



RESĀLA-YE MADANIYA

RESĀLA-YE MADANIYA, a treatise of some 130 pages by Abd-al-Baha ('Abd-al-Bahā'), internally dated in 1292/1875 (Abd-al-Baha, 1984, p. 72; 1957, p. 62), which calls on the Iranian people to 'awake' and take the steps necessary to modernize the country. The treatise is written in a highly literary style, making extensive use of alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, parallelism, and literary figures, yet it reads quite easily. A mirror for princes' story of the moral education of King No'mān III (r. ca. 580-602; Hitti, p. 84), through the virtue of a Christian, divides the text into two parts (Abd-al-Baha, 1984, pp. 55-61; 1957, pp. 46-51).

The text was lithographed by a Bahai press in Bombay in 1299/1882 (described in Rosen) and bound in one volume with Bahā'-Allāh's *Lawḥ-e Mānekča-šāheb* (composed in 1878). The latter is written in 'pure' Persian without the use of Arabic loan words. Viktor Rosen reproduces the frontispiece of this edition and attributes the authorship of the whole text to Bahā'-Allāh (Rosen et al., p. 253), who ordered its publication. This edition has not been consulted. A second printing in 1310/1892 has a different frontispiece and is bound without the *Lawḥ-e Mānekča-šāheb*. The copy of this, to which Browne refers (p. 944), is now in the Cambridge University Library (Moh. 436.d.6) and has been consulted. The widely used *Baha'i-Verlag* edition of 1984 is a reproduction of the typeset Cairo 1911 edition, with some diacritics added. Since the original Cairo edition is rare, and the copy consulted was missing several pages, the references in this article are to the 1984 edition, followed by the corresponding page number in Gail's translation. The 1911 Cairo edition and



the 1984 edition include a short appendix (p. 139) by Abd-al-Baha on the Mamluk Sultan Ašraf Salāḥ-al-Din Ḳalil b. Qalawun (r. 1290-1293) who is mentioned in the text as “Saladin, the victorious Ayyubi King [who] completely expelled the kings and armies of Europe from the lands and coastal plain of Egypt and Syria” (1984, p. 108; mistranslated by Gail and Dawud). Initially the book was distributed without the author’s name. The Bombay editions bear the Arabic title *Asrār al-ġaybiya le asbāb al-madaniya*, hence the title of the most widely used English translation, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, by Marzieh Gail, published in 1957.

The first English translation of 1910 by Johanna Dawud is entitled *The Mysterious Forces of Civilization*. This translation is poor, with some of Dawud’s own enlargements about conditions in Persia being incorporated into the text (e.g., pp. 35, 38-9). The typesetting appears not to have been corrected. For example, it reads ‘heads’ and ‘applications’ where the translator must surely have written ‘hands’ and ‘supplications’ (pp. 6-7). The 1918 edition of this translation corrects incidental mistakes, but apparently without reference to the original. Sections were translated by Shoghi Effendi (1928, pp. 49-50; revised in 1938, pp. 37-38; 1928, pp. 52-53), who first used the title “The Secret of Divine Civilization.” Gail has adopted the first section translated by Shoghi Effendi, but not the second. She has also relied on Dawud’s translation, since she sometimes repeats his mistakes with Arabic and Islamic vocabulary. For example, *bāliya dar qabur* (1984, p. 29) is translated as “the decayed bones in the sepulcher” by Dawud (1910, p. 51) and “the mouldering bones in the graveyard” by Gail (1957, p. 53), but it should read ‘the torments of the grave.’ Gail appears not to have been familiar with the reforms of Ḥosayn Khan Sepahsālār (later Mošir-al-Dowla; 1827-81), discussed below, with the result that references to these forms are lost. For example, *majāles-e mamālek-e maḥrusa* (1984, p. 10) is translated by Gail as “consultative assemblies in foreign states” (1957, p. 24), whereas the reference is to the provincial councils that then existed in Iran. In general, Gail universalizes Abd-al-Baha’s thought and casts it as hopes for the future rather than as specific commentary on the Persia of 1875. A new translation is forthcoming in the Iranian Studies Series (Rozenburg Publishers, Amsterdam).

At the time the treatise was written, reform from above appeared to be feasible in Persia, particularly through the work of Mirzā Ḥosayn Khan. Many themes in the treatise show support for Mirzā Ḥosayn Khan’s administrative and broader social reforms. The story of King No‘mān III may be intended as a



historical parallel, in which that king's two mourned victims correspond to *Amir(-e) Kabir* executed in 1852) and the virtuous Christian corresponds to Ḥosayn Khan Sepahsālār, in whom Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96) had once again found a trustworthy and progressive advisor. However, the book is intended not as an appeal to the court alone, but to a wider audience, and Abd-al-Baha, like his father, looked mainly for organic reform from below through the mobilization of the masses and a moral and religious revival that would create the necessary social conditions to sustain the reforms. There is a strong emphasis on the need for energy, effort, resolve, and confidence to enable Iranian people to transform their country into a role model for the civilized world (Abd-al-Baha, 1984 p. 6; 1957, pp. 4-5).

Abd-al-Baha advocates a range of governmental and social reforms, which could broadly be called 'Western,' but he is also sharply critical of some aspects of Western civilization. He calls European culture morally superficial, as evidenced by Europe's militarism, the oppression of the masses, class and cultural conflicts, and civil wars. (Abd-al-Baha, 1984, pp. 70-75; 1957, pp. 60-64). He endorses borrowing ideas from other countries (*ibid*, 1984, pp. 17-21; 1957, pp. 25-32) and refers to European models and the Meiji restoration in Japan (*ibid*, 1984, p. 131; 1957, p. 111). Yet he bases his own argument primarily on the values of reason, wisdom, mind, intellect, and the innate capacity for building civilization, which the Persians had demonstrated in the past. This could be characterized as a primarily indigenous yet global-minded approach to institutional reforms within the framework of a broader social development to be based on individual moral development and persevering effort, which in turn would be sustained by mass education and a revival of true religion.

As Moojan Momen has commented (pp. 23-24), Abd-al-Baha's genuine reliance on religion to provide the social bases for development contrasts with some other prominent figures of the reform movement, who used Islam cynically as a means of making reforms palatable. In the *Resāla-ye madaniya* 'reformers' who line their own pockets are criticized. The members of the consultative bodies must be virtuous, but the people also need to know what justice is if they are to pursue and obtain it ('Abd-al-Bahā, 1984, pp. 19-29). Abd-al-Baha's emphasis on education is similar to the position taken by Muhammad Abduh (Moḥammad 'Abdoh, 1849-1905), his concern for legal reform and a codified law (*ibid*, p. 46) resembles that of Mirzā Yusof Khan Mostašār-al-Dowla (d. 1888) in *Yek Kalama*, and his recognition of the harmful effects of religious



zealotry (illustrated in part by the ‘mirror for princes’ episode mentioned above) is reminiscent of *Ākundzāda* (1812-78). The repeated references to technical innovations perhaps look back to the reforms of Amir(-e) Kabir.

Rather than lambasting the conservative ulema (*‘olamā*), Abd-al-Baha presents an optimistic picture of the contribution that progressive clerics could make, if they were to concern themselves with the needs of the nation (Abd-al-Baha, 1984, pp. 40-46). At the same time, by attributing the European Dark Ages to the collusion of clergy and rulers, he implicitly makes the separation of church and state, and their cooperation, a condition for progress in Iran, a theme to which he was to return in his *Resāla-ye Siāsiya* and *Will and Testament* (ibid, 1984, p. 102; 1957, pp. 86-7; discussed in McGlinn, pp. 205-7, 212, 219, 391). The substantial section which specifically addresses the ulema, (ibid, 1984, pp. 40-117; 1957, pp. 32-99) is presented as an explanation of the Hadith, “for him who is one of the divines, protecting his self, defending his faith, opposing his passions and obeying the commandments of his Lord: let the common people imitate him” (ibid, 1984, p. 41; 1957 p. 34).

Relatively innovative elements, beyond the scope of Mirzā Ḥosayn Khan’s reforms, include the need for a system of global collective security based on law and backed by force (Abd-al-Baha, 1984, pp. 76-77) and the suggestion that public officials should be chosen in periodic elections, rather than being appointed by the shah, so as to give the public a supervisory role and inhibit corruption.

The primary influence is clearly Abd-al-Baha’s father, Bahā’-Allāh, who had already published many of these views, and who had asked Abd-al-Baha to write a work on the causes of development and underdevelopment (Fayzi, p. 38). Momen has demonstrated (pp. 49-52) that Bahai leaders in the 1860s and 1870s had extensive contacts with the most prominent reformers in the Muslim world during this period and were part of the debates on reform. It is likely that Abd-al-Baha had read the works by Ṭaḥṭāwi and Mostašār-al-Dowla. A more distant echo of medieval Persianate political ethics (Arjomand) can also be detected, particularly in the formulation of the relationship between religion and politics.

Resāla-ye madaniya was the second Persian reformist treatise to be printed and distributed in Persia, after Mostašār-al-Dowla’s *Yek Kalama*. E. G. Browne (p. 944) has noted its wide dissemination while its importance to Bahā’-Allāh’s project is indicated by the fact that when the Hasani Zivar Press became

available in Bombay, this was the second work whose publication Bahāʾ-Allāh ordered (the first being his *Ketāb-e Iqān*). As Momen has explained (pp. 48-49), the paucity of references to it on the part of Iranian intellectuals of the period (and since) may reflect their unwillingness to be associated with the Bahais (see also Cole, 1992, p. 13). The few acknowledgements of its existence in recent Iranian scholarship have come from writers who are unaware of its authorship, or who prefer not to mention it (e.g., Ādamiyat and Nāṭeq pp. 114-17; the manuscript they cite includes part of Bahāʾ-Allāh's *Lawḥ-e Mānekča-šāheb*). Momen (pp. 52-60) gives a detailed summary of the contents and an evaluation, which understates the close parallels between Abd-al-Baha's themes and Ḥosayn Khan's actual reforms, and his forthright endorsement of them, notably in the summaries on pp. 118-120 and 136 (cf. Nashat, pp. 44-47, 50, 84-5, 100-102, 104, 110, 118, 122, 125, 127). Nader Saiedi has provided the only full-length study of the *Resāla-ye madaniya*, treating it within the framework of Bahai theology as a source of still usable insights into the sociology and theory of development, for both Iran and the world at large. He also locates the work within the various disputes leading up to the [Constitutional Revolution](#) of 1906, while Cole (pp. 81-89) places it in relation to other reformist currents in the Middle East. Oliver Scharbrodt compares and contrasts it to Muhammad Abduh's thought (2008, pp. 73-83).

Necati Alkan (2008, pp. 68-70) gives an outline of the work in the context of Ottoman reforms and makes an interesting comparison to the proof-texts and line of arguments used to justify modernization in the alleged testament of Foād Pasha (1815-1869). Oliver Scharbrodt (2008, pp. 73-83) analyses the way the Islamic and Iranian history is treated in the *Resāla-ye madaniya*, in comparison to the approach used by Muhammad Abduh. Scharbrodt's earlier study (2004, see pp. 116-29) is more detailed and gives a good outline of the Iranian context. However, the work is marred by the imposition of a Bahai meta-historical scheme to explain the rise of civilizations as results of new revelation, whereas the text speaks rather of the revival of religion as a foundation for progress, and by Scharbrodt's own supposition that Bahāʾ-Allāh and Abd-al-Baha's concealed intention is to "defeat" Islam (see pp. 117, 128) rather than reform and revive it.



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