Modernity and the Millennium, by Juan Cole: Review

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published in Journal of Interdisciplinary History30:3, pp. 566-68

2000

Modernity and Millennium: The Genesis of the Bahá'í Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East

Author: Juan R.I. Cole

Publisher: New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, 264 pp. $47.50 cloth $19.50 paper

review by: Barbara D. Metcalf

review published in Journal of Interdisciplinary History30:3 (2000), pages 566-568

Cole's book illuminates significant aspects of modernity in the Middle East, as well as the early history of the Bahá'í millenarian movement led by Bahá'u'lláh, the nineteenth-century Iranian prophet. Cole's careful work as an archival historian is informed by the theoretical work of historical sociology. But its high quality depends on yet another discipline, namely, "area studies," which has given him excellent command of the languages and the cultural traditions of the area.

Cole's research design places a definition of modernity at the center of his project. Drawing on theorists that include Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, Eric Hobsbawm, Michel Foucault, Alain Touraine, Max Weber, and Victor Turner, he identifies five critical themes that are central to modernity and that, surprisingly, elucidate his case study: the relationship of religion to the state; the move from political absolutism to some form of democratic or representative government; the rise of an international system of nation-states characterized by internal and external violence; the phenomenon of nationalism, with its illusion of homogeneity and relatedness; and, finally, the challenge to patriarchy through women's movements and feminism. The sources for the study [End Page 566] include such Arabic, Turkish, and Persian texts as histories, letters, reports, and the writings of both founders and followers. Cole also draws on a vast background literature in such fields as history, literature, and religious studies.

Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (1817-1892), the founder of the Bahá'í faith, built on the protests of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819-1850), his predecessor, who had attacked aristocratic oppression in Qajar Iran and supported interest on loans, more freedom of movement for women, and restrictions on both European merchants and on the official clergy. Known as "the Bab," he was executed and his followers suppressed. Nuri, scion of a magnate family, joined the Babi religion, taking the name by which he was later known, Bahá'u'lláh ("glory of God"). Exiled to Baghdad in 1853, and subsequently to Edirne and Akka, he built his own following, adding to the earlier Babi themes those of Sufi ethics and ecstatic worship, as well as the claim of being the successor promised by the Bab.

Ironically, Bahá'u'lláh's evolving political ideas were close to those of Ottoman reformers in accepting a fundamental separation between religion and state. In due course, he was to create democratic governing institutions for his followers, the "houses of justice," at every level of his community. He fully supported religious freedom while simultaneously criticizing Enlightenment deism, opposition to organized religion, and unfettered science. 'Abdu' l-Baha, his eldest son, further articulated these political teachings. His tens of thousands of followers in Iran clearly played a role in the ferment for constitutional reform during the first decade of the century--a role hitherto undocumented. Bahá'u'lláh favored the creation of a union of nations as a way of eliminating war, as well as the establishment of a single world language. Cole situates Bahá'u'lláh's teachings in the context of French "peace thought" and notes the similarity in social milieu of the early Bahá'í followers--largely merchants, skilled urban workers, less influential clergy, and many activist women--and the followers of Saint-Simon (137). Bahá'í have differed in their interpretations of the founder's teachings in relation to women, but at the least he articulated a position that gave higher status and privileges to women than was common in the Islamic law and custom of his day.

One contribution of Cole's work is his exploration of the issues of religious transformation and modernity in the context of predominantly Muslim societies, given Euro-American assumptions that virtually equate Islam with anti-modernism. Cole, in contrast, reviews the ambiguities and variations that make it impossible to accept that simplistic view. He also shows the simultaneity of many material developments in the Middle East and in Europe, as well as the patterns of intellectual responses common to modernity throughout both areas. Following Giddens' discussion of European movements against the "dark side" of modernity, Cole places Bahá'u'lláh among the "utopian realists" whose critiques of the power of industrialized warfare, xenophobic nationalism, [End Page 567] colonialism, materialism, and exploitative capitalism seem ever more prescient.1 To explore an interpretation of movements like the Bahá'í as utopian, rather than reactionary and antimodern, is in itself an important contribution of this study. It is surprising that Cole makes no reference to the broadly similar Ahmadiyya movement, which originated in colonial India. The Ahmadis have been denied status as Muslims, which they have sought; the Bahá'í, by contrast, have insisted on identity as a separate religion. Neither strategy has helped: In Iran, about 200 Bahá'í have been executed since the revolution (144).

In his conclusion, Cole notes that the Bahá'í community in recent years has come to emphasize literalism, patriarchy, theocracy, and censorship--far less tolerant values than those of their founder. This "radical reorientation" (194), which resonates with the positions of "fundamentalist" movements elsewhere, further counters easy assumptions of essentialism in relation to Middle Eastern religious movements--an argument effectively made in the study as a whole.

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Note

1. Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity (Stanford, 1990).
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_interdisciplinary_history/v030/30.3metcalf_b.html

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Views9813 views since posted 2003-10-18; last edit 2022-02-17 17:00 UTC;

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