

REVISIONING THE SACRED

New
Perspectives
on a
Bahá'í
Theology

STUDIES IN THE BABI AND BAHÁ'Í RELIGIONS

VOLUME 8

Edited by Jack McLean

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BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í RELIGIONS

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REVISIONING THE SACRED:
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON A
BAHÁ'Í THEOLOGY

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J. A. MCLEAN



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In today's world, any theology, Bahá'í or other, is viewed as having virtually no significant impact on thought, culture, or conduct. Yet, in theological and comparative studies of religion, more commonly called today "global theology," unsuspected resources lie as yet untapped to help form a world consciousness based on the on-going elaboration of common ethical ties, spiritual life styles, and shared beliefs. Global theology, moreover, can certainly assist in building bridges between the ever-shrinking intellectual shores of East and West and thereby facilitate cross-cultural communication. Religious Studies also contain an as yet undeveloped peace component that can significantly contribute to a pacific mindset, not only among the world's great religions, but also within the larger secular community.

In this light, Anthony A. Lee and Payman Afsharian deserve the first vote of thanks for their willingness to venture to publish Bahá'í works of a theological nature. Without their continued support, the achievements in Bahá'í Studies of the English-speaking community would not have received as wide a notice. I thank also all the scholars who recognized the value of producing such a book and who were concerned enough to contribute to its publication. It has been a pleasure collaborating and corresponding with all of you over these past two years throughout the several tasks that have led to this volume.

I mention here again Dr. Udo Schaefer to whom this volume is dedicated, as a serious promoter of Bahá'í theology over the past four decades. Dr. Schaefer recognized some forty years ago the necessity of an independent Bahá'í theology and has dedicated his ensuing years to the publication of a number of works to that end. Udo Schaefer, like other scholars who share the same outlook, has long since realized that the Bahá'í Faith cannot come to be recognized as a distinct and independent world religion without a distinctive theology. Moreover, every scholar who contributes to this emerging field is worthy of mention.

This is the first multi-authored volume dedicated to the understanding of Bahá'í theology *per se* as a free-standing discipline within Bahá'í studies. It is my hope that this work will help attract the

attention of Bahá'í theologians in the making and the wider notice of scholars of religion. My aim is to perpetuate the sacred study of religion in a Bahá'í context so that in the twenty-first century it might continue to thrive and take its rightful place alongside the great theological traditions of the sister religions of the world.

INTRODUCTION

The publication of *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology* has provided a group of scholars with an opportunity to collaborate on a publication that presents some current issues in emergent Bahá'í theology. The Bahá'í scholars of religion appearing in this volume are among those living in the last two decades of the twentieth century, years that may well prove to be a historic turning point for the development of the sacred study.

I say historic for three reasons. The first is that although Bahá'í theology is still in a formative stage, it is nonetheless beginning to demonstrate certain characteristic features and a recognizable voice of its own. The second is that these articles, although they could not hope in one volume to adequately depict the whole field, nonetheless represent some of the preoccupations of the current generation of Bahá'í scholars of religion. These writings reflect selected concerns and styles of the present period. Third, the Study of Religion Seminars held under the auspices of The Association for Bahá'í Studies in English-speaking Europe and also in North America have been instrumental in helping to form a small but dedicated group of scholars who have by now acquired the skills, and in some cases the professional training, to do exegesis and to write thoughtfully on theology and the history and comparative study of religion. The following essays reflect some of these acquired skills.

It is worth noting that the modest but steadily growing accomplishments achieved thus far in the field have been made in large part without the advantages enjoyed by scholars in the more ancient traditions and institutions of the other great religions of the world. While the Bahá'í sacred writings shed much light on both ancient questions and contemporary issues, there is as yet no centuries-old tradition of theological and philosophical reflection on the Bahá'í revelation upon which to draw. Indeed, there are some who still reject the validity of the whole notion of Bahá'í theology itself, however broadly and carefully one defines the concept. The work of the present generation of scholars is consequently still very much ground-breaking, and I hope this volume will help water the seed bed that is now beginning to flourish.

Since the Bahá'í Faith is a religion without professional clergy, nothing resembling Bahá'í divinity schools has been established and only a restricted number of Bahá'í scholars has thus far had formal academic training in the study of religion. An even smaller number is teaching religious studies at university and of these very few are in the envious position of being able to teach university-accredited courses on the Bahá'í Faith. Lectureships and courses on the Bahá'í Faith have been established only during the past decade within selected departments of religion, a significant accomplishment that augurs well for future developments. At this time, several Bahá'í scholars of religion work professionally in fields unconnected to the academic study of their faith. Consequently, these scholars have had to rely to a large extent on their own resources to promote critical studies of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh.

Fortunately, the Study of Religion Seminars or Special Interest Groups of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies mentioned above have provided a much-needed and valuable focus for research and formal presentations, as well as providing avenues for publication of scholarly articles. Although scholars of religion have had to work in less than favorable conditions to further their aims, their competence and dedication have led to the publication of instructive works. With the publication of *The Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* (1982) and more recently *Abhá: A Journal of Bábí-Bahá'í Studies* (U.K.) edited by Stephen Lambden and *The Bahá'í Studies Review* (1990) under the auspices of the Association for Bahá'í Studies for English-speaking Europe with Seena Fazel acting as current co-editor, periodicals devoted to studies of the Bahá'í religion have been established, although both *World Order* and more recently *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (ABS-North America) have published occasional articles on specifically religious themes.

Another significant development worthy of mention is the establishment of the Bahá'í Studies lectures at the American Academy of Religion begun by Anthony Lee and Susan Maneck in 1984 and whose current secretary is Robert Stockman. Although the name of the group, now called Bahá'í Studies Colloquy, has changed several times, the activities of this group provides an important venue for the exchange of ideas relating to Bahá'í religious studies.

In a recent article, Seena Fazel, using the technique of citation analysis, has pointed to a significant increase in the output of articles

related to the specifically religious aspects of the Bahá'í Faith in the years 1988–1993.¹ Yet unfulfilled tasks still beckon the scholar of the Bahá'í religion. The systematic “Bahá'í theologian” has yet to emerge—if indeed that were possible in the postmodern and post-systematic age into which we have slipped—and a number of fundamental Bahá'í teachings have suffered from neglect. Some eighty-five years (to 1996) after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s proclamation in pastor R. J. Campbell’s nonconformist City Temple in London on September 10, 1911 of the oneness of religion as “the gift of God to this enlightened age,”² there is still no major scholarly work in Bahá'í perspective on this most vital theme, which along with the oneness of humanity, is the most distinctive and characteristically Bahá'í teaching. Neither is there yet any major scholarly work on progressive revelation, one of the grand themes of Bahá'u'lláh’s preeminent doctrinal work the *Kitáb-i Iqán* (The Book of Certitude), although Christopher Buck’s recent work *Symbol and Secret: Qur’an Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh’s Kitáb-i Iqán* (Kalimat Press, 1995) provides a focused scholarly discussion of the Islamic references in Bahá'u'lláh’s work of “unsurpassed pre-eminence.” Rather than enumerate the gaps that currently exist in Bahá'í studies of religion, I refer the reader to Stephen Lambden’s instructive article that argues for the pressing need of Bahá'í theology to fill several vacuums.³

In a volume dedicated to the study of Bahá'í theology, it would be helpful to allude briefly to certain parameters of the field. Theology, at least in its Christian versions, has for centuries been associated with an oppressive dogmatism. The reemergence of fundamentalism in recent times can be viewed as an on-going manifestation of the dogmatic mindset in another guise. Of course, it would not be true to assert that the dogmatic mentality generally prevails in religious studies today. We are hardly living in the age of the great dogma, but rather in a post-dogmatic age. Postmodernism and especially, today’s current intellectual fashion, deconstructionism, are dedicated to the overthrow of authoritarian systems, be they theological or other. To say, however, that Bahá'í theology is non-dogmatic—at least in the Christian sense of the word—does not derive from a respect for the postmodern temper of the times. It is rather because the Bahá'í Faith simply declines to give institutional sanction to the opinions of individual scholars as being normative and binding, however authoritative or cogent their

arguments may be. Bahá'í scholarship is, moreover, dedicated to creativity and diversity, which mitigate against monolithic thinking, and while it defends and preserves the integrity of those teachings enshrined in Bahá'í scripture, it respects the right of the individual to a full expression of his or her views.

It would not be entirely true, however, to maintain that there is no sense of a qualified "dogmatic" authority in the Bahá'í Faith. While Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), proponent of Albrecht Ritschl's liberal Protestant theology, in his classic seven-volume *Dogmengeschichte* (The History of Dogma),⁴ came to view dogmas as oppressive fabrications that obscured the purity of the Gospel message, he maintained nonetheless that the meaning of dogma in the primitive church was that of a revealed truth.⁵ This thought, I think, can be applied to the kerygmatic theology of Shoghi Effendi, which, as a theology of the Word proclaims, interprets, and hands down the truths of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings. It does not easily escape one's notice that the certitude of Shoghi Effendi's doctrinal interpretations speak with the very clear voice of the charismatic authority of his office as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. In this sense, and to use George Santayana's apt phrase, the word dogmatic is not entirely an outmoded "term of reproach."

I view the shape of emerging Bahá'í theology, which I define loosely here as critical reflection on the specifically religious content of the Word of God, as being outlined by three subdisciplines: exegesis, critical apologetics, and philosophical theology. I highlight here a few points from this last statement.

First, any Bahá'í theology must be firmly text-rooted. The Word of God, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, is the celestial city⁶ and it is first and foremost to that city that we must direct our steps in order to discover the worlds of inner meaning and outer significance. Bahá'u'lláh says:

Please God, that we avoid the land of denial, and advance into the ocean of acceptance, so that we may perceive, with an eye purged from all conflicting elements, the worlds of unity and diversity, of variation and oneness, of limitation and detachment, and wing our flight unto the highest and innermost sanctuary of the inner meaning of the Word of God.⁷

Second—and this is the more liberal side of Shoghi Effendi's theology—Bahá'í theology must correlate its findings with other world religions and systems of thought. Correlation is a method that one may

view as a kind of theology in its own right, for it includes dialogue and rapprochement as well as making correspondences or, when necessary, disjunctures of the Bahá'í Faith and classical or more modernistic philosophical, theological, or spiritual issues, and just as importantly, movements. Third, Bahá'í theology should remain within the borderlands of theology and philosophy. For it is clear from even the most cursory reading of Bahá'í sacred scripture that Bahá'í Holy Writ embeds at source a variety of philosophical concepts. Fourth, I return to the point made above that Bahá'í theology should strive to avoid the oppressive noise of dogmatism and invite diversity without scattering to the four winds those teachings which are clearly and distinctly its own.

But it is above all the substance or content of the Bahá'í sacred writings that defines what makes for a distinctive Bahá'í theology. While gathering up and stating the essential of certain primordial teachings from antiquity and anticipating at the same time questions of modernity, the Bahá'í writings touch on a great variety of themes: the old question of "the one and the many" (unity and diversity), the prophetic teaching of the apophatic godhead, the ethical mission of the prophets, the nature of faith, progressive revelation, the relativity of religious truth, the spiritual oneness of the world's great religions, the indwelling names and attributes of God,⁸ the role of religion as a progenitor of cultures and civilizations, spiritual anthropology in the form of an interaction of soul, mind, body, and spirit, and of course, spirituality which is the living expression of faith, and spirituality's friends, prayer and mysticism. These are just some of the Bahá'í Faith's more outstanding teachings which will lend themselves handily to the further development of Bahá'í theology.

While the articles that follow reflect the preoccupations of the present, they also have implications for the future. For the outstanding Bahá'í thinkers who will no doubt emerge in the twenty-first century will either develop further some of the questions and dialectical styles represented here, or they will take Bahá'í theology in other directions, determining another discourse and raising and answering other questions. But the basic task of the Bahá'í theologian will always remain the elucidation of "the teachings," and Shoghi Effendi has said that: "Teaching is of course the head cornerstone of all Bahá'í service. . . ."9 The insights of every Bahá'í scholar, theologian or other, will result

from a close, prayerful, and faithful reflection upon the Bahá'í sacred writings. In the twenty-first century, the Bahá'í Faith must continue to make good its birthright and fulfill its great potential as a significant unifier of the world's great religions, one of the exciting promises of its sacred scriptures. In this task, Bahá'í theology has no mean part to play.

NOTES

1. Seena Fazel, "Bahá'í Scholarship 1988–1993: An Examination Using Citation Analysis," a paper presented at the Seminar on Bahá'í Studies, Bedfordshire, U.K., 6–8 January 1995. Citation analysis is widely used as a quantitative tool to assess the influence, significance, and impact of research in a field. In his study, Fazel determined which books, articles, and authors were most frequently cited in publications on the Bábí–Bahá'í religions appearing in both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í academic periodicals in 1988–1993. These results were compared with the citation data from 1978–1983. The emerging theme in the later years is Bahá'í theology, compared with the situation between 1978–1983 when history dominated the most cited list of publications.

2. *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 19. The talk in City Temple on September 10, 1911 was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's first in the West. The talk was given on the first Sunday after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's arrival in England. "He spoke from the City Temple pulpit to the evening congregation at the special desire of the Pastor, the Reverend R. J. Campbell" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 17).

Reginald John Campbell (1867–1956) became famous in the first decade of the twentieth century as an unorthodox preacher and proponent of the controversial, so-called "New Theology." In *The New Theology*, Campbell opposed what he viewed as antiquated dogmatic theology. Without being a pantheist, Campbell took a very immanentist view of God in the universe and in humanity and following the absolute idealists argued for a unity in multiplicity. Campbell reinterpreted the basic Christian doctrines of the fall, atonement, the person of Christ in less absolute, more metaphysical terms, and greatly reduced the historical uniqueness of Christ. He also embraced socialism as a means of inaugurating the Kingdom of God on earth.

3. "Doing Bahá'í Scholarship in the 1990's: A Religious Studies Perspective," *The Bahá'í Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (1994), pp. 59–80.

4. Translated by Neil Buchanan from the third German edition (London: Williams and Norgate, 1897).

5. ". . . for according to the conception of the church, dogma can be noth-

ing else than the revealed faith itself." (*History of Dogma*, Vol. 1, p. 9) Harnack makes the same point on p. 15.

6. *Kitáb-i Íqán*, p. 199.

7. *Kitáb-i Íqán*, p. 160.

8. This question was systematically elaborated by Hegel's contemporary, the philosopher Karl C. F. Krause (1781–1832) as *panentheism*.

9. The full quotation is: "Teaching is of course the head cornerstone of all Baha'i service, but successful teaching is dependent upon many factors, one of which is the development of a true Baha'i way of living and the fulfilment of responsibilities which we have incurred." (From a letter dated 3 June 1952, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II, p. 317)