
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 Fereydun 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 Bahá’í 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 Bahá’í 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 Bahá’í 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 Bahá’í new year).

Each of the subsequent four articles in the book concerns the Bahá’í 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 Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abd al-Bahá’, to Bahá’í women from prominent Bahá’í families in Iran and India. The letters praise the Bahá’í women 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, written by Moojan Momen, deals with the important role Iranian Bahá’ís 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 Bahá’ís 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 Bahá’ís 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 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 by Iranian Bahá’ís 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 Bahá’í sacred writings,