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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

DÖ©laram Mash-hoori. *Rag-e Tak: Guftary dar barih-e naqsh-e deen dar tarikh-e ejtemaee Iran [Du role de la religion dans l'histoire sociale de l'Iran]*. Vincennes: Khavaran, 1999. 634 pp. No price listed (cloth), ISBN 978-2-912490-29-2.

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Published on H-Bahai (February, 2004)

The two-volume survey of Iranian social history entitled *Rag-e Tak* (The Vein of Vine) by the author D=laram Mash-hoori (first published in 1999) purports to present a new key to understanding modern Iranian history. Since then the book has already gone through four printings, which in itself is a feat for a Persian book published out of Iran, especially since the number of subsequent prints has increased steadily to 5,000 for the fourth (and latest) print. Moreover, the success of the book is reflected in the generally positive reviews given by Iranian intellectuals. The author, writing under a pseudonym,[1] has attempted to present a new synthesis of Iranian history and shed new light on aspects of the role of religions in Iran in its struggle towards modernity.

The book is worthy of close examination for a number of reasons. First, the author's thesis is genuinely novel, and she diverges from standard academic and non-academic master narratives. The novelty of her approach may be illustrated by her study of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. For instance, in the (academic) debates on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1913) different authors have argued historical "agency" for a number of social and intellectual factors. Browne has argued for a Western democratic influence, Hamid Algar for the role of the (Sh='=) 'Ulama, Vanessa Martin for the Tujjar (Merchants) and 'Ulama jointly, Mangol Bayat for the Sh='= dissident movements (by which she means the Azal=-B=b=s), and Janet Afary has primarily argued for the role of Social Democrats. Mash-hoori argues that the Constitutional Revolution became possible only with the advent of religious reformers (the B=b=s and Bah='=s) who loosened the hold of Sh='= Orthodoxy as preamble to social change in Iran. The author of *Rag-e Tak* also seeks to refute two particular (and somewhat) popular voices; that of Stalinist Marxists (as expressed in the works of Tabari and Fush=h=) and Iranian intellectuals (such as Kasrav= and =damiyyat) both of which had marginalized the force of the early B=b=s and Bah='=s stemming from their own ideological considerations. All this affords *Rag-e Tak* a unique position in the

discourses concerning modern Iranian history. *Rag-e Tak* also provides the non-academic reader with meticulously gleaned data and insights about Iranian history. It must be noted that the Bah='= readers (who by now have come to expect anti-Bah='= apologetics and polemical attacks disguised as "history") have also responded very positively to a book that locates a favorable position for them in modern Iranian history. It is possible that the book has done better among the Iranian Bah='=s than the Iranian population in general.

The central question raised by *Rag-e Tak* has to do with the decline of Iranian civilization and culture and its root causes. The author asks:

"Historical inquiry, in any country, serves to answer questions about the position of that nation in the World history. For example, this query occupies the mind of every Iranian: 'How is it that in Iran one of the most important of ancient civilizations flourished, but not only has that civilization declined but additionally our fatherland has been struggling for centuries with an especially dark fortune, and in the modern age where newly arrived nations lay claim to historical importance, national pride, and cultural identity, Iran is in rapid decline and unspeakable misery?'" (vol. 1, p. 2)

The thesis of the early chapters of the book is that "Islam" and "Islamic mentality" were the direct cause of the decline of Persia. Accordingly *Rag-e Tak* dates the beginning of this process of decline to the Arab conquest of the Persian Empire during the reign of the second Caliph ('Umar). The following is an example of her analysis on the effects of Islam in Iran:

"We have seen that the Arab assault [on Iran] in its material dimensions was the attack of primitive tribes on the center of Iranian civilization, and such repeated assaults are part and parcel of human history. What transformed the Arab invasion into a true tragedy, not only for Iran, but also for human history, was its Islamic mentality, that aimed at the destruction of the outer and inner evidences of cultural and civil achievements of that

civilized society, and saw its survival dependant on the annihilation of all traces of the above.” (vol. 1, p. 32)

The author then argues that as destructive as Islam had been to Iranian culture and heritage, the decline still accelerated with the emergence of Sh=’ism in Iran during the Safavid reign. She describes Sh=’ism as “the most radical and most violent” Islamic sect and synchronizes the gradual domination by Sh=’ism with a campaign of eradicating the religious minorities (namely Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian minorities). The evidence offered here is most interesting and is perhaps one of the few sections in volume 1 where data is produced to support an argument. She points out that the number of Zoroastrians in Iran declined from 1,000,000 during the Safavid reign over two centuries to 8,000 during the reign of N=sir ud-D=n Sh=h (vol. 1, p. 54). A similar decline is noted in the number of Jews and Christians. For Mash-hoori the decline of religious minorities is important as she had argued previously that one of the important factors in the rise of Europe since the seventeenth century had been the role of Jewish thinkers and scientists, whose near absence from the Iranian intellectual scene yielded different results. She provides little evidence to support a unique Jewish contribution to modern European development; nevertheless there is ample historical evidence suggesting harsh persecutions of religious minorities along the lines suggested by *Rag-e Tak*.^[2]

Mash-hoori sees in the B=b= and Bah=’= religions a societal force capable of challenging the Sh=’= Institutions and reforming Iran. In so doing she is transposing a classical (and somewhat antiquated) European model on Iran. Her argument goes as follows: During the Middle Ages Europe was still more “backwards” than Iran, India, and China, and under the despotic domination of the Catholic church. Europe’s rise was consequent to Martin Luther and the Protestant movement, and without these Europe would not have been able to emerge from its pitiful state. Mash-hoori finds a tragic irony in that the “fall” of the East and the “rise” of the West are synchronized (and correlated) with diverging fortunes of religious orthodoxy:

“Such a survey in the social history of Iran reveals trends and patterns that have been moving in a completely opposite direction from those that have been steering Europe from a ‘barbaric land’ to the forefront of progress in World. For example, if one considers Luther’s reform movement (923 A.H.) as a turning point in the history of Europe, it is astonishing and painful that in that same “historical moment“ in Iran, Sh=’ism was declared the ‘dominant religion’ through a decree of Sh=h Ism=’=l

Safav= (930 A.H.) and at this turning point Iran accelerated in its unstoppable fall.” (vol. 1, p. 118)

Her methodology, based on a transposed model adapted from European history, hence forms the structure of Mash-hoori’s analysis.

Rag-e Tak then outlines in detail the major developments of the past two centuries of Iranian history. A number of critical chapters are devoted to a study of B=b= and Bah=’= history. The Shaykh= School is examined in order to prepare the reader for subsequent developments, and it is not treated favorably (Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid K=zim are categorized as Akhb=r=, and not Us=l=, which is incorrect) except for the fact that within the nucleus of Siyyid K=zim’s students a number of future dissidents and reformers were to be found. The B=b= religion is however examined in very favorable terms, and as a genuinely Iranian reform movement. Examples of B=b= discourses that the author understands to be anti-Sh=’= include the fact that the B=b= wrote in both Persian and Arabic, the persona and writings of Tahirih and the B=b= teachings that prohibit the chastisement of children, and the prohibition on the study of useless subjects such as jurisprudence, among others. The most radical aspect of B=b= thought is said to have been its very presence as an alternative to Sh=’ism. Her detailed analysis of the early B=b= movement and the early B=b=s is an interesting (if not somewhat uncritical) one. Some of her conclusions are as follows:

“After the Safavid era when a newly empowered Sh=’ism brought about a trend diametrically opposed to European developments, the victory of the B=b= Movement could have hastened a great progress and created a historical turning point. This was the last chance that Iran had to tread the road to progress and advancement through its own agency and its defeat was primarily due to the paralyzing and aggressive force of Islam and the guardians of Middle Ages religiosity. The main purpose of this inquiry is also the same, to demonstrate how and why did the B=b= Movement suffer defeat even though it had aimed at an Iranian renaissance, some three centuries after Europe....

“From the perspective of national and historical interests, a correct and positive evaluation of this Movement is of determinative importance. For at least it falsifies the erroneous claim that Iranians have been unable to initiate a movement to achieve a modern civilization....

“Yet again we emphasize enlightened and complete non-violence as the main modality of B=b= resistance, and we recognize the heroic defense of the B=b= Forts, and that in contradistinction to “Sh=’= culture“ non-

violence is not reflective of weakness, rather indicates a spiritual power, above and beyond violence. It is a source of pride that the non-violent method of B=b= protest has been employed by progressive and successful movements in many parts of the World for the past century and a half.” (pp. 234-235)

The second volume of *Rag-e Tak* begins from the 1850s and covers Iranian history until the early years after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It treats the rise of the political awakening, the Tobacco R=gie, the tenure of three progressive and reform-minded Prime Ministers, the Iranian Constitutional movement and its aftermath, and the rise and fall of the Pahlav= dynasty. This period coincides with the ministries of Bah='u'll=h, 'Abdu'l-Bah=, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice. While academic[3] and non-academic examinations of Iranian history have at times given historical “agency” to the B=b= movement and the Azal=-B=b=s as a reform-minded movement it is perhaps for the first time that the Bah='= Faith has been examined in such light. The author of *Rag-e Tak* laments the fact that Iranians generally and Iranian intelligentsia specifically have not given Bah='u'll=h due credit in terms of his achievements as a social reformer, or as a prominent Iranian thinker. This approach to Bah='u'll=h as a social thinker and reformer is perhaps the most unique and refreshing aspect of *Rag-e Tak*. It is noted that Bah='u'll=h was able to canalize and continue the tradition of B=b= reform whereas the Azal=s were gradually but fully assimilated into mainstream Sh='ism. Bah='u'll=h is especially praised for the fair treatment he accorded M=rz= Taq= Kh=n Am=r Kab=r and Husayn Kh=n Mush=r ud-Dawlih (despite the very harsh anti-B=b= position of the former and the political agitations caused by the latter during his tenure as Persian ambassador to the Sublime Porte) and acknowledgement of their reformist and progressive intentions. One especially novel argument by the author deserves further attention. The following analysis occurs after Bah='u'll=h's comments addressed to Edward Granville Browne are quoted concerning the shortcomings of governments and the suggestion (made to Browne) that Europe stands to benefit from the teachings of Bah='u'll=h as well. Mash-hoori sees in Bah='u'll=h's comments and critique of the West a counter-hegemonic discourse and proudly asserts:

“Considering the weakness shown previously by most Iranian statesmen towards the Europeans such an encounter has a remarkable historical significance. Through adopting such a position a significant step towards development of “political culture” was taken in Iran, and at least for some Iranians, and I mean the

Bah='=s, it ended the crisis of identity and weakness caused by Sh='ism. From this point on the Bah='=s placed themselves in a respectable situation, relying on their newly rediscovered position of power, recognized that even as Easterners they have something to say, and their voice was worthy of being heard.” (vol. 2, p. 156)

D=laram Mash-hoori praises Bah='u'll=h for giving a voice to Easterners and in particular to Iranians, for bringing about the equality between men and women, for the adoption of non-violence as method of resistance, encouragement to study arts and sciences, permission for Bah='=s to freely consort with religious minorities, among many others. She also credits Bah='u'll=h as the father of free verse Persian poetry, and acknowledges Bah='u'll=h as the founder and most eloquent of writers in “pure Persian” (vol. 2, p. 152). While some or most of her claims are fairly self-evident, some such as Bah='u'll=h being the father of *shi'r naw* (modern free verse poetry) are not readily apparent and need further investigation before acceptance.

Methodologically a number of issues must be raised. First is the overt anti-Islamic and anti-Sh='= aspect of her work. She essentializes Islam, and all things Islamic as “barbaric,” “backwards,” anti-democratic, and contradictory to (modern) fundamental human values. Whatever the limitations of Islam and Sh='= thought it must be said that for most of its history, Islam did have the upper hand over Europe, in sciences, arts, architecture, and other fields of human endeavor. Janet Abu-Lughod, for instance, in her groundbreaking study of the thirteenth century, has convincingly argued that in terms of commerce, industry, and navigation of sea routes, the Arabs and Persians were much ahead of the Europeans who were at best peripheral players in that world-system (pp. 19, 200).

The anti-Islamic polemic of *Rag-e Tak* is even more problematic where it critiques figures like Siyyid Muhammad Tab=tab='= who belonged to the class of Islamic Sh='= clerics. For sure there were figures among the Constitutionalist 'ulam=, such as Siyyid 'Abdu'l-Il=h Bihbah=n=, who joined the pro-constitution forces with little interest in true reform or grassroots democracy. *Rag-e Tak* is correct in pointing out his defections from side to side, his interest in accumulating wealth, and overt bribe taking. Anyone who examines the primary sources on the Constitutional Revolution would say as much. On the other hand, Tab=tab='= is a much more sophisticated figure and there is every indication that he was interested in true reform. This is reflected in both primary and secondary sources. In the *T=r=kh-i B=d=r=*

for example, we read that it was he who induced Nizam ul-Islam to start his Secret Society exposing likeminded people to the idea of reform (*Tarikh-i Bahadurshah* 1:60). Nizam ul-Islam gives an excellent record of a conversation with Siyyid Muhammad Tabataba'i (dated 1905) revealing him to have been an open-minded and enlightened man who was interested in reform, democracy, constitutional government, and education of girls. It remains unclear to this reviewer as to why Mash-hoori cannot accept that a figure like Tabataba'i may have been interested in genuine reform.

The other methodological problem with *Rag-e Tak*, albeit related to the first one, is that she seeks to explain the "fall" of the Iranian greatness to Islam, and in particular to the post-Safavid Twelver Shi'ism that has dominated Iran since. There is no doubt that Iran underwent a gradual economic deterioration during the including the Shi' = Safavid and Qajar rule. Mash-hoori does not produce any causal evidence for her thesis. Moreover, during this same period both the Indian and Chinese empires became significantly weakened. How would the author of *Rag-e Tak* explain the "fall" of the Mogul and of the Chinese empires? Would she still implicate Shi' = Islam or would she further interrogate her evidence to find a more holistic answer? The problem was not uniquely Iranian, Islamic, or Shi' =. The whole of the "East" had undergone a process of weakening and deterioration. There are a number of theories advanced by macro-historians that have much better explanatory powers than Mash-hoori's thesis.

This leads to a third criticism of *Rag-e Tak*, that while there is an abundance of academic literature on post-Safavid Iran, and especially the constitutional period, the author does not engage in any assessment or interrogation of these sources, nor does she utilize them in any way. Her avoidance of these works especially creates a challenge where she diverges from theories advanced by previous authors. For example Mangol Bayat in two of her works has argued for significant Bah' = agency with regards to constitutional history, whereas Mash-hoori has primarily argued for Bah' = agency. It would have been instructive to see Mash-hoori present a critique of the Bayat position. A similar situation occurs with the radicalizing Social Democrat movement in Iran. Both Bayat and Afary see the Russian-inspired Social Democrats fermenting and radicalizing the Constitutional Revolution, a claim that Mash-hoori dismisses

without engaging or even mentioning either author or their arguments. It would have strengthened *Rag-e Tak* tremendously had she acknowledged and engaged the Western academic literature directly.

In conclusion, and despite the methodological issues discussed above, *Rag-e Tak* is an excellent addition to the Persian literature on modern Iranian history. The major contribution of the book is its aim to explore and expose the Bah' = Faith (and its precursor Bah' = religion) as a unified and cohesive religious movement that was engaged in an active discourse to bring about progress and advancement in modern Iran. While the Bah' = Faith does not limit its vision to Iran, it is nevertheless a welcome change to see its positive influences examined in a book intended for the Iranian intelligentsia. It is hoped that *Rag-e Tak* will open the door for future studies of the Bah' = history and thought in Iranian literature.

Notes

[1]. It is worth noting that the adopted nom de plum Daram is a female first name. For the purposes of this review the reviewer will refer to the author as female.

[2]. See Murtid = R = vand =, *Tarikh Ijtimai = r = n* (Sociological History of Iran), vol. 9, pp. 537-553.

[3]. The debate here concerns historical "agency." Mangol Bayat, in *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909*, argued for Bah' = reformists' "agency." Janet Afary, in *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911*, acknowledges the role of Bah' = dissidents but suggests a multi-factorial approach. Afary however, does explore some (indirect) aspects of Bah' = involvement in the Constitutional Revolution such as the articles by Mrs. 'Ismat Tihri in *Iran-i Naw* and Ali Kuli Khan's instrumentality in the hiring of Morgan Shuster, but definitely does not give the Bah' = an active role in Iranian history. Juan Cole's article "Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the Nineteenth Century Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24 (February 1992), and his follow-up book, *Modernity and Millenium*, examine the writings of Bah' = u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Bah' = and correctly trace "democratic" thought in them but again do not see any effective and purposeful movement towards reform.

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Citation: Kavian S. Milani. Review of Mash-hoori, DÖ©laram, *Rag-e Tak: Guftary dar barih-e naqsh-e deen dar tarikh-e ejtemaee Iran [Du role de la religion dans l'histoire sociale de l'Iran]*. H-Bahai, H-Net Reviews. February, 2004.
URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8946>

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