

Dominic P. Brookshaw and Seena Fazel, eds., *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies*, Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), xv + 283 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-35673-2

In spite of the fact that the Baha'i sect has remained the biggest religious minority in Iran since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, and despite the significant role that members of this community have played in Iranian history (e.g., in education, health, gender, and so forth), the historiography of modern Iran has lacked a serious and thorough study of this community—at least until a decade ago. The main reason for this academic lacuna is the fact that no Iranian regime and government has ever recognized the Baha'i faith, because recognizing it meant recognizing that the same God who had sent previous prophets such as Moses, Jesus and Muhammad also sent new prophets. This, in itself, would mean pulling down one of the main pillars of the Islamic religion, namely the belief that the Prophet Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets. Furthermore, for the Shi'a Muslims (who constitute the vast majority of the Iranian people ever since the Safavid period beginning in the sixteenth century) and especially the Shi'i clerical establishment, it would have meant acknowledging that God made a new order, in which there was no need for clerics. It was due to this that anything related to the Baha'i faith or the Baha'i people became a taboo in Iran, which, obviously, included any study that could shed light on the constructive and positive role the Baha'is played in Iran. One should, therefore, welcome this book, which is one of the more serious attempts not only to throw a new light on the Baha'i 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. They touch on the later Qajar, the Pahlavi, and the Islamic Republic periods. Thematically, they deal with a wide range of subjects, such as conversion of other religious minorities in Iran to the Baha'i faith; Baha'i ideas on and the role of Baha'is in the promotion of the status of women; the advent of modern education, health and constitutionalism; persecution of the Baha'is in Iran; and secular and Islamist anti-Baha'i discourse in Iran.

Apart from the Shi'i population, converts into the Baha'i faith also came from two other recognized religious minorities in Iran: namely, the Jews and the Zoroastrians. In their respective articles, Mehrdad Amanat and Fereydon Vahman analyze what they consider to be the reasons that drove Jews and Zoroastrians, members of two recognized and protected minorities in Iran,

to convert to a new religion, which was not only not officially recognized by the state and the Shi'i clerical establishment, but also had its source in Shi'i Islam, and whose members had been persecuted since the inception of Iran.

According to Mehrdad Amanat, the main reasons Iranian Jews converted to the Baha'i faith seemed to be their messianic expectations, coupled with the belief that their own religion could not provide the means to meet the challenges posed by the modern world. For those Jewish converts, the Baha'i faith seemed to meet those expectations and challenges. Messianic expectations as a reason for conversion seems not to have been limited only to Iranian Jews but, as Vahman explains, also affected Iranian Zoroastrians. Members of the Zoroastrian community in Iran were attracted to the Baha'i faith given its Iranian character (e.g., the use of Persian as a sacred language, alongside Arabic; the adoption of the Norouz, the Iranian new year, as the Baha'i new year).

Each of the subsequent four articles in the book concerns the Baha'i perspective and role in a major field of study. The first article in this group belongs to gender studies; its author, Dominic Brookshaw (who is also one of the editors of the book), surveys some 250 letters, sent between 1870 and 1921, by Baha'ullah and 'Abd al-Baha', to Baha'i women from prominent Baha'i families in Iran and India. The letters praise the Baha'i women for converting to the Baha'i faith and for their contribution to the evolution of Baha'i ideals, encouraging them to take a more active role in the Baha'i community.

The second article in this group, written by Moojan Momen, deals with the important role Iranian Baha'is played in the development of modern schools and education in Iran. Following the educational activities of foreign Christian missions and tolerated religious minorities in Iran, the Baha'is were the last religious minority permitted to open schools in Iran at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Momen, the main incentive for the Baha'is to open such schools was their own religious belief in the special, universal role of education. Momen provides important data about these schools, which were allowed to operate till their closure in 1934 by Reza Shah Pahlavi. Since the role played by the Baha'is 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 Baha'i perspectives in the field of health and hygiene, and the role played by Iranian Baha'is in its development. The authors of this article, Seena Fazel (also one of the editors of the book) and Minou Foadi, reach the conclusion that, as was the case in education, the main drive for the health initiatives is to be found in the Baha'i sacred writings,

which contain medical and health directives. These inspired Baha'is to build, for example, new and more hygienic bathhouses and hospitals, which operated till 1979, when they were closed, along with other Baha'i-run institutions.

The fourth, and last, article in this group, written by Kavian Milani, examines Baha'i views on and attitudes toward constitutional governments in general and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911 in particular. Milani stresses the fact that although the Baha'is favored a constitutional type of government, they refrained, by order of 'Abd al-Baha', from taking an active role in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, mainly because he believed that an active Baha'i role would have associated the Baha'i community with the revolution, and this could 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 Baha'is not only contributed to the conditions that made the constitutional revolution possible, but also to the development of the constitution itself.

The last five articles explore various aspects of Baha'i persecution and discrimination in Iran. The first article, a comparative analysis of the situation of the Baha'is and of other religious minorities (Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians) since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, was written by Eliz Sanasarian. She finds little change, in 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 Baha'i history: he looks into the historical roots of the Babi-Baha'i persecution in Qajar, Iran. Unlike the other religious minorities, which were officially recognized and protected, the Babis and Baha'is lacked such a status for they "were seen as a post-Islamic heresy whose very existence militated against the Islamic notion of prophetic finality" (p. 175). Amanat also looks at the anatomy of the cycle of anti-Baha'i persecutions, and finds interesting characteristics.

The third and fourth articles, written by Houchang E. Chehabi and Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, discuss two anti-Baha'i essays of the Pahlavi period, namely those of secular intellectuals and Islamists respectively. Chehabi discerns two main groups among the secular Iranian intellectuals: those who perceived the Baha'is as agents of foreign powers in Iran (such as Ahmad Kasravi), and those who regarded the Baha'is as pro-Pahlavi (mainly from among the anti-Pahlavi secular intellectuals). The Baha'is were thus generally considered by both groups to be negative elements in Iran. As far as the Islamic anti-Baha'i discourse is concerned, Tavakoli finds that the fate of the Baha'is greatly depended on the court-clergy relationship: When Muhammad Reza Shah was

young and weak (i.e., up to the mid-1950s), he needed the cooperation and support of the Shi'i clergy, and therefore permitted Islamic anti-Baha'i agitation; but, when he consolidated his position and became popular (mainly after the 1953 coup), especially after relations with the '*ulama*' started deteriorating, the court significantly limited such agitation.

The fifth and final article in this group, by Reza Afshari, is a long and very detailed piece about Baha'i persecution and discrimination in post-revolutionary Iran—one of the worst human rights abuses of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Although the articles of this collection primarily deal with the study of Iranian Baha'is from a sociohistorical aspect, their importance and relevance to other fields should not escape the attention of both students and scholars. Each and every one of these eleven articles amply shows how relevant Baha'i studies could be to a range of topics and fields in the study of modern Iranian history. An important conclusion of this and other recent books on the Baha'is of Iran would thus be that, given the multilayered spread of the Baha'i faith in Iran since the mid-nineteenth century and the important role played by Iranian Baha'is in the history of modern Iran (in fields such as those concerning religious minorities, gender, education, health, intellectual life, reform, and modernization), new studies in these fields should devote time and attention to Baha'i sources, mostly written in Persian, and regard them as important sources of information. It would make our understanding of the Baha'is richer and more comprehensive.

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