

Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith

Author: Christopher Buck

Publisher: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1999, 402 pages

Reviewer: William P. Collins

If the Bahá'í Faith has a specialist in comparative religion, it is Christopher Buck. His earlier work, *Symbol and Secret: Qur'an Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1995), was the first full-length English-language study of this particular Bahá'í scripture. Buck's study made more widely accessible within Bahá'í scholarly discourse such existing concepts as the "messianic secret" to denote Bahá'u'lláh's as-yet-undeclared station as a Manifestation of God which is at the heart of the Íqán, and "realized eschatology" to characterise the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's exegesis and revelation.

Buck has made an even more significant contribution with *Paradise and Paradigm*, the published version of his doctoral dissertation. When a study breaks new ground in Bahá'í scholarship, it is not an easy task to wrap one's mind around its significance. When that study also enters unexplored realms in the entire craft of *Religionswissenschaft*, appropriate review is made even more difficult. This volume is certainly, from this reviewer's perspective, the best comparative work on the Bahá'í Faith and another religious tradition that has yet appeared, and may serve as a model for future such studies. It succeeds by its depth and its respectful approach to the unfamiliar paradigms of another religious culture. It also succeeds by making explicit a whole range of symbols in the Bahá'í paradigm that are largely unconscious to Bahá'ís themselves.

Buck has created a new methodology in comparative religion termed "symbolic paradigm analysis," and then applied it to the rich spiritual worlds of Persian Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith. He did so by testing a hypothesis: "Parallels' yield paradoxes of commensurability resolvable by paradigm 'logics' within religious systems, resulting in symbolic transformation." The statement boils down to this: two religions may appear to have the same or similar symbols, but the way to understand any real similarities or differences in the symbols' meanings must be found through the religious paradigms within which they are applied. The volume has an initial chapter dealing with the definitions, issues, and problems presented by a comparative study of the symbols and paradigms in two traditions. Buck focuses the main part of his study on the imagery of paradise, and what such imagery signifies in Persian Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith. Buck then proceeds with historical and symbolic profiles of Persian Christianity and of the Bahá'í Faith, each of which is a self-contained and fascinating review.

Buck has framed his argument in a set of parallel overviews of Persian Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith. He sets forth a historical profile and a symbolic profile for each tradition. The historical profiles could not, from a Bahá'í perspective, be carried out on an absolutely symmetrical basis. The primary sources for Buck's historical profile of Persian Christianity are works by Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373 CE) and Aphrahat "the Persian Sage" (d. 345 CE). Ephrem in particular was a significant writer and creator of the symbolic world of Persian Christianity. Neither of these figures, however, makes the kind of divine truth claims that Bahá'u'lláh does. However, from the point of view of value to each tradition, the historical reviews are balanced reviews of source documents for symbolic worldviews. Buck indicates that Persian Christianity is a response to late

antiquity, and that the Bahá'í Faith is a response to the crisis of modernity, so succinctly noted by Ninian Smart who wrote of the Bahá'í Faith that, "It is an example of a spiritual revolution which intuitively recognized the global state of world culture before its time and gave religious preparation for this unified world."¹ Buck's historical profile of the Bahá'í Faith is uniquely arranged around the framework of Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawḥ-i-Bishárát*, and the notion that Bahá'u'lláh's reforms involve desacralization of certain constraining religious formulae of the past, and sacralization of certain social notions that might be viewed as secular. For instance, Bahá'u'lláh abolished holy war, confession to anyone but God, and the destruction of books; yet on the other hand, He made sacred such concepts as interfaith amity, constitutional monarchy, and the pursuit of peace. It is possible to think of the Bábí-Bahá'í movements as a "response" to modernity if it is thought of as arising out of purely social, psychological and historical forces, and indeed works by Cole and Amanat take this view.² There is another perspective that might also have been pursued by Buck—the extent to which the works of Ephrem or the scriptural works by Bahá'u'lláh may have reflected an impulse to remake or repossess worlds that had moved out of old paradigms into new ones. There is a mythic belief in the Bahá'í Faith that the advent of Bahá'u'lláh set in motion, invisibly, the changes that have made the modern world. That world must now be sacralized. In that sense, rather than being a response to modernity, the Bahá'í Faith would be viewed as the instrument for infusing into the modern world the holiness that it needs in order to operate on a moral and ethical plane. In emphasizing the particular points made by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Lawḥ-i-Bishárát*, Buck may have selected a text that tends to be less concerned with the mysticism and personal devotion central to other of Bahá'u'lláh's works.

The symbolic profiles are extremely interesting and less constrained by the framework that Buck placed on his historical profiles. The symbolic profiles have a single framework to facilitate comparison. Each profile notes the key scenarios, root metaphors and symbolic paradigm of the religion being treated. The scenarios and metaphors are classified as either doctrinal, ritual, ethical, experiential, mythic or social. Buck comes up with the following symbols that he compares:

KEY SCENARIOS		
	Persian Christianity	Bahá'í Faith
Doctrinal	the way	the promised one
Ritual	the robe of glory	the covenant
Ethical	sons and daughters of the covenant	illumination
Experiential	the wedding feast	the lover and the beloved
Mythic	the harrowing of hell	the maid of heaven
Social	Noah's ark/the mariner	crimson ark/holy mariner

¹ Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 480.

² Juan R. I. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Bahá'í Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), especially as stated in the introduction. Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bábí Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), particularly the epilogue.

ROOT METAPHORS		
	Persian Christianity	Bahá'í Faith
Doctrinal	the physician	the physician
Ritual	the medicine of life	wine/the water of life
Ethical	the mirror	mirror/gems
Experiential	the pearl	the journey
Mythic	the tree of life	the lote tree/Sinai
Social	paradise	paradise

The volume concludes with chapters that review and draw conclusions about paradise similarities and paradigm differences. It is not possible to do justice to Buck's conclusions in a short review, but in summary, the similar symbols in Persian Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith are ensconced in two different paradigms about soteriology (the theology of salvation). According to Buck, Persian Christianity's paradigm is sacramental; the Bahá'í Faith's is a paradigm about unity. Therefore Jesus, as "the Way" in Persian Christianity, achieves God's purpose of providing sanctification and immortality through the Eucharist—a notion totally absent from the Bahá'í notion of prophetic history exemplified by Bahá'u'lláh as "the Promised One" who is the return of the bounty and perfections of Jesus, and whose purpose is unific rather than sacramental. The book argues persuasively that the Bahá'í Faith seeks a more collective salvation of humankind on a broader plain of unity, rather than on the sacramental and/or individual level of Persian Christianity and Christianity generally. This is an important foray into the deeper realm of each religion's framework of understanding. As even a cursory glance at the tables of key scenarios and root metaphors will show, there is a deceptive similarity to the symbols. Rather it is the underlying meaning, the ultimate concern, of each religion that must be uncovered through the symbols.

If there is any criticism to make of this work, it is that the Bahá'í Faith and Persian Christianity surely have paradigms that are of greater complexity than Buck was able to convey in the limited structure of his book. Buck uses an operational definition of "sacrament" as a priest-mediated sign or symbol of a spiritual reality. Although it could be argued that the Bahá'í Faith has formal religious acts that are symbols of a higher spiritual reality, and that observance of them contributes both to individual well-being and to unity of the community, they are not sacraments in this stricter sense. While the unity paradigm is the overarching frame of symbolic interpretation, there are incorporated in the Bahá'í Faith elements of other paradigms such as those of individual salvation (a Christian paradigm), family salvation (a Mormon paradigm), and the like. Nevertheless, as Buck demonstrates, the unity paradigm is the high-level prism through which Bahá'ís give everything else colour.

An additional benefit that this work affords to the Bahá'í community is the opportunity for profound learning about Christian communities of Iran that are relatively unknown in the west. The discovery of a Christian world unlike the one we know is refreshing and challenging. That Persian Christian symbols resonate with Bahá'ís is a startling discovery. Such symbols simultaneously carry some different meanings as mediated by the Persian Christian and Bahá'í paradigms. Bahá'ís therefore owe three debts to Christopher Buck's *Paradise and Paradigm*. First, that we perforce had to

absorb the symbolism of an unfamiliar faith community. Second, that we then had the opportunity to see our own symbolic worldview with new eyes. And third, that we have before us a new model of comparative religious studies for reading symbolic similarities in light of paradigmatic differences.

The larger dimension of Buck's work is its contribution to the study of religious mythology in the broad sense of the universe of metaphors, analogies, signs, symbols, and stories that make up the cosmologies and worldviews of human beings. That there are similarities in symbols, but differences in the paradigms ("myths"), of two religions means that the created world affords us symbols that can be recycled and yet can be understood in an infinite number of ways. For this very reason, the scholar and the believer are presented with problems of interpretation that suggest a need to guard against two extremes. The well-known mythologist Joseph Campbell described these extremes as:

... the positivistic...represented, on the one hand, by religious experiences of the literal sort, where the impact of the daemon, rising to the plane of consciousness from its place of birth on the level of the sentiments, is taken to be objectively real, and on the other, by science and political economy, for which only measurable facts are real... Whenever a myth has been taken literally its sense has been perverted...[and] whenever it has been dismissed as merely priestly fraud or sign of inferior intelligence, truth has slipped out the other door.³

Paradise and Paradigm avoids these extremes. It is a work of scholarship that can see clearly from outside, and yet impart inner truth. It treats, with tremendous respect, accuracy and courtesy, two religious traditions. It catalogues, with objectivity and due regard for faith and science, the symbolic universes of Persian Christians and Bahá'ís. For that reason, I believe that this tool will inspire a wealth of better studies and sound dialogue with other religious traditions, and will help those who are Bahá'ís to understand more deeply the mythic and symbolic universe of their own faith.

³ Joseph Campbell, *Oriental Mythology* (New York: Penguin, 1962) 27.