

## Preface

This book presents three of the works of Abdu'l-Bahā dealing with social and political issues that deserve to be taken more seriously as contributions to reformist literature in the Islamic world during the period leading up to Iran's Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911). It is intended for general readers, scholars in the field of Persian intellectual history and students of Persian political and religious history. These works, in chronological order, are *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, *A Traveller's Narrative* and *The Art of Governance*.

In recent years there have been signs of a softening in the anti-Bahā'ism which, in Abbas Amanat's words, has long been "a social affliction – a kind of Iranian anti-Semitism, ..." affecting Iranians of all backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Some of the texts translated here, especially the extracts from *A Traveller's Narrative*, give an authoritative overview of Bahā'i religious teachings, and will be an initial and indispensable source – along with the *Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh Revealed after the Kitāb-e Aqdas* and *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*<sup>2</sup> – for those seeking primary material for an informed judgement. The failure to reach a *modus vivendi* between religion and politics has been the major cause of Iran's aborted modernity, which has continued for more than a century past its

<sup>1</sup> See his further analysis in the Introduction to *Resurrection and Renewal*, 2005 paperback edition, pp. xvi to xx; this quotation at p. xviii. For the origins of anti-Bahā'ism in Iran, see Sealy, *In Their Place*, Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Bahā'ism and Islamism," Amanat, "Historical Roots," Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice," Yazdani, *Religious Contentions*. A compilation of statements by Iranian intellectuals rejecting anti-Bahā'ism, prepared by Ahang Rabbani in 2010, can be downloaded from [https://bahai-library.com/rabbani\\_iranian\\_intellectuals\\_bahais](https://bahai-library.com/rabbani_iranian_intellectuals_bahais).

<sup>2</sup> "Tablet" is a Bābi-Bahā'i term usually referring to a shorter work of scripture, whether a letter or an exposition of a theme. All the major Bahā'i texts are available in electronic form, in Persian or Arabic and in English translation, from the Bahā'i Reference Library at <http://reference.bahai.org/en/>. A more extensive guide to sources can be found in "Further Reading" in this volume.

first tragic failure at the end of the Constitutional Revolution. Those Iranian intellectuals who are coming to regard the relationship between church and state as the central question to be resolved in Iran may well be willing to examine again what Bahā'u'llāh and Abdu'l-Bahā were saying on this topic in the period leading to the Revolution.

At the same time, in Iran and around the world, doctrinaire secularism has given way to an awareness that religions are part of our cultures, and neither religion nor culture is destined to wither away in a march towards progress enlightened by scientific consciousness. Public intellectuals must therefore consider how to preserve the gains of modernity and secularism in societies that are becoming post-modern and post-secular, in which the death of religion anticipated by the pioneers of modernism no longer looks likely. They may want to study Abdu'l-Bahā's proposals for a pious, progressive and pluralist society, and the example he gives us of how a religious leader can contribute to fruitful movement in that direction.

In addition to presenting the first parallel text translations of these works, the Persian texts incorporate notes on variants in the manuscript sources. The findings confirm the reliability of the published versions of the texts, and reveal an author who carefully checks and corrects his own works at publication, so far as possible. The exception is the last few pages of *The Art of Governance* (*Resāleh-ye Siyāsiyyeh*), where the most widely used edition, published in Tehran after Abdu'l-Bahā's death, has errors that suggest that the editor was hurried at that point or that his work was completed by a less experienced hand. In the case of *A Traveller's Narrative*, this is the first translation to be based on Abdu'l-Bahā's corrected text, published in Bombay, rather than the earlier version given to E.G. Browne. Differences between these, and some other parallel texts, have been footnoted.

I wish to express my thanks to Johan ter Haar and Asghar Seyed-Gohrab who, as my teachers and successive heads of the Department of Persian Studies at Leiden University, have helped me enormously.

The image on the front cover is from a rare selection of works by Bahā'u'llāh and Abdu'l-Bahā in Persian, Arabic and English: Yuhanna Dawud, *The River of Life*. Two surviving copies are known, one in the British Museum Library and one in the Leiden University Library. The page that is reproduced is from an undated letter of Abdu'l-Bahā addressed to "the People of the World." This letter has not been published in any other collection.

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