

STUDIES IN BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í HISTORY
VOLUME TWO

FROM IRAN EAST AND WEST

EDITED BY

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PREFACE

The Bábí movement, begun in Shiraz in 1844 by Sayyid 'Alí Muḥammad, the Báb, was greeted by many Iranian Muslims as the answer to their hopes for the coming of the messianic Promised One (Mahdi) and the advent of Christ. Partly because of the repression of the movement (1848–1853) by the Iranian government and the ulama, and partly because of the militancy of some Bábís, the original spread of the religion was accompanied by social upheaval and, in several instances, military engagements. A second phase began in the 1860s when Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí, Bahá'u'lláh, successfully pressed claims to being the spiritual return of the Báb, the one whom the latter had foretold God would make manifest. Almost all Bábís swiftly became Bahá'ís, and new believers from other religious backgrounds were attracted by Bahá'u'lláh's charisma as well.

Bahá'u'lláh, from his places of exile in Turkey and Palestine, preached a new social doctrine centered on the unity of all mankind, the unity of the great world religions, and peaceful approaches to the resolution of social conflict. In the autocratic Middle East he advocated constitutionalism and parliamentary government, and in a society not far from feudalism he proposed a more equal distribution of wealth. These social ideas were nevertheless proclaimed as part of a specifically religious message. Bahá'u'lláh's successor and eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá 'Abbás, developed the universalist and liberal aspects of his father's message even further, preaching peace, universal love, and world government on his trips to Europe and North America (1910–1913).

The early phases both of the Bábí movement and its successor, the Bahá'í Faith, provoked exciting and prodigious scholarship in nineteenth-century Europe, engaging the brilliant talents of Gobineau, Browne, Goldziher, Huart, von Rosen, and others in the forefront of Orientalist studies. Admittedly, they were sometimes shackled by the drawbacks of the Orientalist tradition, with its assumption of European superiority and its preoccupation with ideas and texts, almost to the exclusion of social reality. Nevertheless, they produced a solid corpus of scholarship on the Bábís and early Bahá'ís that is only now beginning to be superseded.

Ironically, the early scholarly interest in the religion died out by the 1920s, and for nearly fifty years virtually no European or North American academic scholar published any significant work on it. Yet from 1920 to the present, the Bahá'í Faith has undergone important changes and expanded greatly—becoming, if anything, more important than it was when Browne devoted so much study to it. In Iran the faith grew more organized and its intellectual culture began to take on greater sophistication. It remained the largest non-Muslim religious minority, outnumbering the mostly Armenian Christians, the Jews, and the Zoroastrians. The American Bahá'í community, founded in the 1890s, continued to show vigor, involving itself with activities aimed at bringing blacks and whites together as equals in a racist America. Bahá'í communities were founded throughout the world, and in the late 1950s and the 1960s, the movement suddenly encompassed masses in Uganda, India, and elsewhere.

Since 1970 academic writing on the Bábí and Bahá'í religions has begun once more to see print. The rapid expansion of Middle East Studies as an academic discipline in Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s was one factor. Anthropologists and others who went to Iran encountered Bahá'ís and wrote about them. The surge of growth the religion experienced in the United States and Great Britain (1968–1975) also provoked the interest of many young Westerners, some of them converts. Immigrant Iranian scholars, whether they were themselves Bahá'ís or were simply interested in the history of the movement, have also been important in the revival of European-language

scholarship on it. Since 1979, the persecution of the Bahá'ís by Iran's government has further aroused interest in the imperiled minority.

Within the Bahá'í community, Great Britain has been the center and vanguard of the new Bábí-Bahá'í history. Hasan Balyuzi, a distinguished Iranian Bahá'í originally trained at the American University in Beirut, later at the London School of Economics, and long resident in England, produced full-length treatments of the lives of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the seventies. Younger Bahá'í scholars in Europe participated in the groundbreaking Lancaster seminars organized by British sociologist Peter Smith. Important dissertations have recently been produced on the Bábí or Bahá'í religions by Smith at Lancaster, Denis MacEoin at Cambridge, and Abbas Amanat at Oxford.

Moojan Momen, trained at Cambridge, not only began this series of volumes on Bábí and Bahá'í history but published a compilation of European archival documents bearing on Bábí and Bahá'í history. It was only natural that the first volume of this series featured contributions from the Lancaster group.

Although academic studies on the Bahá'í Faith in North America still lag behind those in Europe, new energy is apparent on the Western side of the Atlantic, as well. The first Bahá'í History Conference held in America took place in Los Angeles in August 1983. It is the intention of the present volume to draw together some of those academics working on the subject in America (or, in the case of Peter Smith, working on the American Bahá'í community). No attempt has been made at being exhaustive, and a great deal of talent exists that is not represented here. All the contributors to the present volume were present at the Los Angeles conference. Although efforts were made to attract contributions from outside that circle, they have met with no success at this point—though it is the hope of the editors that this series will increasingly publish articles from authors of many backgrounds.

If this volume has a theme, it might be the historical impact of the Bahá'í Faith outside the circle of Persian-speaking Iranian Shí'ís within which the Bábí movement originated. In my piece

on Bahá'u'lláh and the Kurdish Sufis of Iraq, I discuss the interplay of Bábí themes of messianic advent and the Sufi mystical emphasis on internal spiritual renewal. The piece analyzes for the first time an important but heretofore little-known early mystical poem written in Arabic by Bahá'u'lláh, which contains strong hints that even in the 1850s he felt he had a private mission of reform to carry out in the Bábí community. Margaret Caton of U.C.L.A. treats Bahá'í influences on the Iranian court musician, Mírzá 'Abdu'lláh. The mystical milieu of the traditional musicians and the Bahá'í Faith's approval of music (in contradistinction to the legalist Islam of the *ayatu'lláhs*, which forbids it) made the religion appealing to one of the great compilers of the Persian repertoire. The Bahá'í Faith touched another out-group in Shí'í Iran in a significant way—the Zoroastrians, an ancient Iranian religious community. Susan Stiles of the University of Arizona makes interesting use of heretofore unstudied biographical materials to delineate the gradual process of conversion among some Zoroastrians to the Bahá'í Faith.

Richard Hollinger of U.C.L.A. gives us a study of Ibrahim Kheiralla, the Lebanese Bahá'í who first spread the religion to the United States but later renounced his allegiance to Bahá'u'lláh's appointed successor, 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Hollinger makes use of a mass of primary source materials he has unearthed in public and private archives. Peter Smith of Lancaster University traces the fate of a Bahá'í periodical published in New York in the 1920s, illuminating important facets of the intellectual and social history of the American Bahá'í community in that formative period. William Garlington, late of Australian National University, discusses in comparative perspective the issue of recent conversion to the Bahá'í Faith by Hindu villagers in Central India, concluding that the universalist themes in the movement allowed it to act as a cultural bridge in expressing the spiritual aspirations of those who embraced it.

The contributions in this volume span the entire history of the Bahá'í Faith, from its early inception in Iran and Iraq through its spread to non-Muslim communities and to other lands and

cultures in North America and India. The rich source materials to which the contributors have drawn attention, and the exciting conclusions they have been able to draw from them, should encourage greater academic interest in the history of the Bahá'í Faith. It is hoped that this series will serve all those wishing to gain a better appreciation of the sweep of Bahá'í history.

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