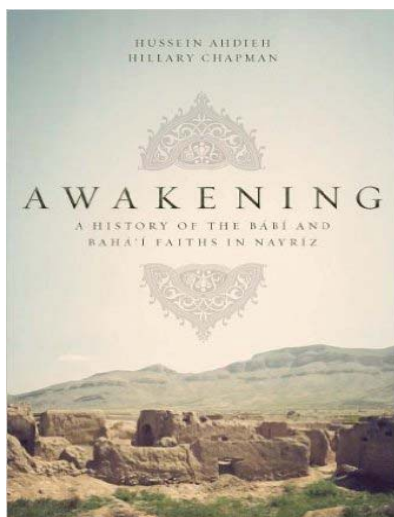


Book Review



Awakening—A History of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths in Nayríz, by Hussein Ahdieh and Hillary Chapman, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, IL, 2013, 352 pages.

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Thanks to the efforts of the Bahá'í International Community, the United Nations, and the protests of various national governments, the persistent egregious violation of the rights of the Bahá'ís of Iran is well documented and well publicized in the world today. Less well known to most sympathizers is the long history of the persecution of the followers of the new Faith from its inception in the 1840s in what was then Qajar Dynasty-ruled Persia. The severity, indeed often barbarity, of the persecution of the Bábís and later Bahá'ís in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth

century is a chapter of religious history comparable to, for instance, the worst of the persecution suffered by the early Christians. The period of severe persecution and spiritual ferment in the history of the Bahá'í Faith has been described by Shoghi Effendi as the “Heroic,” or “Apostolic Age,” beginning with the Declaration of the Báb in 1844 and ending with the death of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1921. It is this period that authors Hussein Ahdieh and Hillary Chapman examine in their book *Awakening—A History of the Bahá'í and Bábí Faiths in Nayríz*.

Specifically, the book focuses on events that took place in the small town of Nayríz (modern spelling Neyríz), southeast of Shiraz in Iran, in 1850, 1853, and 1909. In each of these years there was a sharp upturn in the persecution of the Bábís (or by 1909 the Bahá'ís) living in that town—those Persians who had “awakened” to the new Revelation—resulting in the plunder, maiming, and slaughter of hundreds of men, women, and children, most of whom did in fact act heroically, with almost unfathomable courage and steadfastness in refusing to renounce their beliefs.

Many Bahá'ís will be familiar with such works as Nabil’s *The Dawn-Breakers* or Shoghi Effendi’s *God Passes By*, which describe in detail the early history of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, and so will recognize some of the same information provided by Ahdieh and Chapman. Those able to read Farsi and familiar with the

many more Persian-language accounts of this history will have even greater familiarity with some of the persons and momentous events described by the authors of *Awakening*. What the well-researched and copiously referenced book contributes to our knowledge, however, is a careful synthesis of multiple accounts, including those from unpublished memoirs of eyewitnesses and some from verbal testimonies offered by descendants of survivors (including Ahdieh's own family), within the framework of a historical narrative that follows the lives of Bábís and Bahá'ís from the town of Nayríz. Among those early believers are such formidable heroes as Vahíd (Siyyid Yahya-i-Darabi), a prominent cleric of the time and an early disciple of the Báb who attracted thousands in Persia, including citizens of Nayríz, to the new Faith, and who shortly thereafter sacrificed his life in its defense.

Awakening begins, following a brief introduction, with basic background information on the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, Islam, and Shi'ite Islam. Chapter 1 offers an informal portrait of daily life among the people in village Persia, presumably what Nayríz would have been like in the early nineteenth century. As in many other parts of the world, the authors suggest that culture and religion were not clearly demarcated, and people depended on tradition and the authority of local religious leaders for guidance. This description sets the backdrop for the subsequent chapters, which offer in greater detail the story of the Báb's

life, His teachings, His execution, the effects of His Revelation on people such as Vahíd (who stands at the center of events described in chapters 3 to 7), the collective punishment of the Bábís following the attempt on the life of the Shah, the transformation of the Bábís into Bahá'ís following the declaration of His station by Bahá'u'lláh, and the renewed conflict and persecution of the Bahá'ís in 1909. The book ends with a chapter called "Exodus," divided in sections, giving glimpses of the Bahá'í community of Nayríz, which by 1921 had "become strong" against the circumstances of political events in Iran up to 1956, when once again, a wave of persecution and vandalism against the Bahá'ís of Iran broke out under the influence of hate propaganda.

A particular strength of *Awakening* is that the authors effectively weave the persecution stories of Nayríz Bahá'ís (the crises) with the stories of the successful spread of the Faith in Iran and beyond, accounts of the safekeeping and transit from place to place of the sacred remains of the Báb to, at last, the interment of His remains on Mount Carmel by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in March 1909, and with a description of the opening of the American Temple Convention in Chicago, also in March 1909 (the victories). Periodic references to the life of the Báb's widow, Khadíjih Bagum, are also interesting.

The authors of *Awakening* state in their introduction that they had two goals in preparing the narrative: one was to make this history accessible to

a broader audience for whom Bábí and Bahá'í (and also Muslim and Persian) history may be unfamiliar; the other was to “memorialize the individuals who suffered so much during these conflicts” (4). These two goals are challenging to synchronize, and in my view the authors succeeded better with the second than the first goal. A “broader audience” may get confused by the many names mentioned in the book and the tendency of the book to jump around from different events and personages. Another problem for this reviewer are the missing references to some quotations from the Báb (46, 48), and the somewhat awkward mix of writing styles used in the book—such as the informal portrait of chapter 1, the odd use of ellipses in chapter 9, the use of bullet points in chapter 16, the disconcerting use of the present tense (presumably to suggest immediacy and/or simultaneous events described) alternated with the more usual past tense for a historical narrative, the use of one-sentence paragraphs, and the use of both footnotes *and* end-notes (and the absence of the same for chapter 14).

Only two maps are offered in the book, both in the introduction, and both of Nayríz and its immediate environs. It would have been useful to have another map locating Nayríz in the country of Iran, and perhaps also a glossary of names at the back of the book. The historical photographs of people and places, and facsimiles of calligraphic Sacred Writings, however, are welcome, as is the inclusion

of relevant passages from the Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá at appropriate intervals.

A current preoccupation of the media is the presumed inevitable relationship between religion and violence. Many people seem to believe today that religion is somehow inherently violent and followers thus prone to justifying and using violence, especially in the face of real or imagined threats. While the authors touch on this important topic here and there in brief paragraphs, the book's focus could have provided an excellent opportunity to expatiate on this relationship in the unfolding spiritual drama of the entry into the world of two Manifestations of God and subsequent upheavals. While readers who are acquainted with the history of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths may be familiar with the prolonged siege that ended—following the attackers' duplicitous assurances of a peaceful resolution—with the slaughter of hundreds of Bábís defending their lives in Fort Tabarsi (1848–49 in Mazandaran), the same readers may not know about the almost identical situation in Fort Khaji (a crumbling ruin on the outskirts of Nayríz) in 1850. The call to arms by the Bábís, including Vahíd, though primarily defensive, was also premeditated to some extent. The authors explain that the use of violent defense—even offence—in the name of one's faith was normalized in the context of Shi'i Islamic prophecy concerning the advent of the Qá'im. Indeed, the Bábís

were doing what their conscience, fervor, and circumstances dictated. Bahá'u'lláh later forbade the use of violence in defense of one's faith. Yet, the authors could have made an even stronger case for the transformative effects of the new Revelation on the movement from violence to nonviolence as normative, even in the face of severe persecution, had they placed greater emphasis on and analysis of this phenomenon evidenced within the Bahá'í community of Iran.

In the end, apart from the stylistic issues mentioned previously, and this reviewer's concern that the authors missed the opportunity to delve deeper into the relationship between religion and violence on the one hand, and the spiritual transformation of the Bábí-Bahá'í community of Iran and nonviolence on the other hand, the book is well worth reading, the events within it important to learn about, and the authors to be commended for the significant amount of research that went into the book's preparation.