

Book Review

Religion, Orientalism, and Modernity: Mahdi Movements of Iran and South Asia (Geoffrey Nash). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9781474451697.

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The discourse on contemporary Islamic studies is undergoing an important paradigm shift, in which Eurocentric narratives that have dominated the field for centuries are being challenged and reconstructed. This process of decolonizing knowledge involves not only a critique of Edward Said's classical orientalism but also an active effort to restore subjectivity and agency to Muslim communities in interpreting and developing their own religious traditions. In this context, Nash's work provides a valuable perspective on how religious groups in the Muslim world have not simply been passive objects of Western influence, but also active agents who respond to, adapt, and even utilize orientalist discourse for their benefit.

Modernism in Muslim-majority regions such as Iran and South Asia has different characteristics from Western narratives of modernity. The Mahdi movements studied by Nash show how modernity is interpreted and negotiated differently in local contexts, creating a unique synthesis between religious tradition and the demands of modern times. In addition, decolonization efforts in contemporary Islamic studies seek to uncover and appreciate these varied experiences of modernity, rejecting the idea that there is only one single path to progress.

Through a comparative approach and critical analysis of religious movements in Iran and South Asia, Nash's work exposes the tension between religious authenticity and the demands of modernity, between resistance to colonialism and adaptation to global discourses. The first chapter opens the discussion by explaining the background of the emergence of Mahdi movements such as



Babism, Baha'ism, and Ahmadiyya. Nash underlines how these movements emerged in response to modernity and colonialism. Furthermore, he also discusses how theological tensions between these groups and other Muslim communities, particularly Shia, involve orientalist rhetoric to discredit each other. For example, Shias often portray Baha'is as agents of Western imperialism, while Baha'is use orientalist language to portray Muslims as backward fanatics (pp. 1-3).

As indicated above, Nash also highlights the importance of a comparative approach to understanding the geographical and temporal variations of these movements. He cites the importance of viewing Mahdi movements in the broader context of global change, in line with Christopher Bayly's view of the need to integrate national histories into global patterns (pp. 2-4).

Chapter two discusses the social, political and cultural context in which the Mahdi movement emerged in Iran and South Asia. Nash highlights how Western colonialism and orientalism affected the internal dynamics of Islamic societies in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, he describes how these movements responded to the need for renewal of religious authority amidst changing times (pp. 25-27). He argues that these movements were not only religious but also political, reflecting their communities' attempts to assert their identities amid colonial pressures and modernity (pp. 28-30). The book also explores the views of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, a French diplomat whose theories on race influenced the way the West understood Persian society.

Gobineau attributed Aryan racial superiority to religion, which then influenced Orientalist perceptions of Babism and Persian society in general (pp. 45-48). Nash shows how Gobineau's theory created a narrative that romanticized Persia while denigrating its traditional Islam. This perspective became the basis for many Orientalist interpretations of the Mahdi movement in Iran (pp. 49-51).

In chapter four, Nash discusses Ernest Renan's attempt to find a religion compatible with the values of modernity. As an early modernist scholar, Renan believed that religion must be harmonized with science and rationality in order to be relevant in modern society (pp. 69-72). Renan viewed Islam as static and unable to adapt to changing times, a view that later influenced the way Western orientalists understood Islamic reformist movements such as the Ahmadiyya (pp. 73-75).

Chapter five explores Edward Granville Browne's contribution in documenting the history of Babism. Browne was a British scholar who paid great attention to Babism but was often criticized for using an orientalist lens in his writing (pp. 96-98). In short, Nash criticizes Browne for portraying Babism in a romantic light while painting Shia Islam as repressive. This selective representation had a major impact on Western perceptions of religious reform in Iran (pp. 99-101).

Meanwhile, chapter six discusses the relationship between imperial powers and the development of Baha'i identity during their expansion into Russian Transcaspia and Palestine under the British Mandate (pp. 123-126). Nash explains how colonial powers used the Baha'is as a tool of modernization in line with Western interests, while the Baha'is used imperial support to strengthen their legitimacy in the eyes of the international community (pp. 127-130). Next, Nash compares the writings of Baha'i and Ahmadiyya leaders in response to modernity. He shows how both groups use orientalist rhetoric to position themselves as progressive alternatives to traditional Islam (pp. 156-159). The Baha'is emphasized the universality of their message, while the Ahmadiyya focused on revitalizing Islam through reinterpretation of sacred texts. This strategy helped both groups gain recognition under the context of British colonialism (pp. 160-163).

In its final chapter, the book discusses the Muslim community's response to the Mahdi movement, which is often considered heretical or a political departure from orthodox Islamic teachings (pp. 212-215). Nash notes that despite facing oppression, these movements managed to survive by adapting to changing socio-political realities. He also reflects on the future relevance of the Mahdi movement in contemporary Islamic thought (pp. 216-220).

To sum up, with in-depth analysis in each chapter, Geoffrey Nash provides valuable insights into the relationship between religion, orientalism, and modernity through case studies of three major Mahdi movements from Iran and South Asia. This book is an important contribution to the study of religion, modern Islamic history, as well as the theory of postcolonialism. Such studies are also becoming increasingly relevant in the contemporary world, where Muslim societies, especially in the Global South, continue to struggle to define their identities amidst globalization and complex geopolitical pressures.

References:

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