

Review Essay on three books on the Baha'i religion for Iranian Studies: *Journal of the Society for Iranian Studies*. Vol. 21:3-4 (1988) pp. 162-68.

Review Essay
by B.T. Lawson

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Letters and Essays, 1886-1913 Mirzā Abū-Faḍl Gulpaygānī
Translated and annotated by Juan R. I. Cole. Los Angeles: Kalimāt
Press, 1985, n.p;

The Master in 'Akkā (Reprinted from *The Life and
Teachings of 'Abbās Effendi*, 2nd rev. ed., New York;
London: Putnam, 1912) Myron H. Phelps. Los Angeles: Kalimāt
Press, 1985, n.p;

*In Iran: Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī History, Volume
3* Peter Smith, ed. Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1986, n.p.

The three quite different books under review represent successive stages in the history of the Bahā'ī faith. The following remarks will proceed according to the chronology of these stages.

Bahā'īs have from the beginning of their history been careful chroniclers of the major events surrounding the formation of what has now acquired the characteristics of a distinct religiosity. From the earliest times, some of this writing has also included discussions of theology, philosophy, and mysticism. The ablest of all scholars of the Bahā'ī faith is generally agreed to have been the author of the short pieces published as *Letters and Essays*. Abū-Faḍl Gulpaygānī was born in Iran in 1844 and died in Cairo in 1914. Thus his life spanned the earliest and undoubtedly the most crucial stages of the rise and development of the Bahā'ī faith, which is seen

to have begun with the claim of Bāb (d. 1850) in 1844. From the samples of his thought and expression here admirably translated from the Arabic and annotated by Juan R. I. Cole, we are permitted an instructive view of not only the importance of Abū-Faḍl's own contribution to this development, but also the process, or at least part of the process, by which the movement which would eventually become known as the Bahā'ī faith, grew gradually away from being identified with its parent religion. The author of these pieces was born into a family of scholars and pursued a life devoted to traditional scholarship, teaching in various colleges throughout Iran until he became, in 1876, a follower of the founder of the Bahā'ī faith, Bahā'u'llah (d. 1892). What is significant about this work of Gulpaygānī's is that it represents an intellectual ferment not always acknowledged to have any lasting value for the development of Islamic religion in the twentieth century. From the notes provided by the translator, we learn, for example, that Abū'l-Faḍl's writing provided something of a foil for the activity of Rashīd Riḍā, whose eventual opposition to a provision in the Egyptian constitution granting freedom of religion was put forth on the specific grounds that such would benefit the Bahā'īs.

The topics discussed in this collection, and the discussion itself, are also of interest for the history of Islamic thought. The four-fold structure of the book follows the biography of the author who lived in Iran, Russian Turkistan, Palestine, and finally Egypt. The pieces are arranged in chronological order, those in Part I are as follows: 1) On the Meaning of Civilization; 2) On the Ressurection Day; 3) Why Moses Could Not See God (a *tafsir* of Qur'an 7:143); 4) Against Blind Obedience (presumably *taqlid*). Part II consists of a lengthy letter to Alexander Tumansky, the Russian translator of Bahā'u'llah's *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*. Part III is devoted to a short piece in which among other things, the author's (? first) meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahā (d. 1921), the son of and successor to Bahā'u'llāh, is described. Part IV begins with the translation of a particularly important document, namely the earliest publication of the Bābī movement in the Egyptian scholarly press. The journal, *al-Muqtataf*, introduced the 1896 article by mentioning the suspicion which had fallen upon the Bahā'īs (still widely known as the Bābīs), in connection with the assassination that year of Nāṣiru'd-Dīn Shāh. The second item in Part IV, A Letter to Tripoli, was written to a group of scholars who had seen the article in *al-Muqtataf* and were taking exception to some of its contents. Among these scholars was the above-mentioned Rashīd Riḍā, the extremely active Muslim polemicist who would eventually depart from the basic philosophy of his mentor, the remarkably original and influential thinker

Muhammad 'Abduh (author of *Risālat al-tawhīd* and editor of the Shī'i compilation of the sayings of 'Alī, *Nahj al-balāgha*) who, we are told here, was a friend of 'Abdu'l-Bahā. The brief *On Tests and Trials* introduces the subject of the problems arising in the young Bahā'i community in the United States, which difficulties would lead ultimately to the author's four-year visit to North America for the purpose of explicating the teachings of the Bahā'i faith. *On Perfection and Imperfection*, shows a characteristic impatience with materialistic philosophy. *On the Reaction in Egypt to His Writings*, written in 1901, is a response to the unalloyed outrage and vilification from Rashīd Riḍā and others of al-Azhar (where the author had been teaching traditional Islamic subjects) that greeted the 1900 Egyptian publication of his rather daring *al-Durar al-bahīya* (recently published in a translation by Juan R. Cole as *Miracles and Metaphors*, Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1981), but which was lauded, perhaps predictably enough, by Muṣṭafā Kāmil. *On the Meaning of Angels* (pp. 155-72) is actually concerned, but only briefly, with problems of angelology. The first problem taken up is the interpretation of Qur'ān 7:142 "And We appointed with Moses thirty nights and We completed them with ten, so the appointed time of his Lord was forty nights." One is thus in a position to compare this rationalistic *tafsīr* with what were undoubtedly for Abū'l-Faḍl the formative sources of Shī'i exegesis. Finally, at p. 163, the author takes up the subject introduced in the title of this piece: the meaning of angels in the Qur'ān. Proceeding from a traditional etymology which reads *malak* as a derivative of the verb *malaka*, "to possess," the ensuing commentary is offered as an explanation of the exceedingly enigmatic usage at Qur'ān 74:31. As the author says, this time invoking the Shi'i tradition:

The terms "angel" and "angels" were used in the words of the prophets preserved in the holy scriptures for holy souls and leaders guiding others, because they clothed themselves in human form yet possessed spiritual and heavenly attributes. They took hold of the reins of guidance and became sovereigns of the realms of guardianship [*walāya*]. It was as though they were given absolute authority over the happiness and affliction, the guidance and perdition of the people.

This is the meaning of the absolute guardianship [prob. *al-walāyatu'l-mutlaqa*] referred to in the sayings of the Imams: it was for this reason that the commander of the righteous ['Alī] was referred to as the guardian of the gates of paradise and of hell.

The book closes with three pieces of varying lengths entitled "The Reality of the Holy Spirit" (pp. 171-2); "Did Moses Prophecy Muhammad?" (pp. 173-9); and "A Commentary on the Saying 'Knowledge is Twenty-Seven Letters.'" (pp. 181-93)

Unfortunately, this collection does not contain enough bibliographical information; all we are told is that the translation is based on R. Mehrabkhāni's collection of Mīrzā Abūl-Fadl's letters, published in Iran as *Rasā'il raqā'im*. Surely we could have been given more information about this volume in an introduction where mention could also have been made of at least one other edition of Gulpaygāni's work published as recently as 1980 under the title of *Mukhtārāt min mu'allafāt Abi'Fadl*, by the Bahā'i Publishing House of Belgium which contains several of the pieces translated in the volume at hand. This lack may however be by design. A Foreword by the great Iranologist and Islamicist, Alessandro Bausani, warmly recommends the book to all, but especially to Bahā'is, in order that they might "obtain a better knowledge of what the Bahā'i faith really is." Thus the volume appears not to have been intended primarily for professional scholars. Nonetheless, the contents are of such interest that any trouble taken to provide the normal scholarly apparatus of footnotes and bibliography, not to mention a glossary for some of the less widely known technical terminology of the Bahā'is, would have increased the usefulness of the book.

The next item to be reviewed here is a reprint of Myron H. Phelps' description of his experiences and impressions gathered during a one-month visit to the Haifa/'Akkā region at the turn of the century. The author, himself not a Bahā'i, was a New York lawyer with a serious interest in Buddhism and other spiritual disciplines. Not all of the book has been reprinted because of the several inaccuracies in the author's attempt to present Bahā'i teachings. His friendship with the somewhat better-known Countess M. A. de S. Canavarro brought him to the Bahā'i centre in Palestine for the month of December in 1902. What might be thought the most valuable portion of the original book, namely the pen-portraits of 'Abbās Effendi, usually known as 'Abdu'l-Bahā, and the important oral history of Bahiyyih Khānum (d. 1932), eldest daughter of Bahā'ullāh, have been reprinted with added corrections noted by the editor.

The value of the book is hard to overestimate insofar as it gives a firsthand response to the force of the character of 'Abdu'l-Bahā. Indeed, for many years, this work of Phelps' was the only sustained

and sympathetic picture of this subject. The result may be thought to provide a balance to the sometimes expressed perception that the Bahā'ī faith appeals only to the intellect and "intellectuals". Through these sketches of 'Abdu'l-Bahā the reader is permitted to appreciate the kind of power of personality which is the foundation of most religions. We are given an intimate view of the workings of the household and the shape of the average workday, during which 'Abdu'l Bahā is shown caring for the sick, bestowing alms upon the poor, providing comfort to all who seek it from him, and attending to an increasingly demanding correspondence. Even at this relatively early stage in the history of the Bahā'ī faith these latter duties of correspondence were so heavy that it became necessary for 'Abdu'l-Bahā to enlist full-time one of his daughters for the purpose of reading and providing brief digests of the letters to help ease his heavy burden.

The first thirty pages or so of this volume carry a most delightful introduction by the talented and well-known Bahā'ī belletrist and translator, Marzieh Gale, whose task is to set up the circumstances surrounding the writing of this work and its reprinting. This she does with exemplary and characteristic aplomb, skill, and taste. In this introduction is given much important information on the relationship between Phelps, Madame de S. Canvarro and their interlocutors and translating assistants.

The last volume to be reviewed, edited by Peter Smith, represents a resurgent interest by academics in the Bahā'ī faith which dates from the early seventies. All of the contributors to this diverse collection of articles are young scholars (in most cases Bahā'īs) who are making every effort to ensure that their study of the Bahā'ī faith conforms to a rigorous standard of objective and scientific scholarship. The first article by Stephen Lambden on the biography of the Bāb represents something of a turning point for studies on the Bahā'ī faith. This is essentially a literary analysis of a number of stories of the early life of the Bāb bearing the "Wise Child" motif, and a comparison of these with similar Christian and Islamic stories of the childhood of Jesus. It is precisely through the examination of such material that we are able to see that the forces which helped to form other religions have most certainly been at work in the rise and development of the Bahā'ī faith.

The article by Smith and Momen may be regarded by social historians as the centerpiece of the volume for the light it sheds on an extremely obscure problem. Thanks to this study, which employs the *optique* of "resource mobilization theory," we now

have more precise knowledge about the actual membership of the Bābi movement, its leadership, and the nature of its expansion.

The third piece by Denis MacEoin attempts to unravel a tangled problem: the hierarchical structure of what is referred to as middle Babism (from 1850 to ca. 1863). Here the task is to divine the system underlying the use of a number of traditional honorific and hierarchical terms found in the Bāb's writings. For all of the considerable erudition shown in this lengthy article, the author's concluding remarks are possibly more apposite than anything else that could be said: "The reader--if he has persevered this far--will by now have reached the conclusion that none of this is very clear. I suspect that many early Bābīs may have felt the same way." (p. 135) To point out one important error (p. 140), there is in fact evidence that the Bāb read the works of Ibn 'Arabi: he quotes the *Fuṣūṣ* directly in his commentary on Q. 103, *Sūrat wā'l-'aṣr* (f. 71a of Cambridge Browne F. 9). But even if there were no such evidence, it would not be wrong to say, at the very minimum, that the mystical and theological expressions used by the Bāb were highly influenced by the work of Islam's greatest mystic, inasmuch as most mystical philosophy in Iran since Haydar Āmulī show the deep traces of Ibn 'Arabi's thought and technical vocabulary. Christopher Buck's summary of the manner in which Bahā'u'llāh is presented as the universal messiah to the followers of various religious traditions is most useful indeed. R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram's account of the establishment of the first Bahā'ī school for girls in Iran, based upon original research in the United States Bahā'ī Archives, is of real historical and sociological interest. Finally, Mehri Samandari Jehnsen's study of comparative fertility in the Iranian Muslim and Bahā'ī communities is the first of its kind and therefore provides much new information.

This volume is marred by an excessive number of typographical errors, some of which are: p. 50 proslytism for proselytism; p. 76 Mu'tamidu'd-Dawlih for Mu'tamadu'd-Dawlih; p. 86 Mirajafari for Mirjafari; p. 89 Momen Moojan for Moojan Momen; p. 106 *mashiyatt* for *mashiyyat*; p. *kaynū-natu'llāh* for *kaynūnatu'llah*; p. 113 *hujjiyya* for *hujjiyya*; p. 129 specualtion for speculation; p. 146 P. 252 for p. 252; p. 153 1864 for 1964; p. 155 *wabla* for *qabla*; p. 160 movement for moment; p. 206 dismissed for dismissed; p. 213 obtain for attain; p. 214 difussion for diffusion; p. 215 contradictory for contradictory; p. 218 *māfil* for *mahfil*; p. 235 reasonalby for reasonably; differnces for differences; 236 J. A. Arberry, *Religions...* for A. J. Arberry, *Religion*.

If current census statistics of around 3.5 million world-wide members are at all accurate, the rise and development of the Bahā'ī faith, along with its teachings on belief and practice, are subjects certain to make increasing claims upon the attention of scholars of religion. Kalimāt Press is to be congratulated for its dedication to a subject which continues to be all but ignored in contemporary university curricula, but which for the moment is being investigated by a growing number of readers.

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Selections from the Writings of E. G. Browne on the Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions Moojan Momen, ed. Oxford: George Ronald, 1987, 499 pp. \$29.50.

E. G. Browne has long occupied an ambiguous position among adherents of the Baha'i religion. Having been almost single-handedly responsible for bringing Babism (and, less prominently, Baha'ism) to the attention of a wide public in the West, he is frequently cited in Baha'i publications as a generally favorable source of information on the early history of the movement. On the other hand, having in his later years reached negative conclusions about the Baha'is and written approvingly of the Azali leader Mirza Yahya Subh-i Azal, he is often castigated for having misunderstood the "true facts" of Babi history or allowed personal sympathies to interfere with the demands of scholarly objectivity.

Poor Browne seems unable to win: when his sympathies lead him to write enthusiastically about, say, the Bab or Baha' Allah or Abbas Effendi, he is quoted as an independent authority whose scholarly views lend weight to Baha'i opinion. But when he goes against that opinion, as Momen writes in his introduction to the present work, it becomes "regrettable that a scholar of Browne's abilities should have allowed himself to take such a partisan viewpoint which clouded his judgement over a number of issues and diminished the value of his writings on the subject" (p. 11).

Baha'i criticism of Browne began after his publication of the Persian text of an early Babi history, the *Kitāb-i nuqtat al-kāf*, issued in