

## SELECTIONS FROM THE WRITINGS OF E.G. BROWNE ON THE BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í RELIGIONS

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Edward Granville Browne (1862-1926) is considered the preeminent Western scholar of Persian studies. His great interest in the only major messianic movement within Shí'í Islam in modern times, that of Babism, was first stirred when he read Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau's *Les Religions et les Philosophies dans L'Asie Centrale*, first published in 1865. A century after Browne's travels in Iran in 1887-88, his insights and contributions about Iran and the Bábí and Bahá'í religions remain relevant and important. Both his empathy with Iranian culture and his remarkable command of the Persian language gave him a unique opportunity to study the religions of Iran. Perhaps apart from the writings of the French scholar A.L.M. Nicolas, no Western works exist which equal Browne's in preserving the early history and doctrines of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions.

From the large storehouse of Browne's writings on the new religions, Moojan Momen has collected "those which are most useful to a person studying the Bábí and Bahá'í religions and which at the same time are less easily available" (6-7). Four of Browne's works on the subject (which include his translations of *A Traveller's Narrative*, *The Tárikh-i-Jadíd*, and *Kitáb-i-Nuqatu'l-Káf*, and Browne's compilation, *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion*) have been reprinted recently. Thus, this selection by Momen from Browne's other writings on the subject complements these four works and also includes unpublished works.

The first section includes extracts from Browne's celebrated work, *A Year Amongst the Persians*. In this book, Browne changed the names of the Bahá'ís he met in order to protect them from persecution. By collating the text of this work with Browne's original diary entries and other sources, the editor has succeeded in breaking Browne's Perso-English and Sanskrito-English code, and identifies important early Bahá'ís, such as Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí.

The second of the compilation's seven sections is made up of Browne's paper for the Royal Asiatic Society in 1889, entitled "The Bábís of Persia." Here, one finds the first attempt since Gobineau to study the new religion systematically. This article, long out of print, was supplemented and corrected by Browne in later works, such as his article entitled "Bábíism" in the book, *Religious Systems of the World*, published in 1892, which appears in the fourth section of this collection. In the third section, Dr. Momen completes and annotates Browne's previously unpublished abstract of one of the Báb's most important works, the *Persian Bayán*, which was written in 1847-48.

Sections five and six are brief extracts from two of Browne's well-known works. *The Persian Revolution* deals with the Bahá'í attitude towards the constitutional movement in Persia. The section "Bábí and Bahá'í Poetry" is primarily drawn from the fourth volume of Browne's monumental *Literary History of Persia*. The seventh and final section is a list of Browne's manuscripts and papers on the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, compiled by Dr. Momen and published for the first time.

Rather than providing a detailed analysis of Browne's writings on the subject,<sup>1</sup> Dr. Momen has presented large portions of primary texts. This has the benefit of ensuring that scholars from different disciplines can gain from Browne's insights into the origins and teachings of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions. For those interested in the characteristics of the new religious movement, Browne's feeling for the Persian ambience and his evocation of the secrecy, confusion, enthusiasm, and courage which characterized its early followers will be important.

For the historian, Browne's presentation of the Bahá'í attitude towards Persian politics during the constitutional upheaval can help clarify the collusion of the Iranian church and state in persecuting the religious minority in the twentieth century. For instance, Hamid Algar, a Shí'í historian, suggests that during the constitutional crisis of 1905-09, Bahá'ís "came to occupy something of a position between the State and the ulama [religious scholars], not one enabling them to balance the two sides, but rather exposing them to blows which each side aimed at the other."<sup>2</sup> For the Orientalist, Browne's translation of the *Persian Bayán*, one of the clearest translations of the notoriously difficult Bábí texts, is of special interest.

Browne was a pioneer in the field of chronicling the birth and rise of an obscure, new religion. Inevitably, his achievement was to be limited by his own partiality and the tendentious evidence available to him. Nevertheless, Browne's reputation as an Orientalist was established on his research about the Bábí and Bahá'í religions. His works remain valuable source materials for Orientalists, historians of the Middle East, and students of comparative religion with an interest in the Bábí and Bahá'í religions or in the dynamics of new religious movements. The present volume adds significantly to the already large but ever-growing corpus of primary materials about the religions.

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1. For such a detailed analysis of Browne's writings on the religions, see H.M. Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1970).

2. H. Algar, *Religion and State in Iran: 1785-1906* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 151.