amanat also attempts to look at the anatomy of the cycle of anti-Bahá'í persecutions, and he finds interesting characteristics.

The third and fourth articles in this last group discuss two anti-Bahá'í discourses during the Pahlavi period, namely those of the secular intellectuals and the Islamists. Houchang E. Chehabi discerns two main groups among the secular Iranian intellectuals: those (such as Ahmad Kasravi) who perceived the Bahá'ís as agents of foreign powers in Iran, and those (mainly from among the anti-Pahlavi secular intellectuals) who regarded the Bahá'ís as pro-Pahlavi. Thus, for both subgroups the Bahá'ís were considered as a generally negative element in Iran. As far as the Islamic anti-Bahá'í discourse is concerned, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi finds that the fate of the Bahá'ís much depended on the court–clergy relationship, namely when Muhammad Reza Shah was young and still weak (that is, up to

the mid-1950s), he needed the cooperation, support, and legitimacy of the Shi'i clergy and therefore permitted Islamic anti-Bahá'í agitation; but when he started to feel strong and popular (mainly after the 1953 coup), and especially after the relationship with the 'ulamá started deteriorating, the court limited such agitation to a large extent.

The fifth and final article in this group, written by Reza Afshari, is a long and very detailed article concerning Bahá'í persecution and discrimination in post-revolutionary Iran—which rates as one of the worst records of the Islamic Republic of Iran in terms of human rights.

Although the articles in this collection primarily concern the study of Iranian Bahá'ís from sociohistorical perspectives, their importance and relevance to other fields should not escape the eyes of students and scholars of Iran. Each and every one of these eleven articles amply shows how relevant, important, and valuable Bahá'í Studies could be to a range of topics and fields in the modern history of Iran. Thus, an important conclusion of this and other recent books on the Bahá'ís of Iran would be this: that given the multilayered spread of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran since the mid-nineteenth century and the important role played by Iranian Bahá'ís in core fields in the history of modern Iran (such as religious minorities, women's status, education, health, intellectual life, reform, and modernization), new studies in such fields should make every effort to consult Bahá'í sources and regard them as an important category of sources, which are written mostly in Persian. Those who do that will surely find their studies to be richer and more comprehensive.