

Book Review



Geoffrey Nash, *Religion, Orientalism and Modernity: Mahdi Movements of Iran and South Asia*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022 (Edinburgh Historical Studies of Iran and the Persian World). 334 pp., ISBN 978-1-4744-5168-0.

Islamic Studies scholars have been occupied with the relationship between Islam and modernity for more than a century. This preoccupation is unlikely to end soon, with much more ink to be expended on examining it anew. However, the lenses through which scholars have narrated this relationship have changed. In *Religion, Orientalism and Modernity*, Geoffrey Nash applies the rather hegemonic perspective of postcolonial theory with its almost inevitable recourse to Edward Said's iconic *Orientalism*. Though critical of Said's dichotomist and monolithic approach, Nash follows the almost obligatory Saidian path of analysing the discursive othering between "East and West" in the context of colonial politics.

The book presents a study of three Mahdi movements: Bābism, its "offshoot" Bahā'ism and the Aḥmadiyya. In so doing, the author focuses on the development of these religious movements in the context of both Orientalist and modernist thought. In this sense, the book does, indeed, discuss the intersection of religion, Orientalism and modernity. Nash looks at the ways in which the three Mahdi movements enlisted Western engagement and support. In enacting "traditional performances of Islamic signs in their revelations" (p. 8), the leaders of these movements were speaking to Western audiences while at the same time seeking to attract followers and sympathisers among them. The study also evaluates Western interest in these reform movements against the background of some "key thematic concerns" of postcolonial scholarship, among which Nash identifies the concepts of empire, modernity, othering and Orientalism (p. 12). The author draws on both the works of Western Orientalists and the twentieth-century narratives of Bahā'ī and Aḥmadi writers as sources, with Orientalism the overall governing conception. For Nash, Orientalism is both a

scholarly descriptive tool and – in the sense of Edward Said – a means for the configuration and control of the East by the colonial West.

The book is divided into eight chapters and while written in excellent prose, due to its organisational deficiencies and argumentative leaps, I see no viable alternative to describing the main themes and arguments of the chapters in their chronological order and with concrete references to the text.

After his introductory chapter, Nash moves in Chapter 2 onto “Contexts and Issues” by examining the rise of the three Mahdi movements in the context of an asymmetric intercultural exchange characterised by the “urge toward dialogic reciprocity with a culturally dominant Europe in the late imperial period” (p. 27). According to Nash, combining messianic presumptions with modernist attitudes, Bahā’ism and Aḥmadism “started as self-constructing modern movements” with a “great willingness to engage with colonial powers” (pp. 40 and 35).

The subsequent chapters discuss European, Bahā’ī and Aḥmadī authors’ representations of these movements. Chapters 3–5 deal with Western thought in the works of Arthur Gobineau (1816–82), Ernest Renan (1829–92) and Matthew Arnold (1822–88). Nash reflects on the extent to which their views of the Bābīs and Bahā’īs was guided by instrumentalist and political motivations, detecting a kind of fashionable Romantic Orientalism then widespread among Europe’s educated elite in Gobineau’s portrayal of the Bābī movement. Fascinated with Bābism, Gobineau portrayed it in an Aryanised and Christianised form (p. 46). Nash states that Gobineau’s account of Bābism “would have a significant impact on intelligentsias across Europe”, foregrounding two readings of Bābism – the movement’s collision with the state and the image of the Bāb as an Iranian martyr – which appealed to Western audiences (pp. 53–54). Gobineau’s Orientalist representation of Persia initiated a process of making Bābism suitable for Christian readers. Even more importantly, his Christianizing of the Bāb also had a strong impact on Bahā’ī writers, as exemplified in the works of Shoghī Effendi (1897–1957), the guardian of the Bahā’ī faith from 1921 until his death and the grandson of Abdul Bahā’ (1844–1921), the eldest son of the “prophetic founder” of the movement, Bahā’ullāh (1817–92) (p. 61). Nash concludes that Gobineau deracinated Bābism from its Shī’a origins and thus contributed to the later presentation of Bahā’ism as a new world religion (p. 66).

Renan, who together with Matthew Arnold is the topic of the fourth chapter, shared Gobineau’s idea of the distinctiveness of an Aryan Persian genius (p. 52). Entitled “Ernest Renan’s Search for a Religion of Modernity”, this chapter focuses on the phenomenon of martyrdom in Renan’s thought. Nash argues that for Renan, this was the missing element in the “rational exposition of a

modern religion” (p. 71). Employing the familiar Semitism/Aryanism binary of his times, Renan perceived Bābism as a movement of religious innovation and revitalisation. Bābism affirmed the Aryan spirit of Persia and was a paradigm for the persistent vitality of spiritual struggle and martyrdom in modern times. In this sense, Renan closely followed the interpretative track of Gobineau: Both understood Bābism “as a modern instance of religious renewal.” However, Nash sees Renan, unlike Gobineau, as denigrating “Islam as a Semitic creation *per se*” (p. 81). In this way, the French *homme de lettres* even further separates Bābism from its origins in Shī‘a Islam.

Chapter 5 deals with Orientalist scholar Edward Granville Browne (1862–1926), whom Nash declares to have been “Gobineau’s principal disciple” (p. 96). Nash views Browne as combining the skills of a British Iranologist with an interest in the Bahā’ī movement and thus of being an influential conduit in the transmission of Bābī narratives to Victorian and early twentieth-century Western audiences. His personal interest in and enthusiasm for the Bāb distinguishes Browne from the Saidian type of European Orientalist (pp. 97–98). Yet, having embroiled himself in the schism within the Bahā’ī community, Browne became disillusioned by the movement’s direction and became a supporter of Iranian nationalism, though not without also significantly influencing Shoghī Effendi’s later writings (p. 102). The chapter continues with a section on Shoghī Effendi before moving on to a comparison with the Aḥmadi movement. Nash argues that the Aḥmadis “endorsed orientalists in a similar way to Baha’is”, while “holding tenaciously to the position that they are Muslims” (p. 117). Thus, Nash seems to argue that the Aḥmadiyya’s continuing adherence to Islam constitutes its key difference with Bahā’ism. While Chapter 6 promises to deal in more detail with both movements and, more precisely, with their connection to the British and the Russian empires, the Aḥmadiyya are assigned only a four-page comparative appendix at the end of it. The chapter is largely about Bahā’īs in Russian Transcaspia and in Palestine, the latter being where they established the movements’ religious centre in Haifa, under British protection.

Despite recurring references to Effendi’s work, it takes until Chapter 7 for Nash to explicitly tackle Bahā’ī and Aḥmadi writings. He begins it with some critical remarks made by scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Sadeq Al-Azm on Said’s “monolithic” concept of Orientalism. Al-Azm criticised Said by coining the term “orientalism in reverse” to characterise Islamist and Arab nationalist thinkers’ ideological constructions. Nash also briefly points to studies by Selim Deringil and Usama Makdisi that examine Orientalist stereotyping in Ottoman and Kemalist modernity. A couple of pages on comes discussion of the “racist” tendencies in Iranian nationalism, with particular reference to Āqā Khān Kermānī (1854/55–96). Nash argues that Orientalist elements “entered

the writings of early twentieth-century Western Baha'is via borrowings" from Orientalist sources such as those by Gobineau, Renan, Curzon and Browne. Nash largely underpins this finding, already mentioned in previous chapters, with examples relating to Western Bahā'īs, such as Hippolyte Dreyfus, Horace Holley and Mason Remey, who associated the Bahā'ī movement with civilisational progress against the alleged backwardness of Islam and the Middle East (p. 173). Shoghī Effendi reappears in this chapter as the most instrumental Bahā'ī writer in the construction of the "teleological, triumphant metanarrative of a new world religion." Aḥmadī thought, however, is still treated comparatively marginally in the last pages of this chapter.

The book closes with a short chapter on Muslim responses to these movements and the future of Mahdi movements in which Nash briefly discusses South Asian responses to the Mahdi movements by Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877–1938) and Abū l-A'lā al-Mawdūdī (1903–79). The author concludes that there was no uniform Muslim response to these movements as such. Yet declaring them to be "the creation or agents of Western imperialism", according to Nash, would also represent "a crude distortion of a complex alignment of positions" (p. 221). Instead, Nash urges a "restricted postcolonial argument" and clearly sees "the employment and incorporation of orientalist discourse within important texts which form a key part of official Baha'i narrative" (p. 224).

Nash has written an interesting account of the complex entanglement of three very distinct nineteenth-century Islamic reform movements that reflects on Western Orientalist thought in the context of the asymmetric power relations with European imperialism. Bābism, Bahā'ism and the Aḥmadiyya represent important divergences from the classical nineteenth-century reform models discussed in Albert Hourani's seminal *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*. Nash's focus on these three movements, therefore, is a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion of the relationship between Islam and modernity. Whether we still need to discuss Said's concept of Orientalism in this context is a different question. A great deal of energy has already been spent on doing so. It is an irony of conceptual history that *Orientalism* still serves as a major theoretical and conceptual reference for so many authors in the field of postcolonial studies. Said himself told his readers that *Orientalism* is a partisan book and not a theoretical machine. Scholarly inaccuracies and conceptual flaws, therefore, almost necessarily played a part in strengthening the polemical direction of his book. Many of Said's critics have failed to understand this need to subordinate the scholarly character of *Orientalism* to its polemical thrust. In the end, Said's decidedly partisan argument partly explains the sustained salience of his book in the field.

Nash's book is a stimulating read, but I question the merit of his inclusion of the Aḥmadiyya in this study in the way he does. Bābism and Bahā'ism occupy the overwhelming majority of its pages and the Aḥmadiyya is discussed only occasionally and to a most inadequate degree for sound comparison. Adding this South Asian movement and its different context, therefore, tends to distract the reader from the text's core argument about the way in which the complex relationship between Bahā'ism and Western Orientalism shaped the contours of a "modern world religion." Shifting between the Bahā'īs and the Aḥmadiyya only reinforces the already problematic organisation of Nash's text, which combines a tight phalanx of primary sources from a wide variety of origins with secondary literature on different topics, biographical digressions, and a large number of often extremely long direct quotations. The organisation of the book makes the task of the reader to trace the course of the argument unnecessarily burdensome, even for those familiar with the theoretical and empirical subject matter.

Dietrich Jung

University of Southern Denmark, Centre for Modern Middle East and
Muslim Studies, Odense, Denmark

jung@sdu.dk