



the agitation that led to the new Iranian constitution of 1906).

Juan R. I. Cole's elegantly presented study brings the period and its reformers back on to centre stage, while doing so through an unfamiliar medium: the reformism of a new, post-Islamic religion, the Bahai faith, which exists today as a widespread and rapidly growing new religious movement. This is not as perverse as it may seem. Bahá'ísm ranks very high indeed in the hate list of modern Muslims, sandwiched somewhere between Salman Rushdie and Zionism. The reason is simple: despite the smallness of its numbers, Bahá'ísm represents the ultimate threat to Islam; it is a movement that abrogates Islamic law and puts a new prophet and a new law in its place.

This has all sorts of resonances today, but in the last century (Bahá'ísm developed through the 1860s, 70s and 80s) it was heady stuff. Secular reformers had already seen the inevitability of abolishing Islamic law, while their clerical opponents perceived a future devoted to rearguard actions in defence of the faith.

The Bahá'í prophet, Baha' Allah (1817-92), stands out as a moderate figure in this debate, abrogating Islam while insisting on the primacy of religion within the State. Cole presents the prophet's teachings in an original and accurate manner, demonstrating for the first time in many years the liberalism and even radicalism that exemplified the new creed, and tracing connections with reforms in Istanbul, Tehran and elsewhere. Modern Bahá'ís have tarnished that picture by a heavy-handed conservative interpretation of Baha' Allah and his ideas, and it is refreshing to see someone of Cole's stature rescue both from their smothering embrace.

It is a pity, however, that Professor Cole didn't spend a little more time discussing the Azali Babis. The Babis were a militant sect that preceded the Bahá'ís, and the Azalis were and are its only surviving splinter group, and great rivals of the Bahá'ís at one time. Although their numbers were tiny, many Azalis played an important part in the Iranian constitutional revolution. The Bahá'ís, on the other hand, were conspicuous by their absence. Yet Babism is backward-looking, mystical, conservative and crippled by some of the most impractical laws in religious history whereas Bahá'ísm is in principle liberal, forward-looking, delighted by modernity and eager for social improvement. There is an anomaly here that the present work only goes part of the way to explaining.

But even a partial explanation is much more than we have had before. Above all, Cole is to be congratulated for his forthrightness in treating Baha Allah, the main focus of his research, not as a god, but as a man and an articulate exponent of human rights and reformist principles. If, in future, we are to see a realistic biography of the Bahá'í leader, it will be along these lines, rather than those of the hagiographies which have, until now, dominated the field.

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