

Lights of 'Irfán



Papers Presented
at the 'Irfán Colloquia
and Seminars

Book Eleven

Lights of 'Irfán

Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs

*Papers Presented at the
'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars*



Book Eleven



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Lights of 'Irfán: Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs
Papers Presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars
Book Eleven

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O MY BROTHER! Hearken to the delightsome words of My honeyed tongue, and quaff the stream of mystic holiness from My sugar-shedding lips. Sow the seeds of My divine wisdom in the pure soil of thy heart, and water them with the water of certitude, that the hyacinths of My knowledge and wisdom may spring up fresh and green in the sacred city of thy heart.

Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words

To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers. All are enjoined to delve into the ocean of His Revelation and to partake, in keeping with their capacities and inclinations, of the pearls of wisdom that lie therein.

Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010

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Preface

O MY BROTHER! Hearken to the delightsom words of My honeyed tongue, and quaff the stream of mystic holiness from My sugar-shedding lips. Sow the seeds of My divine wisdom in the pure soil of thy heart, and water them with the water of certitude, that the hyacinths of My knowledge and wisdom may spring up fresh and green in the sacred city of thy heart.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*

The independent search for truth is a fundamental principle of the Bahá'í belief system. It is one of the spiritual obligations of every individual Bahá'í. Fulfillment of this obligation demands systematic study and proper understanding of the prescription for living given by Bahá'u'lláh to the people of the world. It has an enlightening effect and strengthens and consolidates each individual's personal understanding of and adherence to the directives for living a Bahá'í life. The Universal House of Justice provided the following guidance in the message of Ridvan 2010:

To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers. All are enjoined to delve into the ocean of His Revelation and to partake, in keeping with their capacities and inclinations, of the pearls of wisdom that lie therein.

The 'Irfán Colloquium and its publications are aimed at promoting Bahá'í scholarly activities and facilitating the fulfillment of the above-mentioned spiritual obligation. *The Lights of 'Irfán* presents the outcome of study and research in the Bahá'í Writings, interfacing Bahá'í teachings with the current religious and intellectual trends and with social

challenges confronting humanity. The Universal House of Justice in a letter issued on its behalf on 24 April 2008 emphasizes the need for and advantages gained by scholarly studies in the following words:

The House of Justice is fully committed to fostering the development of Bahá'í scholarly activity in all parts of the Bahá'í world. Through their scholarly endeavours believers are able to enrich the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community, to explore new insights into the Bahá'í teachings and their relevance to the needs of society, and to attract the investigation of the Faith by thoughtful people from all backgrounds. Far from being a diversion from the worldwide effort to advance the process of entry by troops, Bahá'í scholarship can be a powerful reinforcement to that endeavour and a valuable source of new enquirers.

In 2009, on the occasion of the centenary commemoration of the publication of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions*, Irfán Colloquium began to present and eventually publish the studies related to the topics and concepts delineated in that book. It is hoped this activity would continue and collection of scholarly studies related to that unique book would form a supplemental source for better understanding and appreciating the contents of *Some Answered Questions*.

Most of the articles published in this volume are the texts of the papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia in 2009 which were held at the Acuto Centre for Bahá'í Studies in Italy, Bosch Bahá'í School in California and Louhelen Bahá'í School in Michigan.

The series of articles entitled "Chronicle of a Birth, Early References to the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions" by Amin Egea that started in Book Five has continued. In this volume, Part III of this series covers the period of 1873 to 1895. This series presents references published in Spain and supplements "*The Babi and Bahá'í Religions, 1844- 1944: Some Cotemporary Western Accounts*" by Moojan Momen which was published in 1981.

“Reflections on Some Messianic Prophecies in Shaykhi Works” is the fourth paper contributed by Youli Ioannesian to *The Lights of 'Irfán*. The three earlier papers are published in Books II, VII, and VIII. Mr. Ioannesian's papers are the results of his research and study of the documents at the St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This article is his attempt to trace and highlight correspondences which he believes to exist between the dates and facts symbolically referred to in the messianic prophecy of Siyyid Kázim and notable events in Bábí and Bahá'í history.

From the beginning of the activities of the 'Irfán Colloquium it was hoped that the papers submitted in English, Persian or German could be translated into the other two languages and published in the series of annual publications of the 'Irfán publications. The article on “The Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace” by Ali Nakhjavani published in *Lights of 'Irfán* Book Nine was the English version of the article originally published in Persian in *Safini-yi 'Irfán* Book Ten. Now we are happy that Gerald Keil has provided an English translation of his paper, “Textual Context and Literary Criticism” that was originally presented in German at the 'Irfán Kolloquium held in Tambach, Germany, 2007 and printed in *'Irfán-Studien zum Bahá'í-Schrifttum: Beiträge des 'Irfán-Kolloquiums 2007/2008*. This is a case study of a phrase from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in 1940. The sole purpose of this study is to explore whether this text passage represents an unambiguous confirmation of the indispensability of such a spot for the determination of the day of Naw-Rúz as stipulated by Bahá'u'lláh, as is generally assumed, or whether it could also be understood in some other way. The methodology used in this study is known as *literary criticism* (“literary” in the broad sense of “anything written”). In this presentation, this term implies the systematic analysis of the written word as a preliminary stage of the process of exegesis and – to achieve clarity from the very start – has nothing to do with criticism in the sense of complaint or faultfinding.

In 1993 German theologian Hans Küng presented a ‘Declaration Towards a Global Ethic’ in the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993. It has become a subject of a number

of pro and con studies. Wolfgang Klebel in “The Path of God: Declaration Towards a Global Ethic” attempts to demonstrate that the Bahá’í Tradition follows substantially in the same tradition of all other religions, having in common with them many spiritual principles. Further, it compares several specific ethical principles as they are expressed in the Declaration of a Global Ethic with the ethical principles of the Bahá’í Faith.

Ian Kluge in “Neoplatonism and the Bahá’í Writings” attempts to demonstrate how familiarity with the work of Plotinus and those who have followed his philosophical school can be useful in understanding philosophical concepts embedded in the Bahá’í Writing. It also argues that in terms of philosophical affinities, the philosophy embedded in the Bahá’í Writings is a unique type of objective idealism.

The Tradition (Hadith) “What is the Truth” related by Kumayl bin Ziyad has received a wide range of explanatory exegesis treatments in the Islamic literature and has been mentioned in a number of occasions in the Writings of the Founders of Bahá’í Faith. Furthermore some Bahá’í scholars have also written commentaries on this Tradition. Moojan Momen in “Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Uncompounded Reality (*Lawḥ-i Basít-Al-Ḥaqíqa*)” discusses the Báb's Commentary on this Tradition. He demonstrates that the Báb refers to himself as Subh-i Azal and it is a reference to the Báb's declaration of his own true station. A recent publication of 'Irfán Colloquium (in Persian), *Aftab Amad Dalil-i Aftab: The Proof of the Sun is the Sun*” by Vahid Rafati provides detail information on the Islamic background and in the Bahá’í literature on this subject.

“A Comparative Study of Hinduism and the Bahá’í Faith” by Anupam Premanand is a comparative study of the phenomenon of the Divine Revelation from Hindu and Bahá’í points of view. He comes to the conclusion that the Bahá’í Faith and Hinduism are two most common Faiths who have spoken in the loudest terms of the eternal nature of Religion. The words of Bahá’u’lláh “*the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future*” and the Hindu term of “Sanatana Dharma, the Eternal Law” have inspired the author to study

and compare the Hindu and the Bahá'í conception of Revelation and he finds them to be strikingly similar.

Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Veil (*Qina*) revealed in response to questions asked by a Bábí in relation to the objection raised by Karim Khan-i Kirmani, a Shaykhi leader and a famous enemy and opponent of the Báb, regarding certain grammatical points in the Writings of the Báb, contains a wide range of subjects. In the words of Sholeh Quinn this article attempts to place this Tablet in historical context, and demonstrate how that context explains certain elements in that Tablet.

The Bahá'í Faith has revolutionized the procedure and the manner of conduct in using consultation as a technique for problem solving and group decision making. "The Indispensability of Consultation for Ordering Human Affairs" by Ian Semple, explains the unique features of Bahá'í consultation. It demonstrates that consultation is not just a technique to be learned, but a development of the character of the individuals who participate in it.

The section entitled ELUCIDATIONS includes the text of three messages from the Universal House of Justice providing guidance on three important matters related to the World Centre of the Bahá'í Faith, i.e. Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, infallibility, authority and centrality of the Universal House of Justice.

For those readers interested to know the topics of the papers published in previous volumes of the *Lights of 'Irfán*, Appendix II presents a list of all those papers. This listing of the papers published in various volumes of the *Lights of 'Irfán* provides a preliminary familiarity with the range, types, methodological approaches and scope of the papers that are welcome to be presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia and be considered for publication in *The Lights of 'Irfán*. In addition to the papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia, research papers related to the main goals of the 'Irfán Colloquium are welcome to be directly submitted.

Starting with Book Six we have made two changes to the 'Irfán Colloquia's style guide. All "authoritative" publications are cited by an abbreviation; see Appendix I, "Bibliography of

the Bahá'í Writings and Their Abbreviations Used in This Book.” Words of Prophets/Manifestations, i.e. quotations from Sacred Writings (not including statements by Shoghi Effendi or the Universal House of Justice), are italicized.

All papers in this volume present the views and understanding of their authors. The texts of the papers are published as provided by the authors. The writing styles and scholarly approaches are therefore different. Articles are published in this volume according to the alphabetical order of the author's surnames.

Iraj Ayman

Chicago May 2010

Chronicles of a Birth Part III

Early References to the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions in Spain (1873-1895)*

by Amín E. Egea

translated by Francisco J. Díaz

Francisco de Paula Canalejas

Francisco de Paula Canalejas (b. 1834, Córdoba, Spain – d. 1883, Madrid, Spain) was a distinguished nineteenth century Spanish scholar. Chair of the history of philosophy at the Universidad Central de Madrid, prolific author, and follower of Krausist philosophy [after German philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause], today he is mostly known for having been the uncle and mentor of assassinated Spanish president José Canalejas.

On May 3, 1874, he published in *Revista Europea*¹ the first installment of an article titled *La Historia de las Religiones*

* The text of “*Chronicles of a Birth: Early References to the Bábi and Bahá'í Religions (1854-1876)*” published in *The Lights of 'Irfán, Book VII* was republished, by mistake, under the title of “Chronicles of a Birth: Early References to the Bábi and Bahá'í Religions (1873-1895” in *The Lights of 'Irfán, Book VIII*. The correct text of this article is now published in the present volume. The sequence of these series of articles on *Chronicles of a Birth* by Amin Egea, so far published in *The Lights of 'Irfán*, is as follows:

Part I : 1850-1853 in *The Lights of 'Irfán, Book V*

Part II: 1854- 1876 in *The Lights of 'Irfán, Book VII*

Part III: 1873-1895 in *The Lights of 'Irfán, Book XI*

[The History of Religions], which he dedicated to the poet Ramón Campoamor (b. 1817, Navia, Spain – d. 1901, Madrid, Spain). Like Juan Valera in his *La Religión de la Humanidad* [Humanity's Religion]², Canalejas sought in his work to justify religion's enduring legacy and man's need for spirituality. The article would later become a chapter in his book titled *El problema religioso: Doctrinas religiosas del racionalismo contemporáneo* [The Question of Religion: Contemporary Rationalism's Religious Doctrines] (Madrid, 1875).

La Historia de las Religiones opens with an interesting critique of certain academic trends at the heart of the study of the history of religion. After a brief introduction to the Vedic and Avestan religions, Canalejas introduces Babism as follows:

Even today heresies in the Oriental countries, whether in India, China, or Persia, surface as frequently as the philosophical theories circulating in German universities, the only difference being that the former move the hearts of entire populations and uproot them, as in the days of Muhammad, and give rise to revolutions that rival those of 16th century Europe.

Babism is a sterling example of this vitality of religious thought in the Orient. Its history, though rooted in the present century, displays characteristics reminiscent of past ages.³

Canalejas cites Gobineau as his source of information about the Báb's religion. His article goes on to narrate some of Babism's most relevant historical episodes: the Báb's declaration, His pilgrimage to Mecca, the features of His influential personality, the rapid spread of His doctrines, opposition from the Muslim clergy, the vicissitudes faced by Mullá Husayn and Táhirih, the Bábí resistance at the Fort of Shaykh Tabarsí, and, finally, the Báb's martyrdom. As for Bábí doctrine itself, Canalejas, in closing his exposition, summarizes it thus:

Babism's sacred literature is extremely copious. It defends Muhammadan monotheism without rejecting Christian hypostases [i.e., Trinitarian doctrines]. God is the Creator, according to Babism, but God's

creation does not proceed directly from God, but rather is one of His effects limited by time and space. Creation is equivalent to a temporal separation of that which has been created with respect to pure essence; but everything shall return to God at the end of times, and, not until the day of final judgment will God's essence become fully known. Humanity's occupation is to seek God; all of man's obligations revolve around obedience to Him. In short, Babism is an Alexandrian doctrine, a Gnostic teaching, which breaks off from Muhammadanism and seeks points of commonality and agreement with Christianity. The Bab is not God's prophet; rather he is only the prophet *for the century* [emphasis Canalejas's], inasmuch as divine revelation complements itself through a series of human manifestations that arise throughout time, until the full revelation is consummated on the day of final judgment.

Let the aforesaid suffice, my dear friend, to prove my thesis and conclude, like Max-Muller, that it is just as important to document the authentic and pristine religious doctrines of ancient peoples as it is to follow their history with a view toward what they eventually become or what direction they take through centuries and generations.

The second and final installment of the article was published on May 10, though the references it contained about Babism were less relevant.

Adolfo Rivadeneyra

Two centuries of estrangement between Spain and Persia came to a close in 1842, with the signing in London of a treaty meant to foster friendly relations and trade between the two nations. Very little came about as a result of the treaty, which was ratified some thirty years later, and it would not be until 1874 that Spain dispatched a diplomatic mission to Persia.

Said delegation consisted of a vice-consul whose primary objective was to explore potential trade routes in Persia. The mission was placed in the charge of Adolfo Rivadeneyra.

Rivadeneýra (b. 1841, Valparaíso, Chile – d. 1882, Madrid, Spain)⁴ began his diplomatic career in 1863 as a *joven de lenguas* (attaché) assigned to the consulate in Beirut. By then he was already fluent in five living languages, in addition to Latin.

In Beirut he devoted himself to the study of Arabic at the monastery in Ain-Warka. A mere fifty days following his arrival, the Spanish Consul, Antonio Bernal O'Reilly, wrote to his superiors in astonishment over how quickly Rivadeneýra had learned Arabic. Within a year he was able to write a treatise on grammar that he titled *Estudio sobre el mecanismo de la lengua árabe* [A Study of the Mechanism of the Arabic Language]. Displaying the same tenacity with which he had learned Arabic, he subsequently learned Turkish, Sinhalese, Hebrew, Armenian, Sanskrit, and, eventually, Persian.

After his tour of duty in Beirut, he continued his diplomatic career occupying several positions such as Vice-Consul or Provisional Consul in Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Ceylon [Sri Lanka], and Morocco, while at the same time publishing articles in the Spanish press and a book about his travels titled *Viaje de Ceilán a Damasco* [Journey from Ceylon to Damascus].⁵

On September 17, 1873, Emilio Castelar, President of the Republic [of Spain], authorized Rivadeneýra's appointment as Vice-Consul of Persia, and, on April 11 of the following year, he assumed his post in Tehran.

Barely a year and a half had passed before Rivadeneýra asked to return. His departure signaled the end of Spain's Vice-Consulate in Persia. Once back in Madrid, Rivadeneýra began writing, on the basis of his travel notes, his *Viaje al Interior de Persia* [Journey Into Persia]⁶, a work encompassing three volumes and which, in several instances, makes references to Babism.

In the fifth chapter of volume one, Rivadeneyra includes a lengthy summary of the history of Persia and ancient Iran. The last twelve pages contain an exposition on Babism:

Before bringing to a close this cursory report on a Nation plagued by so many tragic, though not unrelated, events, I wish to focus on one incident that took place not long ago; that is, in the latter days of the indolent Muhammad Shah's reign.

It was an extraordinary incident, not only in and of itself, but also because of what it could have led to; an incident that will demonstrate yet again how fragile is the foundation on which seemingly everlasting monuments are erected, where we declare them to be the handiwork of gods, when, in reality, they are but the by-products of chance.

Around 1844, in Shiraz, the cradle of insight, lived a nineteen-year-old youth by the name of Mirza Alí Muhammad, the descendant of an Imam, like many of his fellow countrymen, and deeply devoted to the study of religions in general, his own especially. He was handsome, affable, eloquent in speech, and, in addition to possessing such enviable traits, had great reserve, the product not of ignorance or timidity, but rather of reflection.⁷

Rivadeneyra then continues with a thorough account — based entirely on Gobineau's work — of Bábí history and precepts, occasionally interspersing throughout the narrative his own observations:

To get an idea of the fear that the Bábís, now scattered throughout all of Iran, inspire even today, suffice it to say that I, a European, would never dare utter the name of that sect in any bazaar for fear of inciting a riot.

It is truly regrettable that the apostles of the new Messiah were not more prudent; had they been, their victory would have been assured. Whenever the Government seeks to intensify its battle against the converts, it finds them in the majority. And it is not that the believers were being led by the goodness that

the religious impulse generates. Those poor souls lack such motivation; earning their daily bread is struggle enough. But the idea of enhancing their national identity by enthroning an Imam descended from Alí – and related by blood to Yazdigird, the last Sassanid ruler, no less – stroked their egos, so bruised today by the presence of a Turanian sitting upon Cyrus's throne.

This circumstance will continue to feed and nourish Babism, and will someday allow it to acquire renewed vigor. It is doubtful, however, that it will triumph in the end, because such enterprises can not be frustrated; they either triumph or die out.⁸

Rivadeneyra admits that he tried in vain to obtain any of the Báb's writings:

It has been impossible, despite my best efforts, to obtain a sample of the writings of the Bab – the name adopted by the alleged herald of the 'Great Redeemer' – nor of any accounts from the period during which he lived and which are still being written today. Mr. Gobineau found himself in special circumstances that allowed him to acquire the *Biyan* [sic] or *Exposition on What Is Important to Know*. What he has published is but a small fragment of the Bab's writings. The most complete collection of same are to be found in St. Petersburg.⁹

And he concludes his article with the following reflection:

I do not know how to describe the revolution consummated by Babism. What I do know is that in the time of Darius, during the Sassanid dynasty, [and] throughout the entire Muhammadan period, those men that proclaimed a religious idea went on to become their Nation's favored sons. Lacking an exemplar, they embrace the first man that presents himself to them, and they embrace him with faith and heroism; proof of this being that they are still in the earliest stage of moral development, which is faith carried to the altar of sacrifice. Perhaps due to this the Persians will arrive

before we do at the ideal of human society, which, I suppose, is *equalitas sub more*; in other words, what was in the beginning.¹⁰

The remaining volumes contain assorted detailed references to Babism of relative importance. The third volume contains the following anecdote:

On the eve of my departure, a youth approached me and asked if I would help out the lovers of truth; neither the Mirza nor I could guess who those lovers were, and since the lad would not give me a straight answer, I gave him some loose change and sent him on his way. As soon as he departed, the cook came over to inform me that said individual was a Bábí, and that, therefore, I should avoid him in the future, lest the Governor become suspicious of me.¹¹

This encounter is reminiscent of another very similar one recounted by E. G. Browne while in Isfahan.¹² Both stories, however, to Rivadeneyra's dismay, had very different outcomes.

Once back in Madrid, Rivadeneyra gave a talk about Persia before the Real Sociedad Geográfica [Royal Geographic Society], of which he was a member, correspondent, and secretary. Unfortunately, said society's archives are not accessible at present and it is not known for the moment whether he ever mentioned Babism either in his talk¹³ or in his correspondence.

Following his premature death, several tributes were paid to the young diplomat. On March 28, 1882, Eduardo Saavedra, president of the Sociedad Geográfica, gave a talk in memory of his friend and colleague. In the middle of his eulogy, while discussing Rivadeneyra's trip to Persia, Saavedra interjected the following:

... so as not to bore you with accounts dealing with other sects, I will just mention the one inaugurated in 1852 by an obscure yet highly energetic and ardently imaginative figure, who donned the sobriquet of *Bab* or *Door of Renewal*, and who claimed to bring a new Koran. No one disturbed him so long as his preaching

restricted itself to theological matters, but when it began threatening the empire's political and social fabric, the Government became alarmed, ordered savage persecutions, and was unable to quash either him or the disturbances caused by his followers. In the end, it had to turn to the assistance of a Christian regiment hardly impressed by the false apostle's eloquence.¹⁴

One of Madrid's leading newspapers, *La Correspondencia de España*, reprinted *Viaje al Interior de Persia* [Journey Into Persia] as a supplement, so that the references Rivadeneyra made to Babism reached the public at large by way of various printings between 1882 and 1883.¹⁵

His book became somewhat influential and helped to spread beyond the usual circles news of the new religion. This is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that in 1896, following the Sháh of Persia's assassination, numerous press articles about Babism quoted Rivadeneyra. Even as late as 1908, one author referred to *Viaje al Interior de Persia* as the first work to have mentioned Babism in Spain.¹⁶

The Sháh Visits Europe

Násiri'd-Dín Sháh was the first Persian monarch to visit Europe. He did so on three separate occasions: 1873, 1878, and 1889. The historic nature of his visits and, particularly, his and his entourage's exotic demeanor, captivated the European press, especially in the United Kingdom, Austria, and France, where the Sháh prolonged his stay in order to visit the expositions and fairs being held there.¹⁷

The Carlist wars, to his regret, prevented the Sháh from visiting Spain. The Spanish press, nevertheless, gave extensive coverage to his European tour. Naturally, in discussing the monarch's biography or the situation in Persia, some newspapers touched on the subject of Babism, recalling for the most part the events of 1852.

Diario de Barcelona, for example, published on July 16, 1873, a letter written in Paris on July 12 containing information

about the Sháh. It concluded as follows: "He has a very affable personality; he has not had to punish any of his subjects following the Bábí insurrection."¹⁸

Several days later this newspaper published the following:

In 1852, Nasser-ed Din nearly fell victim to an assassination plot hatched by the Bábís, a Sufi sect of Persian free thinkers and revolutionaries, who charge that the Muhammadan clergy have distorted the tenets of Islam and, in their greedy lust, have deceived the Persian nation by interpreting the Koran literally and not according to its spirit.

One day, as the king made his way on horseback toward Chimran, at the foot of Mount Albourz, four individuals of the Bábí sect awaited his approach by the roadside and handed him a petition. The king, unsuspecting, and led by his innate kindness, stopped his horse and extended his hand to take the document, whereupon the assassins rushed him, firing three shots at point-blank range. Fortunately, the Shah turned quickly and was only mildly injured. The assassins were arrested and beheaded at the scene of the crime, and their confessions resulted in horrible punishments being meted out to the Bábí chiefs that had plotted the conspiracy.

Secret societies have made the Shah's personal safety a cause for concern: in addition to Sufi and Bábí conspiracies, he has had to do battle with Freemasonry, which his Minister of State, Malcom [*sic*] Khan, introduced into Persia.¹⁹

One Madrid newspaper, *La Época*, published the following account of a military parade held in the Sháh's honor:

The review [of the troops] in Longchamps has impressed both the Asian prince and the French public, who are witness to how the nation, thanks to law and order, has lifted itself up in the last two years from the greatest of catastrophes and is still today a great nation. Mac-Mahon [*sic*] has acted with prudence, bringing fresh life to imperial feasts and spectacles. He

has taken a great step toward reestablishing the monarchy. Moreover, Nasser-Eddin would recall that other grand spectacle in 1852 in Tehran, when, early in his reign, the Bábí conspiracy sought to kill him and the loyalty of his army saved him.²⁰

La Justicia published the following on July 29, 1889:

Now that the public's eyes are fixed with interest on the Oriental sovereign, we take pleasure in reporting to our readers some details related to this very important figure.

Nass-ed-Dine, Shah of Persia, is a cold, determined, and resolute man.

Some years ago, the Bábí fanatics had whipped up Persia into a frenzy with their sermonizing. The Shah squelched the unrest with typical Oriental zeal, but that very harshness proved counterproductive and the Bábís' fanaticism only intensified.

Nass-ed-Dine was returning one day from the hunt — a pastime he avidly enjoys — when Bábís took him by surprise when he separated from his retinue. They held his steed and with a pistol opened fire on the horseman.

The Shah, uninjured, and in sheer cold blood, approached one of his attackers, felling him with one savage thrust from his sword. To the other attacker he gave a terrific blow with the hilt of his Kandjar, also killing him on the spot.

The next minute he was proceeding on his interrupted journey without betraying the slightest emotion.²¹

Emilia Pardo Bazán

The Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1889, which Násiri'd-Dín Sháh attended, attracted much of the European public's attention.

One Spaniard that visited the fair was the famous writer and intellectual Emilia Pardo Bazán (b. 1851, La Coruña, Spain – d. 1921, Madrid, Spain).

The author of nearly twenty novels and six hundred articles and short stories, she was the editor in chief of *Revista de Galicia*, *Biblioteca de la Mujer*, and *Nuevo Teatro Crítico*. Her long literary career earned her the title Countess de Pardo Bazán, an honor bestowed personally by King Alfonso XIII in 1908. From 1910 she served as Director of Public Education; from 1916, as professor of literature at the Universidad Central de Madrid. Though nominated on more than one occasion to serve as a member of the Real Academia de la Lengua Española, her membership was disallowed on account of her being a woman. Today she is remembered as one of the preeminent Spanish writers of the nineteenth century and as one of the pioneers in the struggle for women's emancipation. From France she collaborated on series of articles for the journal *La España Moderna* and the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*. These letters, together with others composed in Germany, were compiled in 1890 in a single volume under the title *Por Francia y Alemania* [Dispatches from France and Germany].²²

In Paris, she had the opportunity to meet with Násiri'd-Dín Sháh personally, and she was moved by the experience to write a letter, dated August 9, addressed, presumably, to the Buenos Aires-based *La Nación*. The letter bore the rather blunt title *Un Diocleciano* [A Diocletian (an allusion to Roman emperor Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus, noted for his persecution of Christians)].

The Countess's letter opens as follows:

The Shah of Persia is the talk of the town in Paris... The Shah, that is, Nasreddin, has that great city intoxicated by his spell, and all that people think about is going to see him, catching a glimpse of even his most trivial activities, counting the diamonds on his crown, and offering to wine and dine him with feasts, dinners, performances, and diversions of every sort.

There are those who say that Paris's enthusiasm for Nasreddin is due to that inevitable and hush-hush

monarchical fascination so persistent in the Latin republics. The Shah is a king for sure, a king with all the usual trappings: the magnificence, power, solemnity, and irresponsibility of a true monarch. Nasreddin can chop off heads; populate his harem with virgins uprooted from their parents' homes, or wives snatched from their husbands' arms; embroider his horse's saddlery with precious stones and have his slave trailing behind carrying a jug of ice-cold water so that the king should not have to trouble himself by asking for a drink in some café. Nasreddin's subjects refer to him as "King of kings" and "The Shadow of God," and this is what Paris sees. Paris: demolisher of Bastilles, revolutionary, herald of freedom and equality. And instead of exclaiming, as logic would dictate, "What stupid fools these Persians are!", Paris follows in their footsteps and prostrates herself before Nasreddin, who is nary a prodigy of culture, neither wisdom, neither magnanimity, neither talent. Everyone that sees him suffers the same impression: that of a vulgar, stout, not very tall man, possessed of little majesty and deprived of that constant and laudable affectation of personal worth nowadays characteristic of monarchs (Nasreddin would not even enter the Eiffel Tower's elevators). The sovereign of Persia possesses nothing, then, to justify the febrile curiosity and ardent sympathy that Paris has shown him.

Maintaining this sarcastic tone, she continues her letter with a few paragraphs containing some anecdotes and biographical items about the Sháh. The central thrust of her letter then follows:

For although Nasreddin, with all of these familiar details, will appear herein to be a simple and naïve sovereign willing to educate himself, like the emperor of Brazil, let us not fool ourselves: the story of his reign contains a dark and bloody page calling to mind the annals of a decadent Rome during the persecutions. In 1843, five years before the young Nasreddin assumed the throne, a religious sect called Babism, founded by a Persian from Eschiraz named Mirza-Ali Mahomet,

allegedly a descendant of Muhammad's, came into being and swept through Persia. The new religion, theologically speaking, was a sort of reform movement in the pantheistic sense; socially speaking, it was gentle, charity-oriented, progressive, and humane, especially in comparison with the religion it sought to substitute. Its tenets included – and still include, since Persia is full of Bábís – the inviolability of one's home and correspondence, cordiality in one's relations, respect for women and full recognition of their rights, the elimination of corporal punishment in education, nonviolence, compassion, hospitality, monogamy, trade, honest work as a life principle, and a multitude of ideas that, truth be told, seem very good, wise, and practical, and that are at heart essentially Christian.

Babism's doctrines of loving kindness, enlightenment, and fairness spread in such a manner that the Shah was soon trembling in his throne as he foresaw an approaching social revolution that would probably be the ruin of his all-embracing and despotic power and of the age-old and barbaric establishment of his States. At once he launched a bitter and terrible campaign of persecution against the Bábís. They were rounded up like beasts, surrounded in areas where they had established strongholds, and put to the sword; women and children under the age of fourteen were eviscerated. Believers displayed heroism, steadfastness, and the faith of martyrs. Their chief, Mirza-Ali, was paraded nude through the streets, bound by a rope, while mobs hurled mud, stones, and spit at him; later they hung him on a high wall and, from below, finished him off in a hail of bullets, along with a young and faithful disciple that they hung next to him as he professed his faith out loud. Such brutality upset and riled the Bábís, in spite of their meekness, and three from among their ranks resolved to kill Nasreddin. The murder plot against the king was foiled, and all three conspirators were subjected to incredible and savage torture. One woman, a priestess of the new sect, was burned alive.

A lugubrious procession made its way through the streets of Tehran: scores of Bábí children and women, surrounded by their executioners, paraded by, the entire flesh on their bodies ripped to shreds and lighted candles thrust into each of their wounds. The executioner's would goad them on with their whips, and the victims, instead of moaning, would sing in unison their hymn: "We come from God, and unto God do we return." Every so often, a child would collapse, dead at last, free and happy. The mothers would continue their march, treading over their children's lifeless bodies. One father's two sons had their throats slit atop his breast. Later their heads were hung on stakes. Such was the bloodbath that brought Persian Babism to its knees. But clandestinely, and through the fire and zeal that persecution engenders, the sect has continued to gain converts; it has gone underground; it possesses potential both mysterious and powerful; and would that the egotistic policies of the European states not prefer Muhammadan backwardness over more civilizing, beneficent, and milder doctrines, the Shah would find himself dethroned when he least expected it and the bulk of the Persian empire would be Bábí.

In wining and dining the Diocletian of Iran, Paris operates according to her pragmatic interests; she could care less about humanity's interests. Why is it that religious tolerance, which is *de rigueur* the world over, which is invoked against Catholicism in order to protect impure rites and discarded and vain beliefs, can not become a fact of life in Persia, where an idea whose social ramifications portend greater benefits than Muhammadanism is being forced to go underground like some outlaw, and, as such, to face persecution and extermination? No doubt the French will hint at our own Inquisition (which for over 150 years was as imaginary as the boogeyman used to frighten children) and continue to portray us as Torquemadas who burn at the stake every living creature. The hecatombs of Persia will not prevent the Parisian press from depicting Nasreddin as a kind,

paternal *roi d'Yvetot* figure. Material advancements – telegraphs, roads, schools, new and improved firearms – are all fine and good; but does not moral advancement, an improvement of habits that Babism, in lieu of Christianity, would have brought to Persia, stand for anything? And could any man be called *civilized*, in the strict sense of the word, who decrees such tortures and fails to hear in the shadows of night, gripped by the fear of his own remorse, the groaning of scalded and broken children, or the youth's final gasp as his throat is slit open atop his own father's breast?

After these gripping ruminations, Emilia Pardo Bazán focuses anew on personal aspects of the Sháh's life – his relationship with women, his opulence, his physical appearance, etc. – and then brings to a close her letter as follows:

As for the Shah, cursed be the curiosity he inspires in me. Were it not for the atrocities committed against the Bábís, I would indulge him. But in the end, Nasreddin is a tyrant; and every tyrant, when he exerts his tyranny against that divine ether which we call *an idea*, and persecutes souls by torturing bodies, is odious and loathsome. Someone in the crowd yells, “Long live the Shah!” and I recall those gloom-filled victims, those hapless souls, outlawed for wanting to give to Asia a better, gentler, more humane nation... And I am forced to appeal to reason so as not to betray any displeasure, which would no doubt astonish these people, so captivated that a Spanish commoner would turn out to see ‘the darling of Persia.’

Por Francia y Alemnia enjoyed several reprintings, and, in 1891, a Mexican newspaper, *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, published it as a supplement.²³ It has been impossible to determine to date in which issue of *La Nación* this letter was published.

It would not be the last time, however, that Emilia Pardo Bazán mentioned Babism. It happened again – as we shall see on another occasion – in 1899, this time as part of one of her fictional stories.

Other Authors

During the years that this article focuses on, other authors also mentioned Babism in their writings.

Francisco García Ayuso (b. 1815, Segovia, Spain – d. 1897, Madrid, Spain), for example, was a noted Orientalist and Spanish philologist who specialized in Semitic and Indo-European languages. He completed his higher education in Munich under the wings of such eminent Orientalists of the time as Müller, Haug, Ethé, Haneberg, etc.

As a scholar, he at various times held chairs in the history of philosophy, metaphysics, Greek, Sanskrit, world history, and German.

As a writer, he was famous for, among other works, *El estudio de la filología en su relación con el sanskrit* [The Study of Philology in Relation to Sanskrit] (Madrid) and *Ensayo crítico de gramática comparada de los idiomas indo-europeos* [A Critical Essay on the Comparative Grammar of Indo-European Languages] (Madrid), along with numerous translations.

In 1876, he published *Irán o del Indo al Tigris* [Iran or From the Indus to the Tigris]²⁴, in which, in his narrative of the history of Persia, García closed the book with a nearly five-page summary of Bábí history and doctrine. All of his source material is taken from Count Gobineau's *Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*.

It is worth mentioning that García Ayuso founded and directed a language academy in Madrid in which Persian and other languages were taught. It is more than likely that Rivadeneyra, who we discussed earlier, and who was a personal friend of García's, learned the rudiments of Persian in his academy.

Also in 1876, in a work titled *La Cuestión de Oriente* [On the Question of the Orient]²⁵, Emilio Castelar (b. 1832, Cádiz, Spain – d. 1899, San Pedro del Pinatar, Spain), briefly mentions Babism in the chapter titled *Una Religión Decadente* [A Religion in Decline], in which he is critical of Islam and its

apologists and defenders in Europe. He writes in a jocular tone:

Our continent produces commentators of dogmas only; but the Asian continent, in its ingenuity and essence, produces the dogmas themselves. This exuberance of the Asiatic intellect continues unabated. Whereas here we sacrifice our lives in pursuit of establishing States or to fight for our wages, over there they fight and sacrifice themselves in pursuit of religious beliefs and metaphysical abstractions. Penitents still pray in self-imposed exile, prophets preach in the wilderness, sons of God descend from the heavens, and idealism's martyrs irrigate and fertilize the earth with their blood. The founder of Babism in Persia finds neither judges nor executioners among the Muslims, and he would not have died a martyr's death had not Nestorian fanatics killed him. There, from amid the founders of religions, quickly spreads the poetic genius that transports them away from their mundane sorrows to deify them in the heavens.²⁶

The reference in itself contains little of value, but it acquires relevance when we stop to consider that it was written by one of Spain's most notable nineteenth century politicians.

Emilio Castelar held the chair in history at the Universidad Central de Madrid, and he was the founder and director of the republican newspaper *La Democracia*. In 1869, he was elected to Spain's Parliament as a deputy and, with the establishment of the republic, was appointed Minister of State, a position he held until being elected President of the Government. He was the last president of the first Spanish republic. Following the establishment of the monarchy and an exile lasting several years, he returned to political life as a Parliamentary deputy.

In addition, Castelar authored numerous historical essays, novels, and newspaper articles, and was a member of the Real Academia de la Lengua Española.

The paragraph quoted above was republished inside an article that Castelar had published in December 1895 as part of

a section he collaborated on regularly for the journal *La España Moderna*.²⁷

Another author worth mentioning in this brief summary is Joan Montserrat i Archs (b. 1895, Barcelona(?), Spain), a Catalonian poet and engineer who, in 1882, mentioned the Báb in a pull-out section entitled *El Mundo Ilustrado*,²⁸ describing him as “the new Muslim Luther.” His brief summary of Babism, once again, is based on Gobineau’s account.

We know little about this man beyond that, despite the political obstacles that the nineteenth century presented him, he was a determined author in prose and poetry in the Catalonian tongue.

Reference Works

In another installment we mentioned two encyclopedias that early on made mention of Babism in Spain: *La Enciclopedia Moderna* (1854) and *Diccionario Universal* (1876).

During the decades this article focuses on, the number of reference works containing any mention of the new religion multiplied considerably. Volume 3 (published in 1888) of *El Diccionario Enciclopédico Hispano-Americano*, for example, contained entries for “Báb,” “Babism,” and “Bábí,” the first two of which had rather lengthy articles. Volume 15 (published in 1894) mentions Babism again, this time as part of a description of Persian history.

It is difficult to find a dictionary or encyclopedia published in that time frame that did not contain entries for “Babism” or “Bábí,” although no work acquired the prestige and popularity accorded the *Diccionario Enciclopédico*.

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In 1896, Násiri'd-Dín Sháh was assassinated. The king’s murder received extensive coverage in the Spanish press, as it did in other parts of the world. The unjust accusations leveled against the Bábís (Bahá’ís) for that crime allowed equally extensive press coverage of the new religion comparable only to

— albeit to a much lesser degree — that which attended the events of 1852.

This topic will be explored in a future installment.

NOTES

¹ *La Revista Europea* (Madrid) was a publication of the Ateneo Popular de Madrid. It managed to draw into its ranks a good number of writers representative of the intellectual and political vanguard of the time.

² See *Early References to the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions in Spain, (1876-1895)*, p. 71, in *Lights of 'Irfán*, Vol. VII.

³ *La Revista Europea* (Madrid), No. 10; May 3, 1874; p. 298.

⁴ Elder son of Spanish publisher Manuel Rivadeneyra, editor in chief of the literary corpus titled *Biblioteca de Autores Españoles* [Library of Spanish Authors] (BAC). He completed his studies in Germany, England, Belgium, and Paris. There is a letter of his dated December 21, 1863, addressed to Isabel II, in which he requests to be considered for the “joven de lenguas” (translator’s apprentice) post anywhere in the Middle East. The biographical data cited are taken from his personnel file from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (File P 213) and from an article published after his death by Ramón Mesonero Romanos in *La Correspondencia de España* (Madrid) on July 24, 1882.

⁵ Adolfo Rivadeneyra, *Viaje de Ceilán a Damasco*, Madrid: Printed and Stereotyped by M. Rivadeneyra, 1871.

⁶ Adolfo Rivadeneyra, *Viaje al Interior de Persia*, Barcelona: Aribau, 1880.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 236-237.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 244-245.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 245.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 247.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 155.

¹² See Mojan Momen, *Selections from the Writings of E. G. Browne*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1987, pp. 23-24.

¹³ The speech was given on April 26, 1876. The society’s newsletter announced on several occasions that it would publish it, but it was never published, probably because the detailed chronicle of his journey had already been published in the meantime.

¹⁴ *Boletín de la Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid*, 1882, Vol. XII, p. 503.

¹⁵ Specifically, in its issues dated August 15 and 16, September 7, October 19, and November 3, 1882, and January 5, February 8 and 18, 1883.

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- ¹⁶ Rafael Urbano, *Bábismo y Behaismo, Sophia*, Vol. 17, No. 1; January 7, 1908.
- ¹⁷ For a report penned by the Sháh himself about his journey, see *The Diary of H. M. The Shah of Persia during his tour through Europe in A.D. 1873. A verbatim translation*. Murray, London, 1874.
- ¹⁸ *Diario de Barcelona*; July 7, 1873; p. 7287.
- ¹⁹ *Diario de Barcelona*; July 20, 1873; p. 7410.
- ²⁰ *La Época* (Madrid); July 17, 1873; p. 2.
- ²¹ *La Justicia* (Madrid); July 29, 1873; p. 2. *El Diluvio* (Barcelona) published the exact same article in its August 7 issue.
- ²² Madrid, La España Editorial, 1890.
- ²³ The references to Bábism were published in *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* (México) on January 8 and 9, and November 2, 1891.
- ²⁴ *Irán o Del Indo al Tigris : descripción geográfica de los países iranio: Afghanistan, Beluchistan, Persia y Armenia*. Madrid: Imp. de Medina y Navarro, 1876. Retrieved from <http://www.bne.es/cgi-bin/wsirtex?FOR=WBNBIBT4&VIS=W01BIMO&FMT=WBNARIA4&ITE=0004701021645&ISN=00261808&TOT=044&NUM=024>
- ²⁵ *La Cuestión de Oriente*. Madrid: Oficinas de la Ilustración Española y Americana, 1876.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- ²⁷ *La España Moderna*, December 1895; Vol. 7, No. 84; p. 161.
- ²⁸ *El Mundo Ilustrado*, 1882, Vol. 4, cuaderno 101, segunda serie.

Reflections on Some Messianic Prophecies in Shaykhi Works

Y. A. Ioannesyan*

While working on a Russian translation from the original Persian of Siyyid Kázim's treatise "Usul-i-'Aqá'id" ("The Basic Principles of Belief"),¹ I noticed certain correspondences between the messianic prophecy Siyyid Kázim quotes and the time periods, dates and names related to the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths symbolically expressed. The prophecy in question is actually a passage within a broader account of eschatological events described in Chapter 5 of Siyyid Kázim's treatise.² When I realized that this whole chapter was in fact Siyyid Kázim's Persian translation of the corresponding part (Chapter 5) of Shaykh Ahmad's "Hayát al-Nafs" ("The Life of the Soul") – for some miraculous reason incorporated into Siyyid Kázim's work – I turned my attention to Shaykh Ahmad's "Hayát al-Nafs" in Arabic.³ Studying this part of the "Hayát al-Nafs" only reinforced my previous impression of the correspondences between the prophecy concerned and Bábí and Bahá'í history, as such correspondences became even more apparent to me in the Arabic text. The sources for this study are from the collection of the St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences ("the Hayát al-Nafs", manuscripts: A 706, B 4276, B 1895,⁴ its Persian translation by Siyyid Kázim, lithograph: Pk 213, and the "Usul-i-'Aqá'id," lithograph: Ps II 157).⁵

The present writer is well aware of the skeptical attitude of some people, especially scholars, towards prophecy. By sharing

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my ideas, I have not the least intention of trying to convince skeptics of the significance of prophecy, and even less so of the validity of my interpretations. This is only an attempt to trace and highlight correspondences which, in my view, exist between the dates and facts symbolically referred to in the prophecy and the events of Bábí and Bahá'í history. Obviously, the suggested interpretation is not authoritative.

Since the language of prophecy is symbolic, it would be useful to first consider its characteristics. Though in the works available to me this language is mostly treated in relation to revealed Scripture, it is relevant to approach it as a general phenomenon, assuming that its basic features must apply to the symbolic language of traditions as well. The mathematician-philosopher William S. Hatcher defines it as a "metaphorical, extramathematical language."⁶ Concerning the differences between this language and the language of science, he writes:

The language of science is deliberately *linear* – eschewing metaphor and multiple meaning – and *minimalist* – accepting the objective existence of only those nonobservables strictly necessary to an explanation of observable configurations (which, as it turns out, is still quite a bit). Thus, the strengths of science are clarity, precision, and applicability (practicality). Its limitations derive primarily from its partialness (specialization, fragmentation), relative incompleteness, and general lack of a global vision...

In contrast to the language of science, the language of revelation is *nonlinear* (extensive use of metaphor and multiple meaning) and *maximalist* (as rich as possible, freely referring to nonobservables)... Thus, the strengths of revelation are its adequacy and its completeness, but its limitations (from the human point of view) lie in its complexity and the consequent frequent lack of an obvious linear meaning for a given portion of the revelatory text. The student of revelation must be prepared to struggle to understand the different levels of meaning enfolded in the revelation.⁷

Hatcher amplifies his analysis of these differences by the following point:

Mathematical language puts a premium on exactness and precision of expression. Ideally, a mathematical language is totally formalizable in such manner that every grammatically well-formed expression has only one logical meaning. In this sense, mathematical language is *linear*: text (syntax) is already linear, and if we avoid metaphor and multiple meaning in our lexicon, then our semantics will also be linear. In this case, each syntactical sign *is* its own meaning. It is precisely such totally linearized languages that are used, for example, in computer programming.⁸

To summarize Hatcher's viewpoint: the language of science in which every expression or sign has only one logical meaning is linear. It is characterized by clarity and precision. On the contrary, symbolic language, in which an expression has multiple meaning, is non-linear. It is characterized by metaphor and complexity. It would be relevant to add that one of the definitions of the term "linear" is "having only one dimension." Regarding problems of interpreting the symbolic language of prophecy Michael Sours says the following:

Some people argue that prophecies must be fulfilled exactly in every detail, but examples of prophetic fulfillment in the Bible show that this is not the case... This is not to say that the details of prophecy are not important. Sometimes these details raise issues that help clarify the nature of fulfillment, but in many instances the details are intended to make the message relevant to the time when the prophecy was first revealed...

In the *Book of Certitude*, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that Scripture is written in two kinds of language, one 'unconcealed and unveiled' so 'that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing lamp' and another that is 'veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed'...⁹

To perceive the concealed meaning of prophecy one must acknowledge the symbolic nature and spiritual significance of the words used. If prophecy is interpreted literally, and it is imagined that such events will literally happen, then one may expect a truly extraordinary sign and proof that requires little or no spiritual discernment to recognize and acknowledge it.¹⁰

On the multiple meaning of prophecy Sours says:

...some prophecies may be both literal and symbolic. In most cases, however, prophecy is symbolic...Many verses in Scripture can have several meanings. In connection with the interpretation of Scripture and sacred traditions, Bahá'u'lláh cites a saying of Imám Sádiq...: 'We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings'...¹¹ Nevertheless, although there may be many meanings in a verse of Scripture, it is important not to confuse *significant* meanings with *any* meaning.¹²

A good example of how the days referred to in the context of the same prophecy may have to be reckoned differently is best illustrated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of a Zoroastrian prophecy of which Shoghi Effendi wrote:

As a further testimony to the greatness of the Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh may be cited the following extracts from a Tablet addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to an eminent Zoroastrian follower of the Faith: "Thou hadst written that in the sacred books of the followers of Zoroaster it is written that in the latter days, in three separate Dispensations, the sun must needs be brought to a standstill. In the first Dispensation, it is predicted, the sun will remain motionless for ten days; in the second for twice that time; in the third for no less than one whole month. The interpretation of this prophecy is this: the first Dispensation to which it refers is the Muhammadan Dispensation during which the Sun of Truth stood still for ten days. Each day is reckoned as one century. The Muhammadan Dispensation must have, therefore,

lasted no less than one thousand years, which is precisely the period that has elapsed from the setting of the Star of the Imamate to the advent of the Dispensation proclaimed by the Báb. The second Dispensation referred to in this prophecy is the one inaugurated by the Báb Himself, which began in the year 1260 AH and was brought to a close in the year 1280 AH As to the third Dispensation – the Revelation proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh – inasmuch as the Sun of Truth when attaining that station shineth in the plenitude of its meridian splendor its duration hath been fixed for a period of one whole month, which is the maximum time taken by the sun to pass through a sign of the Zodiac. From this thou canst imagine the magnitude of the Bahá'í cycle – a cycle that must extend over a period of at least five hundred thousand years.¹³

In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, the differentiated method of interpreting time periods employed for this prophecy is explained in the following way:

Concerning the passage in the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh in which the Guardian quotes 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of the prophecy referring to the times when the sun would stand still in the heavens, he wishes me to explain that the days referred to in this prophecy have to be reckoned differently. In the Scripture of various religions there are to be found frequent references to days, but these have been considered as indicating different period of time, as for instance in the Qur'án a day is reckoned as one thousand years. The first ten days in the above mentioned prophecy represent each a century, making thus a total of one thousand lunar years. As to the twenty days referring to the Bábí Dispensation each of them represents only one lunar year, the total of twenty years marking the duration of the Revelation of the Báb. The thirty days in the last dispensation should not be reckoned numerically, but should be considered as symbolizing the incomparable greatness of the Bahá'í

Revelation which, though not final is none-the-less thus far the fullest revelation of God to man. From a physical point of view, the thirty days represent the maximum time takes by the sun to pass through a sign of the zodiac. They thus represent a culminating point in the evolution of this star. So also from a spiritual standpoint these thirty days should be viewed as indicating the highest, though not the final stage in the spiritual evolution of mankind.¹⁴

The above interpretation is based on three different approaches to the calculation of days within the same prophecy and clearly indicates that interpretation does not necessarily require a uniform approach to all parts of a text. The application of different systems of reckoning should not be confused with the inconsistency of method detracting from its validity. Rather, it should be seen as a differentiated approach.

Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid Kázim present the messianic prophecy to be considered here in relation to the eschatological concept of "return" (*raj'a/raj'at*), traditionally understood in Shi'ih Islam as the return of the Prophet Muhammad and the twelve *Imáms*, including the "Hidden Imám," known as the *Qá'im*. The Bahá'í notion of the "return" is best expounded by the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith in His *Book of Certitude*:

Strive therefore to comprehend the meaning of "return" which hath been so explicitly revealed in the Qur'án itself, and which none hath as yet understood. What sayest thou? If thou sayest that Muhammad was the "return" of the Prophets of old, as is witnessed by this verse, His Companions must likewise be the "return" of the bygone Companions, even as the "return" of the former people is clearly attested by the text of the above-mentioned verses...

Wherefore, should one of these Manifestations of Holiness proclaim saying: "I am the return of all the Prophets," He verily speaketh the truth. In like manner, in every subsequent Revelation, the return of the former Revelation is a fact, the truth of which is firmly established. Inasmuch as the return of the Prophets of

God, as attested by verses and traditions, hath been conclusively demonstrated, the return of their chosen ones also is therefore definitely proven...

Therefore, those who in every subsequent Dispensation preceded the rest of mankind in embracing the Faith of God, who quaffed the clear waters of knowledge at the hand of the divine Beauty, and attained the loftiest summits of faith and certitude, these can be regarded, in name, in reality, in deeds, in words, and in rank, as the “return” of those who in a former Dispensation had achieved similar distinctions...

From these statements therefore it hath been made evident and manifest that should a Soul in the “End that knoweth no end” be made manifest, and arise to proclaim and uphold a Cause which in “the Beginning that hath no beginning” another Soul had proclaimed and upheld, it can be truly declared of Him Who is the Last and of Him Who was the First that they are one and the same, inasmuch as both are the Exponents of one and the same Cause...¹⁵

Thus, the “return” in the Bahá’í Faith is understood allegorically. Bahá’u’lláh is identified with the Imám Husayn “returned,” not in the sense of His being the return of the same person.¹⁶ Interestingly, there is even a correspondence between their names. Bahá’u’lláh’s name is Husayn-‘Alí, while that of Imám Husayn was Husayn b. ‘Alí. Accordingly, the Báb, whose name was ‘Alí-Muhammad, is identified with the Qá’im.¹⁷

The prophecy we are going to discuss falls into the category of eschatological accounts which provide clues to the time frame within which the events relating to the messianic figure/figures are going to happen as well as to the circumstances of these events. Sours refers to such prophecies in the following passage:

Many prophecies, rather than offering direct and explicit evidence that Bahá’u’lláh is a Manifestation of God, provide clues relating to the circumstances of His life and the age in which He was destined to appear. In many instances, it is only by first recognizing the

station of a Manifestation that one realizes that He has fulfilled prophecies.¹⁸

Let us now consider the first portion of the prophecy in question, bearing in mind that it is expressed in a symbolic non-linear language. Non-linear implies “having more than one dimension” and “not (arranged) in a straight line,” i.e., it conveys multiple meanings and the described events do not unfold sequentially. All the dates and time periods in the prophecy are calculated in lunar years. Let me start by quoting the two slightly differing versions of Siyyid Kázim’s Persian translation one of which is incorporated into his “Usul-i-Aqá’id” as mentioned above:

بلند کند روز و شب را باشد لکن حقت عالی هفت سال...مده ملکش
تا ای نکه یک سال بقدر ده سال شود زیرا که حقت عالی امر می کند فلک را
که سرعت نکند و بطی می شود حرکت فلک در آن سالها تا این که مدت
پنج چاه و از سالهای معروف در زمان ما شود پس چون هفتاد سال ملکش
سیدنا از حکومت حضرت قائم علیه السلام بگذرد خروج می کنند نه سال
و مولانا الحسین علیه السلام با هفتاد و دو نفر از شهدای کربلا و با
ملای که...پس چون هفتاد سال بگذرد شهید می کند حضرت قائم علیه
السلام را زنی...بچاوی از سنک بربالای بام می ایستد و چون آن
بزرگوار از آن کوچه عبور می کند آن ملعونه سنک را فرو می آورد پس چون
بزرگوار از عالم فنا ارتحال فرماید حضرت امام حسین علیه السلام آن
اورا تاجه یز فرموده پس قائم بامر شود... [حیوة النفس در ترجمه
فارسی از سید کاظم رشتی]

...مدت ملکش هفت سال باشد لیکن حق تعالی بلند کند روز شب را تا
می کند این نکه یک سال بقدر ده سال می شود زیرا که حق تعالی امر
فلک را که سرعت نکند و بطی می شود حرکت فلک در آن سالها تا این که
مدت ملکش هفتاد سال از سالهای معروف در زمان ما پس چون پنج چاه و نه
سال از حکومت حضرت قائم علیه السلام بگذرد خروج می کنند مولی نا و
سیدنا الحسین علیه السلام با هفتاد و دو نفر از شهدای کربلا و با
ای که...پس چون هفتاد سال بگذرد قائم علیه السلام را شهید می کند مل
زنی...به هاوی از سنک بربالای بام می ایستد چون آن بزرگوار از آن
کوچه عبور فرماید آن سنک را فرو می آورد و پس چون آن بزرگوار از عالم
فنا ارتحال فرماید حضرت امام حسین علیه السلام اورا تاجه یز فرموده
[117]س قائم بامر شود... [اصول عقاید از سید کاظم رشتی، ص. پ

The duration of His kingdom will be seven years. But the True and Exalted [God] will prolong days and nights so that a year will become equal to ten years. Because the True and Exalted [God] will command the

sphere[s] not to move fast. And the movement of the sphere[s] will slow down in those years so that the duration of His kingdom will become seventy years counting by the years known in our time. Finally, when fifty nine years pass from the reign of His holiness the Qá'im, may peace be upon Him, our Lord and our Master Husayn (lit.: the Husayn), may peace be upon Him, will arise with the seventy two martyrs of Karbila and with angels... Thus, when seventy years pass a woman... will martyr His holiness the Qá'im, may peace be upon Him... She will stand on a roof with a mortar of stone and as that Noble person passes by that street that cursed woman will throw that stone down [on Him]. Consequently, when that Noble person departs from [this] perishable world His holiness *imám* Husayn, may peace be upon Him, having set up His burial arrangements, will then rise for the Cause.¹⁹

Now I will quote the corresponding part of the Hayát al-Nafs in the original Arabic from the three manuscripts available in the collection of the St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, which have minor and insignificant variations:

...مدة ملكه سبع سنين يطول الله الایام و اللیالی حتى تكون السنة
 بقدر عشر سنين لان الله سبحانه یأمر الفلك باللبوث فتكون مدة
 فاذا مضى تسع و خمسون السنین من مدة سبعین سنة قدم له
 ع... فاذا تمت السبعون السنة یمیت الحجّة سنة خرج الحسین
 فتقتله امرأة من بنی تمیم... بجاون صخر من فوق سطح و هومتجاوز فی
 الطریق فاذا مات تولى تجهیزه الحسین ع ثم تقوم بالأمر...
 [حیوة النفس] MS: A 706. P. 17/a

The duration of His kingdom is seven years. God prolongs the days and nights that a year (lit. the year) may become equal to ten years. Because God, may He be praised, commands the sphere[s] to slow down (lit.: tarry). Thus the duration of His kingdom [will be] seventy years [counting] by these years. And when fifty nine years pass/elapse Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will come forth... So, when the seventy years are completed a woman from the Baní-Tamím murders the Proof [of God], she kills Him... with a mortar of stone

from a rooftop as he passes along/crosses the road. And when He dies Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will set up His burial arrangements. After that [Husayn] will rise for the Cause...

Of special note is the fact that the two other manuscripts are even more specific. They both have “from/since them” referring to the “seventy years”:

...مدة ملكه سبع سنين يطول الله الایام و اللیالی حتی تكون السنة
 بقدر عشر سنين لان الله سبحانه یامر الفلك للیوث فتكون مدة
 تسع و منه فاذا مضی من هذه السنین سبعین سنة قم ملكه
 20 علیه السلام... فاذا تمت السبعون خمسون سنة خرج الحسین
 صخرة²¹ وت و قتله امرأة من بنی تمیم... بج اون السنة اتی الحجّة ع الم
 من فوق سطح و هومتج اوز فی الطریق فاذا مات علیه السلام تاتی
 لتج هیزه الحسین ع ثم یقوم بالأمر...
 [حیوة النفس]MS: B 4276. P. 48/b

The duration of His kingdom is seven years. God prolongs the days and nights that a year may become equal to ten years. Because God, may He be praised, commands the sphere[s] to slow down. Thus the duration of His kingdom [will be] seventy years [counting] by these years. And when fifty nine years pass/elapse from (since) them Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will come forth. So, when the seventy years are completed death comes to the Proof [of God], may peace be upon Him, a woman from the Baní-Tamím kills Him... with a mortar of stone from a rooftop as he passes along/crosses the road. And when He dies Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will administer His burial arrangements. After that [Husayn] will rise for the Cause...

Compare it with the part in question from the third manuscript:

تسع و منه!... فتكون ملكه سبعین سنة من هذه السنین فاذا مضی
 ة خرج الحسین علیه السلام... خمسون سن
 [حیوة النفس]MS: B 1895. P. 19/b

...Thus the duration of His kingdom [will be] seventy years [counting] by these years. And when fifty nine

years pass/elapse from (since) them Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will come forth...

This prophesy is briefly summarized as follows by Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í in his "Sharh al-Ziyára al-Jámi'a al-Kabira":

سنة فى مدة سبع سنين سبعة سنين... قلنا قىام القايئم اولاً و هو حى حى
 حى على اكثر الروايات لان السنة فى زمانه بعشر سنين و اذا مضى
 سنة خرج الحسنى ع و تسع و خمسون ملكه
 MS: D 702. P. 33/a

... We said that the rising of the Qá'im is first and He will rule seventy years during a seven year period, according to most versions [of the traditions]. Because a year in His time is ten years. And when fifty nine years pass/elapse from/since His reign Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will come forth.

A correlating prophecy is quoted by Siyyid Kázim-i-Rashtí in his "Risáliy-i-Bahbahániyyih." For convenience' sake, we can refer to it as "prophesy 2" and to the prophesy from "Hayát al-Nafs" as "prophesy 1". In the aforementioned work Siyyid Kázim states:

وى طهر الأرض بسيف قايئمهم روحى فداه فبعد ذلك يرجعون الى الدنيا
 بن ابى طالب علىهما السلم الحسنى بن على فاول من يرجع منهم هو
 ثم يرجع بعد خروج القايئم علىهما السلم بتسع و خمسين سنة
 حولانا و سيدنا على عليه السلم لىصرة ابنه الحسنى علىهما السلم و
 دنيا تسعة و ثلثمائة سنة يبقى فى ال
 MS: B 4269. P. 72/b

And [God] will purify the earth by the sword of their²² Qá'im, may my spirit be a sacrifice for Him. And after that they²³ will return to the physical world. The first of them to return fifty-nine years after the rising of the Qá'im, may peace be upon Him, is Husayn b. 'Alí b. Abí Tálib, may peace be upon both of them. Then our Lord and Master – 'Ali, may peace be upon Him, will return to support His son – Husayn, may peace be upon both of them, and will stay in the physical world for three hundred and nine years.

Since we are not concerned in this paper with linguistics or mathematics, and, given the fact that the language of prophecy

is symbolic and non-linear rather than scientific, it would be proper to consider also that “fifty-nine” sounds in Arabic as “nine and fifty”. Thus, in a more literal translation (of numbers), the passage from prophesy 1 will appear in the following way:

The duration of His kingdom is **seven** years. God prolongs the days and nights...Thus the duration of His kingdom [will be] **seventy** years...And when **nine and fifty** years pass/elapse from/since them Husayn...will come forth.

The key phrase from prophesy 2 will assume the following form:

...The first of them to return **nine and fifty** years after the Qá'im...is Husayn b. 'Alí...

All the numbers in the passages from both prophecies are significant with respect to periods and dates in Bábí and Bahá'í history. Leaving alone number 50 for the time being, let us consider seven, nine, and 70. The Báb was martyred during the seventh year of His mission (which corresponds to the end of “the Qá'im's kingdom” in symbolic language). Shoghi Effendi writes: “On the evening of the very day of the Báb's execution, which fell on the ninth of July 1850 (28th of Sha'bán 1266 AH), during the thirty-first year of His age and the **seventh** of His ministry...”²⁴

Getting back to prophesy 2 (see above), if we add nine to the year 1260 AH (the year of the Báb's declaration, i.e., the “rising of the Qá'im for His mission”) we will come to 1269 AH – i.e., the time when Bahá'u'lláh (Husayn-'Alí) first received His revelation in the Siyáh-Chál prison. Referring to this event Shoghi Effendi points out:

During nine years, as foretold by the Báb Himself, swiftly, mysteriously and irresistibly the embryonic Faith conceived by Him had been developing until, at the fixed hour, the burden of the promised Cause of God was cast amidst the gloom and agony of the Siyáh-Chál of Tihrán...His²⁵ imprisonment lasted for a period of no less than four months, in the middle of which the

“year nine” (1269), anticipated in such glowing terms by the Bab, and alluded to as the year “after Hin” by Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá’í, was ushered in, ending with undreamt-of potentialities the whole world.²⁶

Thus, the numbers seven and nine should be understood literally, as they perfectly match the historic periods. But if we look further into the passage from prophecy 1, we may discover that it contains more information than it appears: “the duration of His kingdom [will be] **seventy** years...And when **nine**...years pass/elapse from/since then Husayn...will come forth.” “Nine” years passing/elapsing from/since “70” (understood as a year)²⁷ will lead us to 79 – the year of Bahá’u’lláh’s declaration, which took place in the month of Dhi’l-Qadih 1279 AH (May 1863) in the Garden of Ridván in Baghdad.

The above prophecies also clearly indicate that Husayn b. ‘Alí will outlive the Qá’im and that He will rise for His Cause after the Qá’im’s death. The Qá’im will be martyred, while Husayn b. ‘Alí will outlive Him. These indications perfectly fit into the historic context and particularly into the circumstances of the ascension of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh.

Let us now proceed on to the second part of the prophecy in the Hayát al-Nafs beginning with its Persian translation by Siyyid Kázim:

ویزید بن معاویہ و عبید اللہ بن زیاد... و کسان ی که با فاعال قبیحی
 ایشان را ضعیف کردند از اولین و آخرین لعنة الله علیهم اجمعین پس
 همگی ایشان را حضرت امام حسین علیه السلام بقتل رساند و از جمیع
 خالفین و دوستان قصاص کند و بسویار می کند کشتن را در میان
 ایشان تا این که مجتمع شوند بر آن حضرت جماعت اشرار و بقیه کفار
 تا این که غالب می شوند و آن بزرگوار را محاصره می کنند در بیت الله
 الحرام پس چون امر بان حضرت شدید شود خروج می کند سفاوح
 امیر المؤمنین علیه السلام با ملای که برای نصرت فرزند کرامی خود
 مکتب می کنند آن یکشده اعدای دین و رؤسای منافقین را و پس م
 بزرگوار با فرزند عالی مقام خود مدت سیصد و نه سال
 پس آن حضرت را شهید نمایند چنان که اصحاب کهف مکتب نمودند
 لعن الله قاتلیه و باقی می ماند حضرت امام حسین علیه السلام قائم
 تا این که استمدت ملک آن حضرت پنجاه هزار سال بدین الله و
 می بنده ابروی خود را بدست مالی از شدت کبر سن...
 [حیوة النفس در ترجمه فارسی از سید کاظم رشتی]

ومحشور می شود یزید ابن معاویة... و عبیدالله ابن زیاد... و کسانی که بافعال قبیحه ایشان راضی شدند از اولین و آخرین لعنة الله علیهم را حضرت امام حسین علیه السلام بقتل اجمعی پس همگی ایشان رساند و آن جملمکی قصاص کند و بسیار می کند کشتن را در میان منافقین و دوستان ایشان تا اینکه مجتمع شوند بر آن حضرت جماعت اشرار و بقیه کفار از اطراف زمین از هرجهت تا اینکه غالب می شود و آن م پس چون امر با آن حضرت بزرگوار را محاصره می کنند در بیت الله الحرام شدید شود خروج می کند سفاح امیر المؤمنین علیه السلام با ملایگه برای نصرت زور دیده کرامی خود پس بکشد اعدای دین و رؤسای مکت می کند آن بزرگوار با فرزندان عالی مقام منافقین را و چنانکه اصحاب کعبه مکت سال و نه سال²⁸ خود مدت شش صد لعن الله قاتله و باقی ت را شهید نماید پس آن حضرت نمودند مدت ملک می ماند حضرت امام حسین علیه السلام قائم بدین الله تا اینکه می بنید ابروی مبارک خود را با آن حضرت پنجاه هزار سال دستمال از شدت کبر و بزرگی سن... [اصول عقاید از سید کاظم رشتی، 117ص].

My translation of the above passage based on both versions is as follows, with different readings indicated by a forward slash:

And Yazíd b. Mu'áviyyih and 'Ubaydu'lláh b. Ziyád...and those who were content with their abominable actions from the first to the last, may God curse all of them altogether, will assemble. Then His holiness *imám* Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will put them all to death and execute vengeance upon every single of them. He will slay many adversaries/hypocrites and their companions until a party of enemies and the remaining unbelievers/unbelievers from every side, from every corner of the world band together against His holiness in a way that they prevail [over him] and besiege that Noble person in the Sacred House of God. When the situation becomes increasingly grave for His holiness then the "Generous," the Commander of the Faithful, may peace be upon Him, will come forth with angels to assist His precious son/ solace of the eyes. Then He will kill enemies of the religion and the leaders of the hypocrites. That Noble person will stay (lit.: tarry) with His highly honored son for a period of three hundred and nine years as did (lit.:

tarried) the companions of the Cave. Then His holiness will be martyred, may God curse His murderers/ murderer. And His holiness *imám* Husayn will stay firm in the religion of God, and the duration of His holiness' kingdom is **fifty thousand years**, until He covers (lit.: ties) His brow/blessed brow with a towel (handkerchief?) from extreme old age.

Before we compare this passage in Siyyid Kázim's Persian translation with its Arabic original let us clarify certain points. "The Generous/Blood-shedder" (Saffáh) is an epithet describing *imám* 'Ali (whose other epithet is "the Commander of the Faithful"). *Imám* al-Báqir is quoted as saying:²⁹

ابن: هل تدري من الممن تصد والسفاح؟ يا جابر الممن تصد الحسن قال ج
³⁰(عليه السلام) والسفاح أمير المؤمنين (عليه السلام)

Jábir said: Do you know who is the Victorious (al-Muntasir) and the Generous (al-Saffáh)?' – 'O Jábir, the Victorious is al-Husayn (may peace be upon Him) and the Generous is the Commander of the Faithful (may peace be upon Him).

"The companions of the Cave" is an allusion to Koran 18:24/25: "And they tarried in the Cave three hundred years, and to that they added nine more."³¹

Let us now turn our attention to Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'i's original text of the passage in the "Hayát al-Nafs" based on the three manuscripts:

ابن زياد... و من رضی ³² و یحشر له یزید ابن معاویة و عبدالله
 بافعا لهم من الاولین و الاخرین لعنة الله علیهم اجمعین فیقتلهم
 الحسن ع و یقتص من هم... حتی یجتم ع علیه اشرار الناس من کل
 ناحیه... فاذا اشد به الامر خرج السفاح امیر المؤمنین علی ابن ابی
³³سلاّم لنصرته مع الملائكة فیقتلون اعداء الذین طال ب علیه ا
 و **سنة ثلاث مائة** علیهما السلام **یمکث علی مع ابنه الحسن** سیو
 کما لبث اصحاب الکهف ثم یضرب علی قرن و یقتل لعن **سینین** تسع
خمسون الف سنة الله قاتله و یبقى الحسن ع قایماً بدين و مدت
 بعصاة من شدت الکبر ³⁴حتى یربط حاجبی
 [حیوة النفس] MS: B 4276. P. 48/b-49/a

As for the other two manuscripts, I will quote only the lines which contain some minor differences from the above version:

...فسيقتلون اعداء الدين ويمكث على مع ابنه الحسين روحى فداها
 اب الكهف ثم يضرب كما لبث اصح ثلاث مائة سنة و تسع سنين
 على فرقته ويقتل لعنه الله قاتله و يبقى الحسين ع قائم ابدى الله
 حتى انه يربط حاجبيه بعصابة من شدة خمسون الف سن قادمة ملكه
 الكبير

[حياة النفس]MS: A 706. P. 17/a-b

...فسيقتلون اعداء الدين ويمكث على على الحسين مع ابنه الحسين
 كما لبث اصحاب مائة سنين و تسع سنين ثلاث على السلام
 الكهف ثم يضرب على فرقته ويقتل لعن الله قاتله ويبقى الحسين
 حتى انه ليربط خمسون الف سن قادمة ابدى الله و مدة ملكه
 حاجبيه بعصابة من شدة الكبير

[حياة النفس]MS: B 1895. P. 19/b

Following is a translation of the above passage based on the three MS versions, with different readings indicated by a forward slash:

And Yazid b. Mu'aviyyih and 'Ubaydu'lláh b. Ziyád ...and those who were content with their actions from the first to the last, may God curse them all, will assemble. Then *imám* Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will kill them and avenge upon them...until the enemies of humankind from every region band together against Him...When the situation becomes increasingly grave for Him then 'Alí b. Abí Tálíb, the Generous, the Commander of the Faithful, may peace be upon Him, will come forth with angels to assist Him. Thus, they will kill enemies of the religion. And 'Alí will stay (lit.: tarry) with Husayn, His son, may peace be upon both of them/may my soul be a sacrifice for both of them, for three hundred years and nine years as did (lit.: tarried) the companions of the Cave. Then 'Alí will be struck upon His head/horns, may God curse His murderer. And Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will remain supreme over the religion of God. And the period of His kingdom/period is fifty thousand years until He covers (lit.: ties) His eyebrows with a bandage from extreme old age.

The same message is conveyed by the passage in Siyyid Kázim's "Risáliy-i-Bahbahániyyih" already quoted:

أىمهم روحى فداه فبعد ذلك يرجعون الى الدنيا ويظهر الأرض بسيف ق
 بن ابى طالب عليهما السلام الحسين بن علي فاؤل من يرجع منهم هو
 وخمسين سنة ثم يرجع بعد خروج القايءم عليه السلام بتسع
 جولانا و سيدنا على عليه السلام لئصره ابنه الحسين عليهما السلام و
 35 سنة تسعة و ثلاثمائة بقى فى الدنيا

MS: B 4269. P. 72/b

And [God] will purify the earth by the sword of their Qá'im, may my spirit be a sacrifice for Him. And after that they³⁶ will return to the physical world. The first of them to return fifty nine years after the rising of the Qá'im, may peace be upon Him, is Husayn b. 'Alí b. Abí Tálib, may peace be upon both of them. Then our Lord and Master – 'Alí, may peace be upon Him, will return to support His son – Husayn, may peace be upon both of them, and will stay in the physical world for **three hundred and nine years**.

What is special about this part of the prophecy, which is based on the Koranic verse, is that “309” features in it as a split number consisting of two separate numbers of years/year periods: three hundred years and nine years (see above). The noun it modifies (“years”) occurs twice – following the “three hundred” and the “nine”: ثلاثمائة سنة و تسع سنين “three hundred years and nine years,” while from a grammatical stand-point a compound number (309) should be treated in Arabic as one single unit with the modified noun that follows it occurring once: ثلاثمائة و تسع سنين “three hundred and nine years.” In the Koranic verse which the prophecy alludes to – though generally understood to indicate a single number (309) – nine is also separated from 300: “And they tarried in the Cave three hundred years, and to that they added nine more.” All these factors considered it is reasonable to suppose that nine has a special value attached to it in this prophecy and that it stands on its own (which of course does not preclude 309 from being significant too). This also serves as a confirmation of the validity of the method we employed earlier, which consisted of splitting “fifty nine” into “nine” and “fifty” (years) and considering each unit on its own merits. In other words, this part appears to hold a clue to unraveling the riddle behind the whole prophecy, based largely on a special

symbolism of “nine” within the compound numbers the prophecy contains.

Now let us reflect more deeply upon the following lines and the message they convey, focusing on the numbers, names and name combinations involved:

Then *imám* Husayn...will kill them and avenge upon them... When the situation becomes increasingly grave for Him then 'Alí...will come forth with angels to assist Him...And 'Alí will stay with Husayn...for three hundred years and nine years...

In summary, it conveys the following message: “Husayn (who is mentioned first) is joined by 'Alí and they stay together for three hundred years and nine years.” Taken symbolically, this forms a name combination, which is highly significant, for it corresponds to Bahá'u'lláh's name: “Husayn” plus “'Alí” is “Husayn-'Alí.” The prophecy tells us that “Husayn + 'Alí (Husayn-'Alí, i.e., Bahá'u'lláh) will stay for 309 years.” We have already seen that numbers expressing temporal realities in non-linear language do not necessarily refer to a time period and can also indicate a year (cf. “70” which we interpreted as a reference to the year 1270). Accordingly, if we apply “309” to a year it would be logical to take it to imply 1309 AH, which is the year of Bahá'u'lláh's ascension. Consequently, viewed from this angle, the hidden message of the prophecy appears to fit perfectly into the context of historic realities becoming transparent and fully meaningful: Husayn-'Alí (Husayan + 'Alí), i.e., Bahá'u'lláh stays in this world until 1309. In his account of Bahá'u'lláh's ascension, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

...His general condition grew steadily worse...which at last culminated in His ascension...on the 2nd of Dhi'l-Qa'dih 1309 AH (May 29, 1892), eight hours after sunset, in the 75th year of His age.³⁷

If we look further into the quoted passage from the prophecy, we may discover that it contains even more information, given the fact that a message conveyed in symbolic (non-linear) language can well have several layers of meaning. This assumption is supported by the earlier conclusion that “nine” which is separated from “300” has a

special value attached to it within the compound number “309.” Therefore it must play a special role. But what is the significance of nine here? The clue to the riddle appears to be in the sentence itself: “And ‘Alí will stay with Husayn ...for three hundred years and nine years...”

We have already considered the names in their combination. Let us now analyze them separately. The name “‘Alí,” by which the Báb often referred to Himself, is the first component of His compound name: ‘Alí-Muhammad. Husayn is the first component of Bahá’u’lláh’s name: Husayn-‘Alí. The first part of the prophecy (see above) clearly indicated that Husayn would outlive ‘Alí, while the second part tells us that ‘Alí will stay with Husayn for...nine years. If ‘Alí is taken to imply ‘Alí-Muhammad the Báb and Husayn – Husayn-‘Alí Bahá’u’lláh, then a correspondence with historic realities will become apparent. Between the Báb’s declaration in 1260 AH and Bahá’u’lláh’s first receiving His revelation in 1269 AH, a period of nine years elapsed (see above) or to put it metaphorically, for nine years Husayn[-‘Alí Bahá’u’lláh] abided under the shadow of ‘Alí[-Muhammad the Báb]’s Revelation before the birth of His own Revelation. To quote Shoghi Effendi, Bahá’u’lláh was in “active and exemplary discipleship in the service of the Báb”:

At a time when the Cause of the Bab seemed to be hovering on the brink of extinction, when the hopes and ambitions which animated it had, to all human seeming, been frustrated..., the Divine Promise enshrined within it was about to be suddenly redeemed, and its final perfection mysteriously manifested. The Bábí Dispensation was being brought to its close (not prematurely but in its appointed time), and was yielding its destined fruit and revealing its ultimate purpose – the birth of the Mission of Bahá’u’lláh...

During nine years, as foretold by the Bab Himself, swiftly, mysteriously and irresistibly the embryonic Faith conceived by Him had been developing until, at the fixed hour, the burden of the promised Cause of God was cast amidst the gloom and agony of the Siyah-Chal of Tihiran. “Behold,” Bahá’u’lláh Himself, years later, testified..., “how immediately upon the

completion of the ninth year of this wondrous, this most holy and merciful Dispensation, the requisite number of pure, of wholly consecrated and sanctified souls has been most secretly consummated.” “That so brief an interval,” ...”should have separated this most mighty and wondrous Revelation from Mine own Manifestation is a secret that no man can unravel...Its duration had been foreordained...

The Shah's edict, equivalent to an order for the immediate expulsion of Bahá'u'lláh from Persian territory, opens a new and glorious chapter in the history of the first Bahá'í century... The process which it set in motion, gradually progressing and unfolding, began by establishing His Cause for a time in the very midst of the jealously-guarded stronghold of Shí'ah Islam, and brought Him in personal contact with its highest and most illustrious exponents; then, at a later stage, it confronted Him, at the seat of the Caliphate, with the civil and ecclesiastical dignitaries of the realm and the representatives of the Sultan of Turkey, the most powerful potentate in the Islamic world; and finally carried Him as far as the shores of the Holy Land, thereby fulfilling the prophecies recorded in both the Old and the New Testaments... With it, may be said to have begun the last and most fruitful of the four stages of a life, the first twenty-seven years of which were characterized by the care-free enjoyment of all the advantages conferred by high birth and riches, and by an unflinching solicitude for the interests of the poor, the sick and the down-trodden; followed by nine years of active and exemplary discipleship in the service of the Báb; and finally by an imprisonment of four months' duration, overshadowed throughout by mortal peril, embittered by agonizing sorrows, and immortalized, as it drew to a close, by the sudden eruption of the forces released by an overpowering, soul-revolutionizing Revelation.³⁸

Let us now move to the closing lines of the second part of the prophecy:

Then 'Alí will be struck upon His head..., may God curse His murderer. And Husayn... will remain supreme over the religion of God. And the period of His kingdom/period is **fifty thousand years** until He covers (lit.: ties) His eyebrows with a bandage from extreme old age. (cf. above)

This passage brings us back to the circumstances of the death of 'Alí and Husayn. Once again, it is emphasized that 'Alí will be murdered/martyred and that Husayn will die a natural death at an old age. Husayn will outlive 'Alí and continue to promote their common Cause, staying firm in the religion of God after 'Alí is martyred. His kingdom will last for 50,000 years. In linear language, the syntax of the last phrase would imply that Husayn will first reign for 50,000 years and then die upon the completion of this period. But in the symbolic non-linear language in which the prophecy is told, the story does not unfold sequentially. Thus, several different messages can be conveyed simultaneously. Consequently, one plane of meaning may be understood to refer to the short-term perspective, i.e., to the lives of 'Alí and Husayn on earth, while another conveys a long-term picture, i.e., Husayn's spiritual Kingdom. Once 'Alí and Husayn are identified with the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, respectively, the correspondences between the first plane of meaning and reality become apparent. That the described short-term events match completely the circumstances of the earthly lives of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh is so obvious to anyone who is familiar with the history of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths that the issue does not need further elaboration. As for the meaning of "the 50,000 years of Husayn's kingdom" one can assume that a year here implies 10 years as indicated in the beginning of the prophecy ("...the True and Exalted [God] will prolong days and nights so that a year will become equal to ten years."). By multiplying 50,000 by 10, we get 500,000 (years) which correspond to the duration of Bahá'u'lláh's Cycle as interpreted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in relation to the Zoroastrian prophecy (see above).

Let us now return to the first part of this prophecy and the related prophecy from the "Risáliy-i-Bahbahániyyih" to consider a number for which no interpretation has so far been

suggested, i.e., “50” in the following lines of the respective eschatological accounts:

...Thus the duration of His (i.e., the Qá'im's) kingdom [will be] **seventy** years...And when **nine and fifty** years pass/elapse from/since them Husayn...will come forth...And when He dies Husayn...will set up/administer His burial arrangements.

...The first of them to return **nine and fifty** years after the Qá'im...is Husayn b. 'Ali...

It was suggested earlier that “nine years elapsing from 70 (understood as a year)” indicated (12)79 AH, i.e., the year of Bahá'u'lláh's declaration, which marks the beginning of His mission. The starting point for this calculation is 1270 AH. However, the other prophecy implies that “nine” and “50” may also be counted from the beginning of the Báb's mission (1260 AH), who is identified with the Qá'im. The underlying logic behind all our interpretations is based on the fact that events when expressed in non-linear language are not necessarily sequential and the message has different levels of meaning enfolded in the text which coexist without precluding one another. It has already been shown that nine years calculated from 1260 AH lead to a significant date in history, i.e., 1269 AH (the time when Bahá'u'lláh first received His revelation), confirming the validity of the assumption that 1260 AH should be taken as a starting point from which to reckon “50” as well. This would lead one to another significant date, the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, marking a period which embraces the Ministry of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh as the Twin Manifestations of God (from the Báb's declaration until Bahá'u'lláh's ascension 49 years and six months \approx 50 years elapsed) described by Shoghi Effendi in the following way:

Inaugurated by the Báb, culminating in Bahá'u'lláh, anticipated and extolled by the entire company of the Prophets of this prophetic cycle, this period has, except for the short interval between the Báb's martyrdom and Bahá'u'lláh's shaking experiences in the Siyáh-Chál of Tihrán, been characterized by almost fifty years of continuous and progressive Revelation — a period which by its duration and fecundity must be regarded

as unparalleled in the entire field of the world's spiritual history.³⁹

Another significant 50 year period can be identified elapsing from the time of the Báb's execution (1266 AH) until His remains finally arrived in the Holy Land – not precluding the previous interpretation. Shoghi Effendi writes:

Assisted by another believer, Háji Sháh Muhammad buried the casket beneath the floor of the inner sanctuary of the shrine of Imám-Zádih Zayd, where it lay undetected until Mirzá Asadu'lláh-i-Isfahani was informed of its exact location through a chart forwarded to him by Bahá'u'lláh. Instructed by Bahá'u'lláh to conceal it elsewhere, he first removed the remains to his own house in Tihrán, after which they were deposited in several other localities such as the house of Husayn-i-'Ali-yi-Isfahani and that of Muhammad-Karím-i-'Attár, where they remained hidden until the year 1316 AH (1899), when, in pursuance of directions issued by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, this same Mirzá Asadu'lláh, together with a number of other believers, transported them by way of Isfahán, Kirmánsháh, Baghdad and Damascus, to Beyrut and thence by sea to 'Akka, arriving at their destination on the 19th of the month of Ramadan 1316 AH (January 31, 1899), fifty lunar years after the Báb's execution in Tabriz.⁴⁰

The quoted passage from Shoghi Effendi clearly shows that the arrangements for the transportation of the Báb's remains, their protection and temporary concealment until they were finally laid to rest in the Holy Land were made under Bahá'u'lláh's direct instruction, Who literally "administered" the Báb's burial. Thus, the phrase from the prophecy: "And when He dies Husayn...will set up/administer His burial arrangements" (see above) fits well into historical context.

It would be fair to say that the predictions contained in Shaykh Ahmad's eschatological account are not unique to his work and can be found in other sources. Moreover, his prophecy is composed of parts which can be traced back to the "Bihár al-Anvár" by Majlisí, "Usul-i-Káfi" by Kuliní, and

“Aválim al-‘Ulum va-l-Ma‘árif” by Shaikh Bahrainí, which are cited in many other works. Thus, in Moslem traditions there exist numerous references to seven and/or nine and/or 70 years of the Qá’im’s/Mahdí’s life or reign, for example:

41 ⁴¹ عىش خمساً أو سبعاً أو تسعاً

[The Qá’im/Mahdi] lives five or seven or nine;

إذا قام القايء...و ىمكث على ذلك سبع سنين كل سنة عشر سنين من
42 ⁴² سنينكم هذه

When the Qá’im arises...He will stay for this reason seven years, each year being these ten years of yours;

فإذا تمت السبعون أتى الحجة الموت. يراد بهذه السبعين أن الحجة
القايء المهدي (ع) يبقى في الحكم سبعين عاماً ، ولابد أن هذا منطلق من
الخبر الذي سمعناه في فصل سابق من أنه يبقى سبع سنين ، كل
سنة كعشر سنين من سنينكم
43 ⁴³ ، فهو يبقى سبعين سنة هذه ، إذ

So, when the seventy years are completed death comes to the Proof [of God]. These seventy imply that the Proof, [Who is] the Qá’im, Mahdí, may peace be upon Him, will stay in power for seventy years. This meaning undoubtedly follows from the tradition which we heard in the previous part, i.e., that ‘He stays seven years, and every year is like these ten of your years,’ in this case He will stay for seventy years.

بني فإذا تمت السبعون السنة أتى الحجة الموت فتقتله امرأة من
ون صخر من فوق سطح وهو متجاوز في الطريق فإذا مات بج...تميم
44 ⁴⁴ (تولى تجهيزه الحسين (عليه السلام

So, when the seventy years are completed death comes to the Proof [of God], a woman from the Baní-Tamím kills Him...with a mortar of stone from a rooftop as he passes along/crosses the road. And when He dies Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will administer His burial arrangements.

References to Husayn being the One who administers the Qá’im’s burial are frequent too:

أن هذا الحسين قد خرج حتى لا يشرك المؤمنون فيه وأنه ليس بدجال ولا
شيطان، والحجة القايء بين أظهرهم فإذا استقرت المعرفة في قلوب

جاء الحجّة الموت فيكون الذي علىه السلام المؤمنين أنه الحسين
 رته الحسين بن علي في غسله ويغسله ويحمله ويحمله في ح⁴⁵

Truly, this Husayn has come forth that believers may have no doubt in Him, that He is neither the Anti-Christ nor Satan. And the Proof [Who is] the Qá'im is among them. And when the recognition of the fact that He is really Husayn, may peace be upon Him, is well established in the hearts of the believers death comes to the Proof. And Husayn b. 'Alí becomes the one Who washes Him, shrouds Him, embalms Him and puts Him into His grave.

Numerous prophetic references to “309 years” are also found in the sources:

السلام عليّه عن ابن محبوب ... عن جابر الجعفي قال: سمعت أبا جعفر
 والله لي لم يكن منا أهل البيت رجل بعد موته ثلاثمائة سنة ويزداد يقول:
 وكم يقوم القائم: بعد القائم قلت: قال؟ متي يكون ذلك: تسعاً قلت
 ثم يخرج المنتصر الذي الدنيا وهو⁴⁶ تسع عشرة سنة: قال؟ في عالمه
 السلام في طلب بدمه ودم أصحابه في قتل ويسيبي الحسين عليّه الح⁴⁷
 حتّي يخرج السفاح وهو أمير المؤمنين

Narrated through Jābir al-Ju'fī from...Ibn Mahbub, who said: I heard Abu Ja'far,⁴⁸ may peace be upon him, say the following: By God, verily a man from among Us – members [of the Prophet's] household, will rule three hundred years after His death 'and to that He will add nine more.' I said: When will this happen? He said: After the Qá'im. I said: How long will the Qá'im stay (lit.: stay upright) in His world? He said: Nineteen years.⁴⁹ Then there will arise in the world the Victorious Who is the Husayn, may peace be upon Him, and seek vengeance for Him (i.e., the Qá'im) and His companions. Thus He will kill and enslave until there arises the Generous Who is the Commander of the Faithful;

وعلى بن عبدالله...از امام محمد باقر روایت نموده که گفت قائم آل محمد
 در این مدت مالک کل زمین خواهد بود سیصد و نه سال پادشاهی خواهد
 کرد و در روی زمین همان قدر که اصحاب کهفرا مدت خواهد بود تا روزی که
 که هر روزش برابر پیدا شوند...در روایت دیگری هفت سال سلطنت کند
⁵⁰ ده روز باشد و هر ماهش برابر ده ماه و هر سالش برابر ده سال خواهد بود

And 'Alí b. 'Abdu'lláh...narrates from *imám* Muhammad Báqir Who said: The Qá'im of Muhammad's Family will be the ruler over the whole earth during that period. He will rule for three hundred and nine years and will be on earth as long as the companions of the Cave [did] until the day they were found...In another version He will reign for seven years and each of these days will equal ten days, each of the months will equal ten months, each of these years will equal ten years.

The sources also clearly indicate the period of 50,000 years:

...عن أبي عبد الله عليه السلام أنه قال حين سئل عن اليوم الذي ذكر
و هي كرة "في يوم كان مقداره خمسين الف سنة" الله مقداره في القرآن
رسول الله صلى الله عليه و آله فيكون ملكه في كرتة خمسين ألف
سنة⁵¹

[It is narrated] from Abu 'Abdu'lláh,⁵² may peace be upon Him, who when asked concerning the day whereof the measure God mentioned in the Koran in the following way: 'in a day whereof the measure is fifty thousand years,'⁵³ said: 'this is the return of the Messenger of God, may peace be upon Him and His family,' thus, His reign upon His return will be fifty thousand years.

And finally references to "Husayn covering His eyes at an old age" are also found in the traditions:

عن أبي جعفر عليه السلام قال : إن أول من يرجع لچاركم الحسين عليه
سنة⁵⁴ من الكبرالسلام فيملك حتى تقع حاجباه على

[It is narrated] from Abu Ja'far, may peace be upon Him, [Who] said: 'The first one to return is your protector⁵⁵ Husayn, may peace be upon Him, and He will rule until His eyebrows fall down upon His eyes from old age';⁵⁶

: إن أول من يكر في الدرجة الحسين... عن أبي عبد الله عليه السلام
بن علي عليه السلام ، ويمكث في الارض
أربعين سنة حتى يسقط حاجباه على عيني⁵⁷

[It is narrated] from Abu 'Abdu'lláh, may peace be upon Him, [Who said]: 'verily, the first one to come

back upon the return [of the family of the Prophet] is Husayn b. 'Ali, may peace be upon both of them, and He will stay on earth for forty years⁵⁸ till His eyebrows fall down upon His eyes.'

Thus every part of Shaykh Ahmad's prophecy which we have considered in this article is found elsewhere and the prominent religious thinker simply collected them from well-known sources. However, when the eschatological events related in different traditions are put together precisely the way Shaykh Ahmad did in his account, the correspondences between the predictions and Bábí and Bahá'í history become most apparent:

The duration of His kingdom is seven years [the Báb was martyred during the 7th year of His mission]. God prolongs the days and nights that a year may become equal to ten years. Because God, may He be praised, commands the sphere[s] to slow down. Thus, the duration of His kingdom [will be] seventy years [counting] by these years. And when nine and fifty years elapse since them Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will come forth [1270 + 9 = 1279 – the year of Bahá'u'lláh's declaration; 1260 + 9 = 1269 – the year when Bahá'u'lláh first received His revelation; 1260-1309 ✪ 50 years – the Ministry of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh as the Twin Manifestations; 1266-1316 – 50 years elapsing from the Báb's execution until His remains arrived at their permanent destination]. So, when the seventy years are completed death comes to the Proof [of God], may peace be upon Him, a woman from the Baní-Tamím kills Him... with a mortar of stone from a rooftop as he passes along the road. And when He dies Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will administer His burial arrangements [Bahá'u'lláh outlived the Báb, Who was martyred, while Himself died a natural death; Bahá'u'lláh took care of the remains of the Báb]. After that [Husayn] rises for the Cause [Bahá'u'lláh rose for the Cause after the Báb's martyrdom]...

And Yazíd b. Mu'áviyyih and 'Ubayd'u'lláh b. Ziyád... and those who were content with their actions from the

first to the last, may God curse them all, will assemble. Then imám Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will kill them and avenge upon them...until the enemies of humankind from every region band together against Him [Bahá'u'lláh challenged the old world order by His powerful new teaching and the 'enemies of humankind' joined their efforts to oppose Him on a global scale]...When the situation becomes increasingly grave for Him then 'Alí b. Abí Tálib, the Generous, the Commander of the Faithful, may peace be upon Him, will come forth with angels to assist Him ['Husayn joined by 'Alí' is a reference to Bahá'u'lláh (Husayn-'Alí)]. Thus, they will kill enemies of the religion [Bahá'u'lláh prevailed over His enemies]. And 'Alí will stay with Husayn, His son, may peace be upon both of them, for three hundred years and nine years [Bahá'u'lláh (Husayn-'Alí) stayed in the world till 1309 first receiving his Revelation nine years after the martyrdom of 'Alí ('Alí-Muhammad), the Bab] as did the companions of the Cave. Then 'Alí will be struck upon His head ['Alí-Muhammad, the Bab was martyred], may God curse His murderer. And Husayn, may peace be upon Him, will remain supreme over the religion of God [Bahá'u'lláh (Husayn-'Alí) outlived the Báb and continued Their twin mission]. And the period of His kingdom is fifty thousand years [$50\,000 \times 10 = 500\,000$ years – duration of Bahá'u'lláh's cycle] until He covers His eyebrows with a bandage being well advanced in age [Bahá'u'lláh died a natural death at an old age].

In conclusion, let us summarize the main points above. The prophecy being considered, which was put together by Shaikh Ahmad from different traditions, reveals a picture of real historic events disguised in symbolic non-linear language. It is largely based on a play upon the numbers and names following in a certain significant, but not necessarily sequential, order. The numbers and names form meaningful combinations in a manner that does not preclude their components from conveying separate messages as well. A special role is accorded to the number "nine." Thus one can identify indications of the following events and time periods in Bábí and Bahá'í history:

1. The Báb will be martyred;
2. He will be martyred during the 7th year of His mission;
3. Bahá'u'lláh will outlive the Báb;
4. Bahá'u'lláh will take care of the Báb's remains;
5. After the Báb's martyrdom Bahá'u'lláh will rise to continue Their twin ministry;
6. Bahá'u'lláh will challenge the old world order by His powerful new teaching;
7. Bahá'u'lláh will face fierce opposition;
8. Bahá'u'lláh will prevail over His enemies, live until an old age, and die a natural death;
9. Indications of years and periods:
 - a. $1270 + 9 = 1279$: the year of Bahá'u'lláh's declaration;
 - b. $1260 + 9 = 1269$: the year when Bahá'u'lláh first received His revelation;
 - c. 1309: the year of Bahá'u'lláh's ascension;
 - d. 1260-1309✽50 years: the Ministry of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh as the Twin Manifestations;
 - e. 1266-1316: 50 years elapsing from the Báb's execution until His remains arrived at their permanent destination;
 - f. $50,000 \times 10 = 500,000$ years: the duration of Bahá'u'lláh's cycle.⁵⁹

Finally, the present writer is aware of the possible objections to his interpretations on the grounds that the correspondences suggested in the article could be seen as mere coincidences or assumptions. The only counter-argument I can put forward to my opponents is that such numerous "coincidences" within a short passage of text raises the question of an underlying objective reality. As for the assumptions, as long as I have been consistent in my assumptions (which I believe I have) they are at least not arbitrary. It would be relevant to remember that

Shaykh Ahmad — given his spiritual status acting under a divine inspiration or guidance — could have consciously or unconsciously presented a prophecy in a manner which would include an account of real future events.

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NOTES

- ¹ The St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (former St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies) has a vast collection of Shaykhi manuscripts (as well as Bábí and Bahá’í). Most of the manuscripts containing works of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsá’í and Siyyid Kázim Rashtí (50 works) originated before the Báb’s Declaration in 1260 AH and therefore did not pass through the hands of Karím-Khán Kirmání’s followers.
- ² Since the subject of this article is limited to this passage, I will refer to it as the “prophecy.”
- ³ The “Hayát al-Nafs” is a systematic outline of Shaykhi doctrines, providing the basis for the “Usul-i-’Aqá’id.”
- ⁴ The first manuscript is undated, the other two are dated respectively: 1248/1832-33, 1242/1826-27.
- ⁵ The lithographs are dated: 1276/1859, 1279/1862.
- ⁶ W. S. Hatcher, *Minimalism*, p. 12.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 12-13.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 67-68.
- ⁹ Cf. Bahá’u’lláh. *Kitáb-i-Iqán: The Book of Certitude*, p. 254-255.
- ¹⁰ M.Sours, *Understanding Biblical Prophecy*, p. 31-34.
- ¹¹ Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *ibid*, p. 255.
- ¹² M. Sours, *ibid*, p. 48.
- ¹³ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 101-102.
- ¹⁴ *Lights of Guidance*, p. 472.
- ¹⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 151. 154, 158-159, 161.
- ¹⁶ See *Lights of Guidance*, p. 496, 498, *God Passes By*, p. 94.
- ¹⁷ See *God Passes By*, p. 33.
- ¹⁸ Sours, *ibid*, p. 36.
- ¹⁹ Here and below translation mine.
- ²⁰ In the MS the word is misspelled: السبوعوعون .
- ²¹ In the MS the word is misspelled: نتحاون .
- ²² “Their” refers to the prophet Muhammad’s family/descendants — the *imáms*.

²³ The *imáms*.

²⁴ See *God Passes By*, p. 54 (here and below bold face mine)]

²⁵ "His" refers to Bahá'u'lláh.

²⁶ See *God Passes By*, p. 92, 104.

²⁷ The principle of interpretation applied here is similar to the one employed in the Bahá'í Writings for "the year sixty," which is identified with the year 1260, cf.: "In the year sixty, His Cause shall be made manifest, and His name shall be proclaimed" [Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán. The Book of Certitude*, p. 253].

²⁸ This is an obvious error.

²⁹ See also *Bihár al-Anvâr*, vol. 53, p. 100. The present author thanks Kházehe Fanánápazír for sharing information about the *Bihár al-Anvâr* internet site.

³⁰ See *Bihár al-Anvâr*, vol. 53, p. 147, cf. Ha'iri. *Ilzám al-Nasíb*, vol. 2, p. 322.

³¹ Cf. *The Koran interpreted*. Tr. with an Introduction by A. J. Arberry, p. 291.

³² In the other two manuscripts the name is: عبيد الله .

³³ This is an obvious error (see the other two manuscripts).

³⁴ The word is obviously misspelled.

³⁵ The order of words in this compound number is strikingly unusual. The normal order is: ثلثمائة وتسع سنين.

³⁶ The *imáms*.

³⁷ See *God Passes By*, p. 221.

³⁸ See *God Passes By*, p. 91-92, 106-107 (bold face mine).

³⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 143 (here and below bold face mine).

⁴⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes by*, p. 274. See also A. Rabbani, *Remains of the Báb in Tihrán* // bahai-library.com/histories/remains.bab.htm.

⁴¹ See Amoli, 441.

⁴² See *Ilzám al-Nasíb*, vol. 2, p. 246.

⁴³ See *Tárikh Ma Ba'd al-Zuhur*, p. 622.

⁴⁴ See *Ibid*, p. 616.

⁴⁵ See *Bihár al-Anvâr*, vol. 53, p. 94, cf. *Ilzám al-Nasíb*, vol. 2, p. 315, *Tárikh Ma Ba'd al-Zuhur*, p. 621.

⁴⁶ In a different version: تسعة عشر من يوم قيامه إلى يوم موته.

⁴⁷ See *Bihár al-Anvâr*, vol. 53, p. 145, cf. *ibid*, p. 100-101, 146-147, *Ilzám al-Nasíb*, vol. 2, p. 318, 322.

⁴⁸ Muhammad b. 'Alí al-Báqir (Abu Ja'far) — the 5th Shi'ih *imám*.

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- ⁴⁹ Nineteen years elapsed between the Báb's and Bahá'u'lláh's Declarations (1260 AH – 1279 AH).
- ⁵⁰ See Majlisi, *Tadhkirat al-Ayimma*, p. 216.
- ⁵¹ See *Bihár al-Anvár*, vol. 53, p. 104, cf. *Ilzám al-Nasíb*, vol. 2, p. 310.
- ⁵² Abu 'Abdu'lláh, i.e., *imám* Ja'far al-Sádiq (the 6th *imám*).
- ⁵³ Cf. the Koran 70: 4.
- ⁵⁴ See *Bihár al-Anvár*, vol. 53, p. 43-44, cf. *ibid*, 64.
- ⁵⁵ One of the meanings of this word is "protector". See Lane, Book I, Part 2, p. 483.
- ⁵⁶ The present author thanks Mark Hellaby for consultation on the translation of this and next quote.
- ⁵⁷ See *Bihár al-Anvár*, vol. 53, p. 64.
- ⁵⁸ Bahá'u'lláh's ministry on earth from the time He first received His revelation (1269 AH) until His ascension (1309 AH) lasted for 40 years. Shoghi Effendi wrote: "The ascension of Bahá'u'lláh had plunged into grief and bewilderment His loyal supporters, quickened the hopes of the betrayers of His Cause...The Instrument He had forged, the Covenant He had Himself instituted, had canalized, after His passing, the forces released by Him in the course of a forty-year ministry, had preserved the unity of His Faith and provided the impulse required to propel it forward to achieve its destiny" [*God Passes By*, p. 404 (bold face mine)].
- ⁵⁹ As for the number "59," also indicated in the prophecy, the only interpretation I can suggest is that it might refer to the sum of both the Báb's and Bahá'u'lláh's ministries: 19 + 40 (see also below). This calculation would not be mathematical, for the 19 years of the Báb's dispensation include the 10 years which Moojan Momen defines as Bahá'u'lláh's "Messianic concealment" (see Momen, *Messianic Concealment and Theophanic Disclosure*, p. 71-88), thus already included in the 40 years of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry. Consequently, this interpretation of the 59 year period would be based on counting the 10 years twice.

Textual Context and Literary Criticism: A Case Study based on a Letter from Shoghi Effendi¹

Gerald Keil

Written replies by Shoghi Effendi, along with those written on his behalf, include seminal statements of doctrine on a wide range of topics, statements which are considered binding for the Bahá'í community. It is currently the case that the vast majority of such letters are generally accessible only in the form of text compilations (in particular, *Lights of Guidance*² and *Directives from the Guardian*³), which do not include the enquiries to which these letters constitute the responses. In addition, the letters are generally presented not in their entirety, but only in the form of selected extracts, these moreover sub-divided into the smallest possible fragments and re-ordered thematically. The fact that the ensuing well-nigh complete dissociation of such fragments from their original textual contexts represents an exorbitant loss of information, a loss which can substantially influence the interpretation of individual text passages, will be demonstrated in detail on the basis of a particularly severe example which came to the fore during the present writer's research activities.

* * *

The text passage with which this presentation is primarily concerned is a single sentence from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi⁴ on 15 May 1940:

As to which spot should be regarded as the standard, this is a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to decide.⁵

It is not my intention here to explore the properties or the practical application of the “spot [that] should be regarded as the standard” as such – I have written about that extensively elsewhere.⁶ My sole purpose is to explore whether this text passage represents an unambiguous confirmation of the indispensability of such a spot for the determination of the day of Naw-Rúz as stipulated by Bahá'u'lláh, as is generally assumed, or whether it could also be understood in some other way. I have occupied myself intensively with this question on two occasions separated by a gap of several years.

It must also be clarified from the very beginning that this presentation will not concern itself with the veracity, i.e. the objective accuracy, of any individual interpretation. That is a judgement to which I am in any event not entitled. My interest lies solely in the bandwidth of potential meaning – how this statement *might possibly* be understood. This approach is known as *literary criticism* (“literary” in the broad sense of “anything written”). In this presentation, this term implies the systematic analysis of the written word as a preliminary stage of the process of exegesis⁷ and – to achieve clarity from the very start – has nothing to do with criticism in the popular sense of complaint or faultfinding. As a theological-scientific activity this discipline is known in the West primarily through Judeo-Christian scholarship (Talmudic commentary and Bible criticism), but there is nothing preventing Bahá'í scholarship from profiting from the rich experience of other traditions for the study of its own writings – in the present case, Shoghi Effendi's correspondence. This suggestion is not new,⁸ but the discussion in Bahá'í academic literature has until now more or less concentrated on the methodology of – and problems associated with – historical criticism of the writings of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith.⁹

While endeavouring in principle to maintain neutrality with respect to the question of veracity, I will most certainly address the question of the degree to which one or another reading of a text passage is *appropriate* to the available textual context in each individual circumstance. Such reflection constitutes an inalienable aspect of literary criticism; without it, analysis would be devoid of any appeal to reality, and any exegesis which was based on such an analysis would be purely

arbitrary. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the assessment of the appropriateness of a given reading has nothing to do directly with the question of its truth value, merely with its hermeneutic feasibility within a given textual context.

This assessment necessarily involves critically examining the reading under consideration for anomalies which it may imply – and naming them by name. This candid use of language may irritate some readers not accustomed to the methodology of literary criticism, who could easily misinterpret this approach as criticism of the guidance offered by the Guardian. It is therefore important to stress that it is expressly *not* the purpose of analysis to make inferences regarding the meaning intended by its author, but rather to assess the potential signification projected onto a text by the *reader*. Anomalies invariably signal that something is wrong with the assumptions underlying the reading, and they ideally indicate directions of investigation which might resolve these anomalies, as was for example the case in the study described in this presentation.

If the only information available to the critical reader is that which comes from the text itself, then his judgement of the appropriateness of a given reading will be based solely on text-internal consistency. But there is virtually no such thing as a text for which there is no external reference. At most, mathematic expressions or statements of a propositional calculus might perhaps be considered self-inclusive, but even these make reference, at least implicitly, to the rules and conventions by which they are governed and which are therefore not understandable to anyone not acquainted with these rules. In the case of texts in natural language, not only are the rules and conventions of the metasytem involved – natural language – incomparably more complicated, so too are the relationships between individual texts and their linguistic and factual environment multifarious, and not always easy to identify. That is the reason why Christian exegetes, for example, in the wake of nearly two thousand years of preoccupation with scripture are still able to uncover novel and unexpected facets of biblical narrative using the methods of literary criticism.¹⁰

It is admittedly extremely difficult to quantify the appropriateness of a given reading. But despite all subjectivity necessarily involved in any such assessment, it is nevertheless possible to subject the text to a set of individual questions and in so doing to proceed in a structured manner, so that the critical reader need not base his conclusions solely on holistic and purely intuitive judgement. In the case of the corpus with which this presentation is concerned — Shoghi Effendi's correspondence, which consists to a large part in letters written in response to written enquiries from individuals or from Spiritual Assemblies — the appropriateness of specific readings can be investigated by subjecting them to questions such as the following:

- Inner cohesion: Are the individual components of this reading thematically, stylistically and objectively consistent among themselves?
- Outer cohesion: Do the assertions implied by this reading stand in concord with comparable assertions from other written sources?¹¹
- External cohesion: Does this reading accord with system-external standards (experience and reason¹²)?
- Relevance: Does this reading address the main purpose of the question which preceded it, so far as that purpose can be ascertained?
- Commensurability: Does this reading leave the impression that it answers the question(s) actually asked?
- Completeness: Does this reading cover all of the issues which were broached by the question which preceded it?
- Motivation: Is each of the individual elements of this reading prompted in some manner by the preceding enquiry — especially with regard to the details (which is, as we know, where the devil lies)?
- Terminological parallelism: Are terms which occur both in this reading and in the preceding question

used in the same fashion, or if not, are terminological differences explicitly topicalised?

- Symmetry: Does the answer reflect the character of the preceding question? (a statement of general principle as answer to the description of a special-case problem, an explanation of administrative procedure in response to a question about ethics, a theological exposition where the questioner is uncertain about correct demeanour, are examples of tendentially inappropriate readings.)
- Language and knowledge level: Do the demands implied by this reading correspond to the level of perceptivity to be reasonably expected from the enquirer? (a child should not be bombarded with an “adult” answer; and a technically correct answer which is understandable only to the specialist is only then called for when the necessary background knowledge and terminological competence can be assumed on the part of the enquirer.)

This list, which is undoubtedly incomplete and capable of improvement, serves in the first instance to concentrate the focus on individual aspects of the text under examination. No single aspect can be totally divorced from the others, and every such text survey involves certain limitations. For example, lack of inner cohesion of a reply might well be conditioned by the haphazard structure of the original enquiry; a given reply might be the sole existing statement in all of the writings to the theme under discussion, so that either the possibility of comparison with additional materials is not viable or the material which is consulted for comparison leads to false associations or conclusions; and the store of knowledge drawn from a broader, predominantly secularly disposed culture is often insufficient or even inappropriate as background for assessment of the plausibility of a given statement from a Bahá’í point of view. But the analysis of the communicative context suffers most frequently from the incompleteness of the available documentation: since in most cases only Shoghi Effendi’s remarks are available, assumptions concerning the nature of each respective preceding enquiry must be drawn on the basis

of the statement which has been formulated in response to it — which means that application of the majority of the above criteria would involve circular reasoning. And even when it is available, the preceding enquiry represents a text which should itself ideally be subjected to the scrutiny of literary criticism.

In the case of the particular text with which this presentation is concerned (which as so far presented consists of a single sentence), the potential for text-internal analysis is correspondingly limited and the dependence on additional sources of information all the greater. In the course of this presentation the communicative context of this sentence will grow step by step, and with each step the potential for interpretation will expand, contract, become more specific — and even contradict itself.

Once again: this presentation is not a discussion about the “spot to be regarded as the standard”. This subject is merely the vehicle for transporting the central thesis: that the effectivity and reliability of exegesis is dependent on a textual context which is as exhaustive as circumstances permit.

The first attempt

In the course of a study of the Badí‘ calendar which was published in 2005,¹³ I investigated the future calendar ruling for determining the day of Naw-Rúz, i.e. the day which carries the nominal specification 1 Bahá‘. This ruling was established originally by the Báb in the Persian Bayán and subsequently confirmed and rendered more precise by Bahá‘u’lláh in the Kitáb-i Aqdas. The Báb writes:

*va án yawm ast keh shams montaql mīgardad az borj-e húb behamal dar hín-e taḥvíl chēh leyl váqi‘ shavad va chēh nahár.*¹⁴

*This day is the day whereon the Sun passes from Pisces into Aries at the moment of its passing, whether it be night or day.*¹⁵

Bahá‘u’lláh’s statement differs in principle from that of the Báb only in the fact that Bahá‘u’lláh explicitly mentions sunset:

*har rúz keh shams taḥvíl beḥamal shavad hamán yawm
‘eid ast agar cheh yek daqíqeh beh ghorúb mándeh
báshad.¹⁶*

*The festival of Naw-Rúz falleth on the day that the sun
entereth the sign of Aries, even should this occur no
longer than one minute before sunset.¹⁷*

Despite differences in wording, both statements express the same content, since the term “day” in the sense of “calendar day” is understood to be the period of time between two successive sunsets: this moment serves not only the Badí‘ calendar, but also for example the Islamic (*hijrī*) calendar as delineator between two calendar days.

It certainly didn’t escape the notice of the early believers that the procedure for determining New Year’s Day was very similar to the corresponding procedure in connexion with the Iranian National Calendar. Also called the *Jalálí* calendar or simply “the solar calendar” (*taqvím-e shamsí*, to distinguish it from the (Islamic) lunar calendar, *taqvím-e qamarí*), this calendar has served since the twelfth Gregorian century as house calendar in virtually all of Iran, in Afghanistan, in the Shi‘ite regions of Iraq and in several adjoining regions of Central Asia. It is thus easy to appreciate how Bahá’u’lláh’s instructions would be understood by the early believers to imply an adaption of the ruling to which they were already accustomed, whereby the new ruling would differ from the old in only one aspect: in the Iranian National Calendar, determination of New Year’s Day is made on the basis of midday,¹⁸ whereas in the Badí‘ calendar it is made on the basis of sunset, the terms “midday” and “sunset” each denoting a characteristic orientation of the sun as observed from some agreed-upon geographical location. In the as yet unpublished second part of his narrative, in which he presumably reflects the views of the community of his time, Nabíl Zarandí (Nabíl-i A‘zam) obviously shares this impression:

*... yawm-e nawrúz hamán rúz ast keh beh qá‘ede-ye
taqvím-e írán dar shab yá rúz án rúz shams beh borj-e
ḥamal vârd shavad agar che yek daqíqe qabl az ghorúb-e
áftâb báshad bar khaláf-e qá‘ede-ye sâbeq-e ahl-e írán*

*keh agar taḥvíl ba‘ad az zohr váqe‘ mishad rúz-e ba‘ad-ra nawrúz qorár mídádand ...*¹⁹

On the basis of the Iranian calendar, the day of Naw-Rúz is the day on which the sun enters the sign of Aries, whether at night or during the day, even if this happens one minute prior to sunset, in contrast to the earlier ruling in Iran, according to which one chose the following day as Naw-Rúz if the shift [i.e. the transit of the sun into the sign of Aries: my comment] should occur after midday ... [my translation]

The similarities of Nabíl’s description with the texts of both Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb indicate that he was acquainted with, and based his own text on, both versions. Admittedly, the parallels in the English-language texts are partly the result of the fact that the above translation has been undertaken with a view to maintaining stylistic conformity with the existing official translations of similar texts. Nevertheless, even in the Persian-language originals the similarity in content can hardly be overlooked.

All that remains of this passage, if one removes those parts of it which are directly derived from the statements of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, is the reference to the Jalálí calendar:

On the basis of the Iranian calendar ... [Badí‘ ruling] ... in contrast to the earlier ruling in Iran, according to which one chose the following day as Naw-Rúz if the shift should occur after midday.

Nabíl asserts that the ruling of the Iranian National Calendar serves as the basis (*qá‘ede*) for the corresponding Badí‘ ruling. That might imply nothing more than that Nabíl felt the new ruling easiest to explain on the model of the old ruling, with which he could assume his readership was acquainted. But these words could also possibly imply that, according to the testimony of Nabíl, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh intentionally adapted the existing Jalálí ruling to serve as the new Badí‘ ruling. This possibility is of course pure speculation, since a confirmation on the part of the Báb or Bahá’u’lláh doesn’t appear to exist in writing. Moreover, the assumption that a direct relationship between the two calendar forms was

historically unavoidable would be tantamount to claiming that a Manifestation of God is a child of his times, dependent on models from his immediate social and cultural environment. But even without support from this speculation, it is easy to appreciate how the undeniable similarity of the two New Year rulings would indeed foster the conclusion that they are meant to be equivalent in all details except for that one aspect which the Báb explicitly altered.

It is perhaps precisely such considerations which resulted in the assumption that, prior to activation, Bahá'u'lláh's ruling would have to be supplemented with the nomination of a particular spot on Earth which would serve as the reference for the determination of Naw-Rúz. After all, this expectation was in accord with the experience of the early believers with respect to no less than two of the other calendars with which they were intimately familiar: not only is the determination the day of the equinox and therewith the Jalálí New Year accomplished with reference to a particular geographical location, the precise spot on Earth of the sighting of the new moon also plays a decisive rôle in the Islamic calendar both for the determination of 1 Muḥarram (the nominal start of the Islamic year) and for the commencement and duration of the month of fasting.

Once it had become engrained community-wide – a state of affairs which was without doubt consummated very early in the history of the Faith – this assumption would quickly assume the character of a tacit agreement. From that time onward, the only detail which would still remain open to speculation would be the location to be selected. Given the already existing possibilities in Iran and Iraq, and subsequent to the interment of Bahá'u'lláh's earthly remains in Bahjí, the erection of the Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel and the establishment of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, discussion would have focussed to such a degree on the multitude of possibilities available that the original assumption which generated the demand for this supply of candidates in the first place would hardly have been subjected to further scrutiny. The community would only have to remain patient until an authoritative decision in favour of one or another of the potential reference spots had been taken.

Meanwhile, the proliferation of the teachings with respect to the spot took its inevitable course: from Iran and the Near East, the teaching spread over the entire globe and was inculcated among peoples who had no knowledge of the Iranian National Calendar and therefore no possible insight into the history of the consensus opinion of which they were being informed, an opinion which perforce mutated for them into an apodictic truth.

* * *

It was no real hardship for the community to postpone the final decision indefinitely, since by virtue of the provisional coordination of the determination of the day of Naw-Rúz with the properties of existing mainstream calendars, the community possessed a practicable interim solution. It therefore comes as no particular surprise to note that, up until the appearance of the letter of 15 May 1940 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, nearly seventy years after the Kitáb-i Aqdas was revealed, the spot appears to have received not a single mention — neither in the writings and letters of Bahá'u'lláh nor in those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi. In spite of that, in the letter of 15 May 1940 Shoghi Effendi could rest assured that the members of the National Spiritual Assembly were acquainted with the concept of the “spot”.

Over and above the fact that it is to be “regarded as the standard” (a condition of which the Spiritual Assembly was no doubt already aware), in this letter there is no further elucidation regarding the “spot”. Not that it was in any way a pressing issue: every Bahá'í, then as now, knew all too well how important “the spot to be regarded as the standard” was — even though it might not at all be clear to him just what function this spot is supposed to fulfil. Calendar details feature among the favourite topics of conversation among those interested in hearing about the Faith. The Badí' calendar always goes down well; it serves admirably as an easily recognisable group-defining feature of the community for individuals who are not really able to cope yet with the more spiritual aspects of the Bahá'í Religion. Moreover, the pleasing symmetry of the nineteen nineteen-day months and the flexibility of the

intercalary days in achieving parity with the solar year are immediately obvious to those who, if truth be told, could never really appreciate why, in their “own” calendar, the extra day in a leap year should be attached seemingly arbitrarily onto the end of the curiously undersized month of February. The Badí‘ calendar sports one blemish, however: the cycle of the year is determined (in the West) according to the dictates of the Gregorian calendar. Were it not for the pending nomination of a spot, this situation would be an embarrassing admission of dependency on the very time calibration system which the Badí‘ calendar is meant to replace. As it is, however, the Gregorian calendar serves the purposes of the Badí‘ calendar, not the other way around: as soon as we Bahá’ís decide for ourselves and on our own terms that the time is ripe, this interim measure will be cast aside.

Since the expectations placed in the future nomination of a spot play such an important rôle in the maintenance of a positive public image of the community, and since the firm belief in the necessity of the spot has such a long history, one which reaches right back to the earliest phases of the Bábí Revelation, it is hardly surprising that the mere mention of the spot on the part of Shoghi Effendi would be automatically, indeed gratefully taken up as confirmation of a conviction which in any case predominated in the community. For example, the editors of the *Kitáb-i Aqdas* conclude, apparently on the strength of that one sentence quoted at the beginning of this presentation, the following:

The Guardian has stated that the implementation, worldwide, of the law concerning the timing of Naw-Ruz will require the choice of a particular spot on earth which will serve as the standard for the fixing of the time of the spring equinox. He also indicated that the choice of this spot has been left to the decision of the Universal House of Justice.²⁰

Although an editorial commentary in no way carries the same import as the divine revealed word, by virtue of its occurrence in the official release of the holiest work of the Bahá’í Revelation this commentary takes on a certain normative authority. It can be quoted, cited in evidence, and with

reference to the supervisory function of the Universal House of Justice even adorned with the aura of inerrancy. In this fashion, what started out as an uncritical assumption and became in stages a consensus opinion, a tacit agreement and an apodictic truth, ultimately takes on the quality of authoritative doctrine.

It is not my purpose, neither here nor anywhere else, to question the potential correctness of this reading of the sentence from Shoghi Effendi's letter of 15 May 1940. In particular, the concern of the current presentation is literary criticism, not exegesis; in other words, it is about the total meaning potential inherent in any given text, and not about what that text is ultimately supposed to mean. My intention is to describe the stages of my investigation of this statement of Shoghi Effendi's in its own right, divorced from the question of assessment of truth – a process which involves among other things ignoring whatever interpretation has heretofore been assigned to it, however self-evident this advance judgement might appear.²¹

* * *

The conduct of this investigation was not devoid of ulterior motives. In the course of my aforementioned study of the Badí' calendar, I wanted to present a technically feasible alternative to the reference-spot method and to discuss the respective advantages of the two methods. In face of the predominance and more recently the implied doctrinal authority of the consensus opinion, I felt it necessary to provide myself with insurance against the potential reproach that I had ignored the clear instructions of Shoghi Effendi. In the end, I didn't have to look very far for my immediate purposes: it was enough to point out that Shoghi Effendi had characterised the spot as a "matter". Had he instead said something like "the Universal House of Justice will decide on a suitable location for the spot", then the situation would have been clear: it would indeed have been merely a question of nomination. But in light of the word "matter", this passage can legitimately be taken to imply in the first instance a decision concerning the *issue* of the spot, and only thereafter, if appropriate, its location.

This interpretation is admittedly anything but cogent, since the word “matter” can just as easily be interpreted as a placeholder for the entire phrase “which spot should be regarded as the standard”, i.e. devoid of independent lexical meaning. Therefore, in support of my further objective – the stimulation of a serious discussion about alternative methods for the future determination of New Year – something more tangible than that which the isolated sentence produced would have served my purposes quite nicely.

The next step consisted of considering this sentence in the context of the complete paragraph of the letter of 15 May 1940 in which it occurs. This paragraph reads as follows:

Regarding Naw-Ruz: if the vernal equinox falls on the 21st of March before sunset it is celebrated on that day. If at any time after sunset, Naw-Ruz will then, as stated by Bahá'u'lláh, fall on the 22nd. As to which spot should be regarded as the standard, this is a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to decide. The American National Spiritual Assembly need not therefore take any action in this matter at present.

This passage is the response to a written enquiry by the then National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada directed to Shoghi Effendi, a copy of which I had tried in vain to obtain while preparing the manuscript for publication in German. It is most probably the case that I am personally responsible for this failure. Having already made liberal use of the services of the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre in the course of my researches, I decided to direct my enquiry to the secretariat of the National Spiritual Assembly in Wilmette – the successor organisation to that which authored the original letter – and thus avoid stretching the patience of the World Centre even further. Presumably due to limitations in the services available to researchers, my enquiry did not produce the result I was banking on. Eventually, preparations for publication of the study reached such an advanced stage that a substantial alteration to the text would no longer be possible, and this project lost momentum. For clues regarding the content of this unseen enquiry I thus had no other option

than to rely on inferences drawn from the formulation of Shoghi Effendi's response.

* * *

The three-part structure of this passage is obvious at first glance. The first portion is in effect a reformulation of the law presented in the Kitáb-i Aqdas:

Regarding Naw-Ruz: if the vernal equinox falls on the 21st of March before sunset it is celebrated on that day. If at any time after sunset, Naw-Ruz will then, as stated by Bahá'u'lláh, fall on the 22nd.

The second portion is the reference to the "spot", discussed above:

As to which spot should be regarded as the standard, this is a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to decide.

Finally, the third portion is a sort of guideline:

The American National Spiritual Assembly need not therefore take any action in this matter at present.

This structure implies a corresponding multi-part enquiry:

- How is Naw-Rúz to be determined? — perhaps expressed in the form: Under what circumstances should Naw-Rúz deviate from 21 March? — followed possibly by:
- When, or under what conditions, will a decision be made about the spot? — and perhaps concluding with the question:
- What measures should the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada undertake in anticipation of such a decision?

The above speculation can be varied indefinitely, but Shoghi Effendi's response appears in any case to consist of two pieces of information and one suggestion for action. In light of the portion of the reconstructed enquiry with which it is associated, though, this concluding suggestion is somewhat

puzzling: one would normally take it as a matter of course that the National Spiritual Assembly would abide by any instruction currently in force until such time as it is explicitly superceded by another. It is therefore plausible to imagine that the instruction to refrain from taking action is simply a formulaic closing remark. Perhaps the Spiritual Assembly didn't even pose the question whether it should take any action or not – or if so, then perhaps it was merely meant rhetorically, just as the answer it prompted sounds rhetorical. It would appear that the editors of *Lights of Guidance* came to a similar conclusion, since in their version the final sentence was omitted.

In anticipation of this closing instruction, the second part (concerning the spot) seems to function primarily as a rationalisation for the postponement of this decision until some indefinite point of time in the future. Thus understood, and in the event that the Spiritual Assembly didn't itself broach the issue, it provides a conceivable motivation for the fact that the spot is mentioned at all in the response, even though nothing in addition is revealed about the function or particulars of the spot itself.

With regard to the first part, it is difficult to imagine just why Bahá'u'lláh's New Year ruling is presented in the manner in which it occurs here. It is hardly surprising to find a reference to the Gregorian calendar in a letter addressed to Bahá'ís in the West, but it is indeed somewhat curious that only one of many inevitable scenarios has been singled out for mention. As a consequence of the Gregorian leap year formula, the vernal equinox can occur in fact on 19, 20, 21 or 22 March, depending on the year and the nominal location on Earth. The moment of the vernal equinox – the so-called vernal point, or point of Aries – is presented in the standard reference works exact to the minute in UT (Universal Time, for the present purposes synonymous with Greenwich Mean Time). This time specification applies by definition to the null meridian, or in other words, it indicates the time at longitude zero, which runs through the middle of Greenwich, a suburb of London. Should the point of Aries occur in a given year at, say, 17:45 UT (5:45 p.m. GMT), then at this moment the sun has already set in Middle Europe but not for example in Ireland, Spain, Portugal

and a large proportion of France. The further away from the null meridian a given location lies, the greater is the probability that a day shift must be reckoned with, i.e. either a Gregorian date change (based on midnight) or a Badí' one (based on sunset), or both. Shoghi Effendi provides no details concerning how this potentially complicated day shift effects the determination of New Year in all these situations, nor does he mention the special conditions which obtain in the polar regions. All in all, this excerpt from the letter of 1940 leaves one somewhat ill at ease: as methodology for the future application of the revealed New Year ruling it is virtually useless.

Had these two sentences been addressed to an individual (and non-Persian) believer who, purely out of personal interest or curiosity, wanted to know something about the future determination of New Year, then the explanation for this apparent carelessness would be clear: in all probability the poser of the question would have been acquainted his whole life long with no other calendar than the Gregorian, perhaps not even aware that it has a name. His choice of words might well have left the impression that he was not particularly versed in matters of astronomy, and an all too abstract or technical answer might have been too much for him to handle. In short, there are understandable grounds for assuming that, in his answer to such an enquiry, Shoghi Effendi would have made reference to 21 March in this fashion — as if the matter really were that simple, and as if Gregorian date specification were an absolute scale against which other, in this case Badí', time expressions are to be measured. And since in any case the application of the law did not lie in the domain of responsibility of this individual, there would be no necessity for providing a lengthy and involved explanation which, while encompassing all conceivable circumstances, would probably include far more than the enquirer really wished to know.

But Shoghi Effendi is not writing here to an individual, but rather to a National Spiritual Assembly, indeed to that of the largest Bahá'í community at that time outside of Iran. For this reason alone one ought to be justified in assuming that Shoghi Effendi's remarks are being directed to a technically proficient readership, and that they are not intended simply to satisfy someone's casual curiosity, but rather to serve as instructions

which are to be put into practice at some future time (as the words “at present” suggest). In light of the words “The American National Spiritual Assembly need not therefore take any action in this matter” it could be argued, albeit somewhat strained, that this passage doesn’t have to do with instructions for action, but at best with instructions for inaction. Yet this objection would have been more convincing if Shoghi Effendi had dispensed entirely with a description of the ruling: silence would then have been preferable to disinformation. And finally, it can be seen that the level of communication is quite simply inappropriate: neither do these sentences pay justice to the level of knowledge which may rightly be assumed on the part of a National Spiritual Assembly together with the consultative resources at its disposal, nor does this reading reflect the care and preciseness characteristic of Shoghi Effendi.

A possible explanation for these apparent shortcomings is provided by the existence of an article which bears the title “Additional Material gleaned from Nabíl’s Narrative (Vol. II), Regarding the Bahá’í Calendar”. This article appeared in every volume of *The Bahá’í World* from vol. III (1928 – 1930) until vol. XX (1986 – 1992). The close collaboration of the Guardian on this article is documented in writing, and it is in fact highly probable that Shoghi Effendi was its author.²² An excerpt from this article explains:

The day of Naw-Rúz falls on the 21st of March only if the vernal Equinox precedes the setting of the sun on that day. Should the vernal Equinox take place after sunset, Naw-Rúz will have to be celebrated on the following day.

This excerpt is based on the passage from Nabíl’s narrative quoted earlier. A comparison of both renditions quickly reveals that the excerpt is far from a translation; it is in fact a complete new formulation. This situation is in itself a convincing indicator of Shoghi Effendi’s participation – no other individual would have undertaken such a liberal reformulation of a passage from a work which had been compiled at the behest of Bahá’u’lláh himself – and demonstrates to what lengths Shoghi Effendi went to target his intended readership. The choice of words in *The Bahá’í World*

is, as it is formulated in a letter from the Bahá'í World Centre, not a translation, but rather “a partial paraphrase that highlights the essential information or principle gleaned from the Persian text in order to clarify the Bahá'í Naw-Rúz for Persian and non-Persian Bahá'ís and for non-Bahá'í readers of *The Bahá'í World*”.²³ The language used and the degree of prior knowledge assumed is appropriate to the range of readership for which the passage was written.

The parallels between these two sentences and the first two sentences of the passage from the letter of 1940 are surely not pure coincidence. Whilst putting together material for letters to be sent on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi's secretaries would routinely access archives of correspondence and other written sources in search of appropriate text passages which the Guardian had already written or approved. It is therefore plausible that this excerpt from the article in *The Bahá'í World*, which had been written some ten years earlier, served directly or indirectly as a template for the corresponding passage of the letter of 1940. Apparently, a secretary adopted this already available text with a minimum of re-wording in order to spare Shoghi Effendi from unnecessary expense of his limited resources of time and energy. However, it still remains a mystery, in light of the difference between the expected degree of perceptibility of the members of a National Spiritual Assembly and that of a non-Bahá'í readership, why Shoghi Effendi let these sentences go through as they did.

The only formulation which has been added to the text from *The Bahá'í World* is the insertion “as stated by Bahá'u'lláh”. However, Nabíl explains in his narrative that he gleaned this information from the *Kitáb-i-Asmá'*, which was revealed by the Báb. In other words, this insertion seems misleading. Perhaps Shoghi Effendi simply wanted to make it clear that Bahá'u'lláh had confirmed this ruling. In light of the impracticability of the rest of the formulation, however, it is hard to imagine why Shoghi Effendi felt the need at all to include this additional remark.

For the purpose of literary critical analysis it has so far been possible to expand the context to include four text passages which preceded the letter of 1940:

- the New Year ruling of the Báb from the Persian Bayán;
- the New Year ruling of Bahá'u'lláh from the Kitáb-i Aqdas;
- the statement from part II of Nabíl's Narrative; and
- the article from *The Bahá'í World* volumes II - XX (1928-1992).

This extended field of information has led in certain respects to an improvement of our understanding of the passage in the letter of 1940: the relationship between the passage and the divine law has become clearer, the provenience of the consensus opinion regarding the spot has been identified, and the source text for the problematic first two sentences has been discovered. Nevertheless, one cannot deem this passage from Shoghi Effendi's letter of April 1940 to be a paragon of clear and unambiguous communication – at least not in accordance with the impression left by the greatly expanded but still incomplete communicative context. The suspicion has grown that the problems presented by this text cannot be satisfactorily resolved without examination of the original enquiry.

The Second attempt

In preparation for the English-language edition of my study a few years later, I obtained a copy of the original letter of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada from the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre. It was explained to me that the letter of 1940 consisted not just of this one question, but rather contained “a large number of questions about different aspects of the Bahá'í Faith and the operation of its Administrative Order.”²⁴ This information alone made the situation more transparent: in the face of a considerable number of individual questions, and in view of the pressure of time which bore constantly on the Guardian, it

is not unreasonable to assume that Shoghi Effendi might rely on the preparatory researches of his secretary and dispense with an extensive revision of each and every passage of a letter of this size written on his behalf – in particular, those individual responses which were either of diminished importance or which did not entail any immediate consequences. Obviously, these conditions applied at least partially to the question regarding the New Year ruling, the inappropriateness of whose presentation is therefore at least understandable: it was necessary under those combined circumstances to leave the sentences which had been virtually lifted from *The Bahá'í World* as they were.

* * *

The reference to “a large number of questions” motivated me to look for answers to other questions in this letter. An Ocean search in *Lights of Guidance* for text passages which had been written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada on 15 May 1940 resulted in four hits in total: not exactly a “large number” (from which we may surmise that only a small selection of items from this letter is included in this compilation), but nevertheless sufficient to gain an impression of the bandwidth of topics for which answers were being sought.²⁵ Of course it is only an assumption that all four extracts come from the same letter; but if they do not, then that merely means that Shoghi Effendi answered up to five separate enquiries from the American National Spiritual Assembly on the same day, of which at least one included “a large number of questions”. And so it remains the case in any event that Shoghi Effendi was burdened with the task of supplying answers to a large number of questions or alternatively to the same large number plus four or more, all on the same day and presumably during the same working session, and it is irrelevant for the purpose of the discussion to speculate which excerpt was written in reference to which theoretically existing letter.

Of these four excerpts, three have nothing do with the spot. They read as follows:

Regarding the interpretation of mental unfitness, this is not the same as being physically incapacitated. By

the latter is meant a condition much more serious than any temperamental deficiency or disinclination to conform to the principle of majority rule. Only in rare cases when a person is actually unbalanced, and is admittedly proved to be so, should the right of membership be denied him. The greatest care and restraint should be exercised in this matter.²⁶

Regarding the age of fifteen fixed by Bahá'u'lláh; this relates only to purely spiritual functions and obligations and is not related to the degree of administrative capacity which is a totally different thing, and is, for the present, fixed at twenty-one.²⁷

In connection with the selection of particular photographs of 'Abdu'l-Bahá for circulation among the friends, the Guardian strongly feels that no definite ruling should be laid down establishing the superiority or distinction of any particular photograph. The friends should be left quite free to use their individual independent judgement in this matter.²⁸

We will take a closer look at these passages, with the intention of identifying the degree to which Shoghi Effendi was involved in their formulation, using criteria which he himself validated:

Although the secretaries of the Guardian convey his thoughts and instructions, ... their words are in no sense the same as his [and] their style certainly not the same, ... for they use their own terms and not his exact words in conveying his messages.²⁹

Since we possess a vast corpus of authentic material from Shoghi Effendi, we are in a good position to analyse these passages with respect to their degree of conformity with his writing style. I contend that much in these excerpts falls short of Shoghi Effendi's level of language competence, as several examples will amply demonstrate:

Regarding the interpretation of mental unfitness, this is not the same as being physically incapacitated.

The antecedent of the word “this” can only be “the interpretation of mental unfitness”. In other words, this sentence is inadvertently claiming that a certain act of judgement (interpreting mental unfitness) is not the same thing as a certain state of existence (being physically incapacitated). And quite aside from this totally nonsensical observation, the word “interpretation” is problematic: it should be either (a) “meaning” or “definition”, (b) “identification” or “prognosis”, (c) “ramifications” or “consequences”, or (d) “assessment” or “toleration”, depending on what is actually meant. And that is not all:

Only in rare cases when a person is actually unbalanced, and is admittedly proved to be so, should the right of membership be denied him.

It is the state of being unbalanced, not someone’s admission to the fact, which is grounds for the denial of membership. There can be no doubt that Shoghi Effendi could easily have found a more appropriate term, such as “officially”, “medically”, “professionally”, “conclusively”, “reliably”, “demonstrably”, to name only a few.

Incidentally, the expression is “cases where”, not “cases when” – as Shoghi Effendi well knew: the former occurs for example in *Advent of Divine Justice* and *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, the latter only in letters which were written on his behalf.

This sentence quite simply doesn’t match up to the habitual fastidiousness of Shoghi Effendi’s writing style. The Guardian was only too well aware that the believers hung on every word from him and that a careless utterance could have disastrous consequences.

The second excerpt likewise features a rich series of solecisms:

... the degree of administrative capacity [*missing comma*] which is a totally different thing, [*superfluous comma*] and [*missing “which”*] is, for the present, fixed at twenty-one.

Instead of “degree of administrative capacity” it should read for example “the age at which aptitude for administrative activity may be assumed”. As it stands, the reader is obliged to imagine a scale of degrees of “administrative capacity” (which presumably means capacity for administration) ranging from, say, 1 to at least twenty-one. According to this statement, the “fifteen” of this scale does not mean the same thing as “fifteen” as passage of time since birth. Naturally, when one reads such a message one mentally carries out the adjustments necessary to disentangle the botched semantics, a process which is so automatic that one is usually not even aware that it is taking place – nor is one generally cognizant of the danger of misconstruction which it encourages. But at the moment we are concerned solely with the question of authorship. One will search in vain for such dubious prose in letters which are known to have been written personally by Shoghi Effendi.

The missing word “which” results in an ungrammatical sentence structure: the “is” of “is a totally different thing” is a copula, whereas the “is” of “is fixed at twenty-one” is a passive auxiliary. However commonplace it might be among native English speakers, this error is not characteristic of Shoghi Effendi. The missing comma transforms a parenthetical relative clause into a modifying one, thereby distorting the meaning: as it stands, there must exist at least one additional scale which is *not* “a totally different thing”. And finally, the superfluous comma is an example of punctuation in accordance with sentence rhythm instead of grammatical function: most likely an indication that the originator of the sentence – in contrast to Shoghi Effendi – was not well versed or practiced in the formal rules of punctuation in English. With regard to the ungrammatical semicolon, it should be noted that the same passage in *Directives from the Guardian* features a colon instead. It is therefore not possible to ascertain whether the one version is an error on the part of the editor of the compilation, or the other version an editorial correction.

The total correctness of the third of these three excerpts stands in striking contrast to the overabundance of errors in vocabulary, diction, punctuation and syntax in the first two. One need not look far for the reason, which is to be found in the words “the Guardian strongly feels”. In this case it is a

matter which Shoghi Effendi considers to be relatively important – important enough to take the time, it would seem, to examine the formulation more carefully and to improve or re-write the text as necessary.

In consideration of the Guardian's precise, accurate and grammatically flawless English writing style, there is enough text-internal evidence to suggest that, in this letter of reply, we have to do with varying configurations of authorship: passages which the secretary had formulated largely autonomously and which Shoghi Effendi let through despite glaring language deficiency, alongside a passage which shows clear signs of the Guardian's collaboration. The situation with respect to the fourth excerpt from the letter of 15 May 1940, i.e. the passage which describes the New Year ruling, remains unclear. It has already been established that this passage consists partly of existing material, and this fact suggests the collaboration of the secretary. To what degree is this passage based on Shoghi Effendi's instructions, and to what degree was Shoghi Effendi actively involved in its composition?

There is a certain amount of text-internal evidence, both positive and negative, which speaks for an active participation on the part of Shoghi Effendi. The interpolated remark "as stated by Bahá'u'lláh" can for example be taken as positive evidence: since the source of the paragraph in which it occurs seems to be a paraphrase of a text which is not even from Bahá'u'lláh (note: this assumption will be reexamined later), it would have been alone the prerogative of Shoghi Effendi to decide if these words could be identified with Bahá'u'lláh himself. Conversely, there is negative evidence which also speaks for an active intervention on the part of the Guardian: namely, the absence of solecisms of the sort which were present with such prolific abandon in the first two of the excerpts examined above. However, this evidence presents another puzzle: If one assumes that Shoghi Effendi was involved in the formulation, then one is forced to ascribe the ultimate responsibility for the earlier discussed incongruencies in content to the Guardian. This attitude is problematic – not on account of the infallibility of the Guardian,³⁰ but simply because such lapses of communication are totally uncharacteristic of him. There must be other factors involved to explain why the text took the

form which it took, factors which cannot be discovered or imagined on the basis of text-internal clues.

Consideration of further excerpts from the letter of 15 May 1940 has led once again to new insights – not only about the scope of the letter in general, but also specifically with regard to the passage concerning the New Year regulation and the rôle Shoghi Effendi possibly played in its creation. Nevertheless, these new insights also bring with them new problems without really resolving the old ones. In particular, the extended textual context does not offer any help in the crucial matter of the interpretation of the sentence in which the spot is mentioned.

* * *

In addition to that remark concerning the comprehensiveness of the letter from the American National Spiritual Assembly, the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre provided me with a copy of the specific paragraph to which the passage in the letter of 15 May 1940 regarding the New Year ruling is the response. It reads:

The ... Chicago Assembly suggests that the NSA determine the correct date of Naw-Rúz astronomically and notify the believers in advance, to prevent confusion. The Egyptian statement declares that Naw-Rúz begins when the sun enters the sign of Aries, and the reckoning of the beginning of spring is made by the astronomical observatories for years in advance. The NSA could obtain the information from the Naval Observatory each year. However, the question is raised whether the determination of Naw-Rúz should come from the Bahá'í World Center.

This paragraph came as a complete surprise in every respect. It is not difficult to recognise that this text is totally unlike anything which had been possible to reconstruct on the basis of the textual clues in Shoghi Effendi's response alone. The text is in fact not an enquiry at all, but rather a suggestion. Only incidentally, and right at the very end, a last remaining question is aired – as if the dispensation of responsibility for the carrying out of the suggestion were open to discussion, but not the suggestion itself.

This text makes implicit but nonetheless unmistakable reference to the Gregorian calendar. Since Naw-Rúz always coincides with 1 Bahá',³¹ the date designation according to the Badí' calendar does not need to be determined. It follows that the expression "determine the correct date of Naw-Rúz" can, strictly speaking, only mean the date in some *other* calendar system; in the Western world that would be the Gregorian by default. Even if Shoghi Effendi suspected a slip of tongue — the enquirer perhaps really meant "day" and not "date" — he understandably responded to what was actually said.

The "Egyptian statement" mentioned in this suggestion is a document which had been compiled in the early thirties of the twentieth century by the National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt and the Sudan. (The historical — and historic — significance of this document, which has been described by Shoghi Effendi in detail,³² is not directly relevant to the current examination.) The original document was photographically reproduced in 1936 in *The Bahá'í World*,³³ followed in 1940 by a Persian-language translation.³⁴ This document, which is principally concerned with Bahá'í marriage and inheritance law, contains only one paragraph which deals with the calendar in any way (article 52). It is essentially a paraphrase of the divine law as explained in the Kitáb-i Aqdas.³⁵ The Arabic-language original reads:³⁶

tanqasimu's-sannatu'l-Bahá'íat ilá tis'at 'ashr shahran khiláfa'l-ayyámi'z-zá'idat wa tabtadi'u bi-dukhúli'sh-shams fí burji'l-ḥamal wa yakúnu ra'isu's-sannat huwa'l-yawmu'lladhí yaḥṣulu fíhi dhálíka'l-intiqál wa lau bi-daqíqat wáḥídat qabla'l-ghurúb.

The Bahá'í year is divided into nineteen months, leaving aside the days in excess, and it begins with the entry of the sun in the sign of Aries, commencing on the day during which the transition into Aries takes place, even if [this should happen] one minute before sunset. [my translation]

The American National Spiritual Assembly was in all probability in possession of the Persian-language translation, whose content is accurate, though somewhat awkwardly formulated.³⁷

sál behá'í beh núzdah máh taqsím míshavad. be-'alá ve-ye ayyám-e zá'edeh va ibtedá-ye an dochúl-e áftáb ast dar borj-e ḥamal keh mabdá'e sál gerefteh míshavad. va an-rúzist keh ín inteqál-e áftáb be-borj-e ḥamal šúrat gírad va lú yek dagígeh qabl az ghorúb báshad.

The “Book of Questions and Answers” (*ketáb-e su'ál va javáb*) is referred to frequently in the Egyptian statement, whose authors explicitly characterise this work, which is a supplementary part of the Most Holy Book,³⁸ as a primary source of information. In addition, the “one minute” clause is clearly based on the nearly identical wording from Bahá'u'lláh as it occurs in “Questions and Answers”, just as the expression *al-ayyámi'z-zá'idat* conforms to Bahá'u'lláh's wording in *Kitáb-i Aqdas* verse 16: thus article 52 of the Egyptian statement demonstrably represents a deliberate paraphrase of the divine law of the *Kitáb-i Aqdas*. It is therefore probable that the insertion “as stated by Bahá'u'lláh” in the first part of the letter of 1940 refers not to the text in *The Bahá'í World* based on Nabíl, but rather to article 52 of the Egyptian statement. One serious objection carried over from earlier readings is therewith eliminated.

It should be noted that the National Spiritual Assembly did not press Shoghi Effendi in any way for an explanation or statement with regard to the spot: the topic isn't even hinted at, neither in the wording of the enquiry itself nor in the Egyptian statement. This means among other things that the sentence “As to which spot should be regarded as the standard, this is a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to decide” in no way takes its cue from the preceding enquiry, but is, as it were, a voluntary disclosure: had Shoghi Effendi wished to avoid the topic of the spot, he would have been perfectly at liberty to have done so.

It is thus clear that Shoghi Effendi introduced the theme (i.e. the “matter of the spot”) for a reason of his own. For those who are already convinced that the spot is an inalienable component of the New Year determination and who moreover reject the efficacy of literary criticism, that reason is clear: Shoghi Effendi introduced the spot into the discussion simply because it is part and parcel of the future ruling. “There is no reason

whatever for even the slightest reassessment of the possible meaning of Shoghi Effendi's response in light of its newly expanded textual context", they will contend, adding: "It is undoubtedly interesting to know what the American National Spiritual Assembly was concerned about at that time, but for the understanding of Shoghi Effendi's text this knowledge is of no relevance: utterances of the Guardian conform to their own rationality, they stand for themselves, in no way dependent on the broader communicative context, self-sustaining and sovereign."

This attitude might well be valid to a degree in certain cases, such as the lengthier letters from Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'í world community. In the present case, however, it ignores certain inconsistencies which are not so easy to dismiss out of hand. Of the three parts of Shoghi Effendi's answer, only the third appears to have anything directly to do with the enquiry which preceded it, and even here our euphoria is held in bounds: one would normally expect that a suggestion, once made, would either be accepted or rejected; the summons to carry on as before is otiose. Other than that, the response doesn't appear to have any genuine points of contact at all with the letter from the National Spiritual Assembly. The Spiritual Assembly demonstrates acquaintance both with the astronomic circumstances and with the functioning of the ruling as presented in the Egyptian statement and incidentally also in the *Kitáb-i Aqdas*. The first part of Shoghi Effendi's answer thus addresses a question which was not asked at all, and indeed in a manner which presents the situation in a far less satisfactorily fashion than either the explanation in the Egyptian statement or the accompanying remarks from the National Spiritual Assembly. Similarly, the second part of the answer is concerned with a topic which was not touched upon at all in the enquiry. And once again, the motivation for this disclosure is not at all identifiable: a matter which is supposedly so central and without which the divine law is allegedly incomplete, and about which the Spiritual Assembly demonstrates no specific foreknowledge, is mentioned laconically, more or less in passing.

It is the case right down to the present day that the intended function of the spot is not unambiguously clear. In the notes

to the English-language edition of the Kitáb-i Aqdas, for example, it is described as “a particular spot on earth which will serve as the standard for the fixing of the time of the spring equinox”,³⁹ a formulation which suggests that it is to function as a parameter to a calculation, in apparent agreement with the underlying assumption of the National Spiritual Assembly in its letter of 1940. By contrast, in the German-language edition of the Kitáb-i Aqdas it is presented as “Messpunkt für die Feststellung der Frühjahrs-Tagundnachtgleiche”, that is, as the location at which the vernal equinox is to be determined, in a manner reminiscent of the historical Jaláli practice by which midday is defined as the moment at which the azimuth of the sun is 0° (due south) relative to an agreed point of observation. If this spot is really so indispensable, then Shoghi Effendi might at least have taken this opportunity to clarify how it was supposed to work, even if he was at pains to avoid preempting the nomination of a particular location.

* * *

But there is also another way of viewing Shoghi Effendi's reaction. One must bear in mind that, by suggesting that New Year's Day be determined on the basis of the actual point of Aries, the American Assembly was effectively requesting the immediate enactment of the divine law. There were valid reasons, which I will discuss presently, why this request was totally unacceptable. Instead of simply blocking the suggestion, however, the Guardian offered a precise, indeed a logically watertight explanation why, by all sympathy with the aspirations of the Spiritual Assembly and in full appreciation of its good intentions, he was not disposed to take up this suggestion. The three parts of Shoghi Effendi's response correspond namely to the three parts of a classical syllogism. That is not to say that Shoghi Effendi intentionally formulated his response in this manner. That may or may not be the case, but all that is being claimed here is that, in this reading, one can discern the line of reasoning which forms the basis of the Guardian's judgement and subsequently of his answer, and that this line of reasoning can be best illustrated in the form of a syllogism, which in its turn can be mapped onto the structure of the answer.

Syllogisms consist of nothing more or less than normal, healthy common sense, albeit painstakingly structured. A syllogism comprises three propositions: two premises (roughly, “contentions”) and a logical conclusion. The first premise is typically a general statement and the second a particular one, but this arrangement is not mandatory. The integrity of the conclusion is dependent on the validity of the two premises, which for that reason must be meticulously substantiated. A premise is then considered substantiated if it is an empirical or axiomatic statement, or if it is itself the result – the logical conclusion – of a valid syllogism. A syllogistic argument is accordingly a potential hierarchy of syllogisms nested within one another, reaching theoretically so far into the depths of exposition until nothing remains other than axiomatic or empirical assertions. Normally, however, the chain of argument ends at the point at which the justification is acceptable to every rationally thinking being (thus avoiding not only unnecessary toil, but also the danger of infinite regress).

In the present case, the three parts of the passage from the letter of 1940 correspond to the three propositions of the syllogism: major term, minor term, conclusion. The first premise (the major term) consists of the paraphrase of the law as presented in the Kitáb-i Aqdas:

Regarding Naw-Rúz: if the vernal equinox falls on the 21st of March before sunset it is celebrated on that day. If at any time after sunset, Naw-Rúz will then, as stated by Bahá'u'lláh, fall on the 22nd.

The essence of this statement in terms of the syllogism is the fact that the occurrence of the day of Naw-Rúz is conditioned by two temporal events: the moment of the vernal equinox and the moment of sunset. In other words: these two factors together determine the definition of the expression “day of Naw-Rúz”. Whereas the term “vernal equinox” is well-defined, the meaning of the term “sunset”, in terms of the divine law, remains unresolved. Reduced to its essentials, therefore, the premise (major term) reads as follows:

The enactment of the divine law with regard to the determination of the day of Naw-Rúz presupposes an

unambiguous definition of the term “sunset” with respect to the law.

In accordance with this understanding, the statement contains everything which is necessary to convey the message. It is not in any way an attempt to inform the Assembly what the Gregorian equivalent to 1 Bahá’ might be; instead, it is an outline of the essential criteria for a procedure whose outcome is fully known, understood and agreed upon in principle by all parties concerned, with the intention of establishing a launching-point for the statements which follow. After all, it was hardly necessary for Shoghi Effendi to provide an elementary lesson in the features of the law: the text of the preceding suggestion (along with its extended context) amply demonstrated that the American National Spiritual Assembly was not in need of enlightenment in this respect. The example of the day of Naw-Rúz in connexion with 21 and 22 March served merely to illustrate the degree to which the determination of Naw-Rúz is conditioned by the properties of sunset.

In short: if we regard the purpose of this part of the passage from the letter of 1940 as a premise, and not as dissemination of information, then our irritation over the Gregorian reference and over the many undiscussed exceptions simply vaporises.

From this perspective, the interpolation “as stated by Bahá’u’lláh” — a clause whose justification has in the meantime been clarified — serves formally to substantiate the premise. Since a statement from Bahá’u’lláh automatically counts for Bahá’ís as axiomatic in terms of syllogistics, it would have been superfluous to pursue the formal substantiation of the major term any deeper.

The second premise (the minor term), which will be examined more closely below, consists of that statement which is of central concern in this presentation:

As to which spot should be regarded as the standard, this is a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to decide.

The conclusion (signalled by the word “therefore”), which follows logically from these two premises, reads:

The American National Spiritual Assembly need not therefore take any action in this matter at present.

The words “need not therefore take any action” represent in this reading a gentle way of insisting that the members of the National Spiritual Assembly abandon this project altogether, since it does not lie within the bounds of their administrative competence. Just how this follows logically from the two premises will become clear when we take a closer look at the minor term, i.e. the premise which mentions the spot.

There are two aspects of the second premise which demand closer scrutiny. The first has to do with the matter at hand:

As to which spot should be regarded as the standard ...

In order to comply with a methodology derived from the Iranian National Calendar, the term “sunset” would have to mean “sunset at a specific location on Earth”, a circumstance which would be thoroughly consistent with the requirement for the nomination of a particular spot to be regarded as the standard. As we have seen, the historically conditioned assumption that the Badí' calendar is to follow Jalálí practice in this respect explains the preoccupation with the spot. But it so happens that the revealed law could also be interpreted in a manner which in fact does *not* require a specific reference spot⁴⁰. This fact in itself renders the concept of “sunset” in terms of the law ambiguous, over and above the question of its exact location. In other words, authoritatively establishing that the resolution of the issue of the spot is directly connected with the definition of sunset does not imply by extension that the use of a spot is prescribed. Uncontestable is alone the fact that, in connexion with the concept of sunset, there is need for clarification with regard to the spot.

The second aspect has to do with the question of competence:

... this is a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to decide.

In contrast to the major term, Shoghi Effendi does not offer an explicit substantiation. Nonetheless this premise is well-

founded, a fact which can be amply demonstrated in the form of a nested syllogism whose propositions are as follows:

major term: All matters which are not expressly recorded in scripture must be referred to the Universal House of Justice.

minor term: The spot is a matter which is not expressly recorded in scripture.

conclusion: Any decision with respect to the matter of the spot must be taken by the Universal House of Justice.

In accordance with this understanding of the text, the thematic intonation does not fall on the word “decide”, but instead on the phrase “the Universal House of Justice”:

As to which spot should be regarded as the standard, this is a matter which the *Universal House of Justice* [and no-one else] will have to decide.

The substantiation of the major term of this inner syllogism is to be found as before in the documented tenets of the Faith – in this case in the Lesser Covenant, which specifies that authoritative interpretation of scripture is vested exclusively in the Guardianship:

*... it is incumbent upon the Aghsan, the Afnan of the Sacred Lote-Tree, the Hands of the Cause of God and the loved ones of the Abha Beauty to turn unto Shoghi Effendi ... the Guardian of the Cause of God ... He is the Interpreter of the Word of God ...*⁴¹

– whereas every matter which is not expressly mentioned in the writings is “a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to decide”, or as it is explained in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament,

*Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice.*⁴²

Shoghi Effendi took great pains to maintain this strict division of domains of competence between the Guardianship and the House of Justice, and he states unequivocally

... that the Guardian of the Faith has been made the Interpreter of the Word and that the Universal House of Justice has been invested with the function of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the teachings. The interpretation of the Guardian, functioning within his own sphere, is as authoritative and binding as the enactments of the International House of Justice, whose exclusive right and prerogative is to pronounce upon and deliver the final judgment on such laws and ordinances as Bahá'u'lláh has not expressly revealed. Neither can, nor will ever, infringe upon the sacred and prescribed domain of the other. Neither will seek to curtail the specific and undoubted authority with which both have been divinely invested.⁴³

Had Shoghi Effendi, in his authoritative understanding of scripture, been of the opinion that the spot was an express part of the writings – and that would mean that he understood “Questions and Answers” no. 35 in the same fashion as Nabíl apparently did – then the matter would clearly lie in his own area of responsibility. In that case he might still have postponed a decision indefinitely, perhaps delegating it to one or another of his successors in office, but expressly *not* to the House of Justice. Otherwise – that is, in the event that Shoghi Effendi were of the opinion that the revealed word is silent with regard to the spot – then he or any other Guardian of the Cause of God would be excluded from clarifying this matter, since he would otherwise “infringe upon the sacred and prescribed domain” of the Universal House of Justice and thereby “curtail the specific and undoubted authority” with which that body had been “divinely invested”. Given this reading of the text, Shoghi Effendi leaves no room for doubt that he holds this second opinion. His conclusion is explicit, unambiguous and compulsory: “This is a matter that the Universal House of Justice will have to decide.”

There are certainly many examples of interim decisions taken by Shoghi Effendi in matters over which the writings remain silent but which, for purely operative reasons, couldn't wait until the Universal House of Justice had been established (for example, the modalities for the election of the initial members of this body), but only in cases where subsequent alteration by the House would be practicable. In the case of the spot, a later revision of an interim decision would have been virtually impossible, since it would involve the abrogation of an already consummated calendar reform. For this reason, a possible interim decision from the Guardian regarding the spot did not come into consideration.

* * *

Everyone must decide for himself whether Shoghi Effendi is here pursuing a logical line of argument, or whether the above discourse is baseless and suggestive. From the point of view of literary criticism, however, it can be observed that, in light of the deliberations above, this reading of Shoghi Effendi's remarks represents in every respect an appropriate response to the passage from the letter of the American National Spiritual Assembly:

- *Inner cohesion*: As carriers of the three propositions of an implicit syllogism, the three parts of the answer are tightly interrelated both structurally and from the point of view of content.
- *Outer cohesion*: This reading is in accord with the writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, on the condition that one abandon the assumption of a direct dependence on the properties of the Iranian National Calendar. Furthermore, this reading is supported by the conditions of the Lesser Covenant.
- *External cohesion*: No form of discourse fulfils the criteria of reason better than the syllogistic argumentation which forms the basis of this reading. Moreover, the scientifically backed astronomic circumstances play a contributing rôle to the extent that they are assumed as necessary background. And finally, this reading is in conformity with the

documented, though not ultimately provable, origin of the consensus opinion regarding the spot.

- *Relevance*: The main issue of both the suggestion of the National Spiritual Assembly and of Shoghi Effendi's response according to this reading is the enactment of the divine law regarding the calendar.
- *Commensurability*: The suggestion of the National Spiritual Assembly ends with a query concerning the administrative responsibility for its implementation. This question is answered.
- *Completeness*: No request for information, clarification or instruction contained in the preceding suggestion by the Spiritual Assembly is left unanswered.
- *Motivation*: All aspects of the response according to this reading are motivated either by the circumstances involved or by the extended textual context, right down to the finest details of choice of words:
 1. the repeated mention of sunset;
 2. the interpolation "as stated by Bahá'u'lláh";
 3. the well-considered inclusion of the word "matter";
 4. the indication of compulsion through "will have to"; and
 5. the use of "therefore" to introduce the logical conclusion.

In addition, the use of Gregorian calendar dates is motivated, admittedly not directly (or better, probably not intentionally) by the preceding suggestion, but nevertheless indirectly, as a result of the preparatory researches on the part of Shoghi Effendi's secretary, who had adopted a passing response from already available materials.

- *Terminological parallelism*: The terms used, as understood in this reading, orient themselves directly on the terms used in the preceding suggestion, along

with those which occur in the Egyptian statement which it mentions. As counterbalance to the suggestion's persistent concentration on the equinox, the response explicitly makes the sunset its central theme.

- *Symmetry*: By virtue of the fact that both the preceding enquiry and the response to it are objective examinations of the conditions surrounding the enactment of a specific aspect of divine law, the response totally reflects the nature of the enquiry.
- *Language and knowledge level*: This reading assumes basic knowledge of the details of the law in the Kitáb-i Aqdas and of the astronomic circumstances involved; that both assumptions are justified is evident from the content of the preceding enquiry. Moreover, it must be considered reasonable for Shoghi Effendi to assume acquaintance with the stipulations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Testament from the members of a National Spiritual Assembly.

Alone the fact that, of all possible readings, this particular one is the demonstrably most appropriate reaction to the preceding enquiry from the National Spiritual Assembly does not mean that it is the objectively correct reading; it merely means that it best satisfies the criteria of literary criticism. To what degree this observation is to be taken into consideration is a decision which must ultimately be taken by that organ which will one day be responsible for the enactment of the divine law: the Universal House of Justice.

* * *

Let us now return to the ambiguity noted at the very beginning of this examination, that is, the question whether Shoghi Effendi is referring to the whole issue of the spot, or simply to the question of its location. Everything said so far with regard to this reading of the passage of the 1940 letter appears to apply equally to both alternatives. However, in light of what we have in the meantime learned concerning the extended context of this passage, the question can now be reformulated: What does "Questions and Answers" no. 35 tell

us about the spot? If we assume (as Nabíl apparently did) that the Badí' New Year ruling differs from the Jalálí ruling only where expressly stated, then we would have to interpret Bahá'u'lláh's silence as endorsement both for the use of a spot *and* for its traditional location in Teheran, being presumably some specific vantage point within the confines of the royal precinct. At the very most the Universal House of Justice might be free to select a specific location in the immediate vicinity to serve as the spot – say, the site of the birthplace or later residence of Bahá'u'lláh – in order to redefine its symbolic significance without measurably altering its effect. If this had been his understanding we would expect that, at some point in his ministry, Shoghi Effendi would have made this restriction clear. For example, in his letter of 15 May 1940 he might quite easily have written

As to which spot in Teheran should be regarded as the standard ...

But instead, the Guardian left the decision of the location (if that is what his remarks imply) entirely up to the Universal House of Justice. That would be in conformity with the divine law only if we understood Bahá'u'lláh's silence to imply that the Jalálí spot prototype holds in principle but not in practice. However, we would then be obliged to identify some text-related criterion which justifies our making such a distinction: some criterion, that is, other than the fact that this particular reading satisfies the expectation which was placed on the text in the first place.⁴⁴ What is more, we would have to ask ourselves why Shoghi Effendi should deliberately have elected to generalise the issue by characterising the spot as a “matter”, thus incurring the risk that this binding interpretation of the divine ruling might be understood differently – not only by some individual pursuing literary criticism, but potentially also by the then future Universal House of Justice.

Again, it is not possible here to conclude which reading is ultimately correct; that will only become clear after the Universal House of Justice has issued enactment legislation with respect to the calendar law. But in anticipation of such legislation it is legitimate to consider the material – including the testimony of Bahá'u'lláh – from a literary-critical point of

view in order to help establish which readings best comply with objective hermeneutic criteria.

In summary: When seen as a reasoned rejection of the plan advocated by the American National Spiritual Assembly to activate this aspect of divine law, Shoghi Effendi's reply appears to confirm that no scriptural basis exists – also and in particular no ruling on the part of the Guardian – in support of the assumed indispensability of the spot: almost exactly the opposite of what is generally interpreted into this text passage.

Conclusion

Every text has both an internal and an external context on which the reliability of its interpretation is causally dependent. Aside from its explicit content it has an origin, a purpose, an evolutionary history, an intended readership. Its author pursues a goal, represents interests, draws upon his own knowledge and perspective, advances a point of view, presents his own opinion, selects according to circumstances what to say and what not to say. A number of these factors can be easily recognised on the basis of text-internal clues, provided that the text is of sufficient size; one or more of them might even be explicitly addressed by the author himself.

The briefer the text, the more meagre the internal textual context, and thus the greater the possibility of a misreading. The external context, which in the case of a passage extracted from a letter means the entire sequence of correspondence of which it is a part, thus becomes all the more important. This context is missing entirely in the available compilations of letters from Shoghi Effendi – and yet the usefulness of such compilations lies precisely in their extensive breadth of theme, which in turn is only possible because the individual entries are kept extremely brief. In other words, compilations are problematic not by virtue of their quality, but by their very nature. In any case, the pursuit of literary criticism in a methodologically sound and systematic manner is not practicable on the basis of such compilations alone.

This presentation has made use of many of the tools of literary criticism, if not in all facets exhaustively: the

application of the methods of historical, linguistic, literary/stylistic, tradition and genre criticism has led to deeper insights into the text under analysis. But it will not be sufficient in the long run for the Bahá'í community simply to adopt existing tools of literary criticism "uncritically". Rather, the task is to examine these as a basis for the development of a specific Bahá'í methodology which acknowledges and reflects the unique quality of Bahá'í writings. In no religious community before have primary documents been preserved with such authenticity and in such plenitude as they have been in the Bábí-Bahá'í revelations; bible critics, for example, cannot even venture to dream of such felicitous circumstances. And yet it is precisely this quality which exposes literary criticism to fresh challenges which demand the development of new departures for analysis. In this presentation, for example, mention has been made repeatedly of the heterogeneous cooperation which apparently existed between Shoghi Effendi and his secretaries in the course of the composition of individual letters. This working relationship could be a central key to questions not only of interpretation, but also of authenticity.

The methodology of literary criticism is principally the same whether it is pursued in the service of one's own personal investigation of religious content or conducted as preliminary analysis in the forefront of authoritative decision-making. Since it aids in the search for, but brackets out the question of, ultimate truth, literary criticism as I see it is a legitimate field of activity for Bahá'í researchers who wish to make a significant contribution to the formation of opinion regarding the substance of Bahá'í belief without thereby encroaching upon the areas of competence of those institutions – the Guardianship and the House of Justice – which are authorised to make binding pronouncements in the name of the Faith.

NOTES

- 1 This is an abridged version of my paper entitled *Textzusammenhang und Kritik: Ein Fallbeispiel anhand eines Briefes von Shoghi Effendi* presented at the 'Irfán Colloquium held in Tambach, Germany on 19 - 22 July 2007 and printed in *'Irfán-Studien zum Bahá'í-Schrifttum: Beiträge des 'Irfán-Kolloquiums 2007/2008*, Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag 2009. Translated by the author.
- 2 Hornby, Helen (ed.), *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File Part I*, New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1988.
- 3 *Directives from the Guardian*, India/Hawaii 1973.
- 4 This presentation is not concerned with the assessment of the degree to which individual excerpts from letters are binding on the recipients of the letters or on the Bahá'í community as a whole. Furthermore, questions of author attribution, i.e. of the authorship of Shoghi Effendi and/or that of his secretary or secretaries, will be addressed only when the discourse requires.
- 5 *Directives from the Guardian* no. 76, p. 30; also *Lights of Guidance* no. 1027, p. 302.
- 6 Keil, Gerald, *Time and the Bahá'í Era. A study of the Badí' Calendar*, Oxford: George Ronald Press 2008, pp. 127-180.
- 7 In contrast to advocates of deconstructionism (for a critical examination of the deconstructivist viewpoint see McLean, Jack, "Literary Criticism, Theology und Deconstructionism", <http://mclean.titles.googlepages.com/LiteraryCriticismTheologyandDeconstr.htm>) I make a plea not for the exclusion of the question of truth content (i.e. the rejection of its validity as an attribute of meaning), but merely for its suspension, for the application of literary criticism as a "safeguard against closures of meaning" (McLean p. 12), in conformity with the Bahá'í principle of discrimination between free expression of opinion (here in the sense of opinion potential) and authoritative interpretation of the teachings.
- 8 See for example Hatcher, John S., "The Validity and Value of an Historical-Critical Approach to the Revealed Works of Bahá'u'lláh", Momen, M. (ed.), *Scripture and Revelation*, Bahá'í-Studies Volume III, Oxford: George Ronald 1997, pp. 27-52; Stockman, Robert H., "Revelation, Interpretation and Elucidation in the Bahá'í Writings", *op.cit.* pp. 53-68; Lewis, Franklin, "Scripture as Literature. Sifting Through the Layers of the Text", in: *Bahá'í Studies Review* vol. 7, 1997; and more recently, McLean, J., "The Art of Rhetoric in the Writings of Shoghi Effendi", in: Iraj Ayman, ed., *Lights of 'Irfán – Papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars, Book Eight*, Evanston: Bahá'í National Center 2007, pp. 203-256.

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- 9 At the latest since [the events leading up to] the publication of *Modernity and the Millennium* by Juan R. I. Cole (New York: Columbia University Press 1998) and the preparation of the text compilation entitled *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith: Extracts from Letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1999), especially the letter of 8 February 1998 (pp. 37-44), the employment of historical-critical methodology in the study of the writings has been the topic of a continuous debate among a number of Bahá'í writers reaching into the present time: the latest significant comment (at the time of this writing) can be found in Schaefer, Udo, *Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: George Ronald 2007), Appendix, Section IV, "The Freedom of Historical Research". This debate has dominated the examination of literary criticism, with the result that consideration of other aspects has been for the most part overlooked.
- 10 For a – critical – examination of the findings of newer Bible criticism see for example Ratzinger, Joseph (Papst Benedikt XVI), *Jesus von Nazareth*, Freiburg: Herder Verlag 2 2007 (or its English-language equivalent).
- 11 For an analysis of the application of this principle in the framework of the understanding of Bahá'í law see Tober, Gilan, "Ein eindeutiger Wortlaut als Auslegungshindernis? Zur Interpretation normativer Bahá'í-Texte", in: *Schriftreihe der Gesellschaft für Bahá'í-Studien* Band 7, Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag 2003, pp. 95-128.
- 12 Cf. Gollmer, Ulrich, "Der Geringere Frieden: Göttliches Heilsangebot in Säkularer Gestalt", in: *Beiträge des 'Irfán-Kolloquiums 2005*, Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag 2006, p. 132.
- 13 Keil, Gerald, *Die Zeit im Bahá'í-Zeitalter: Eine Studie über den Badí'-Kalender*. Sonderband der Schriftreihe der Gesellschaft für Bahá'í-Studien für das deutschsprachige Europa, Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag 2005.
- 14 Kindly made available to me by the late Dr. Badí'u'lláh Panáhi (my transcription).
- 15 Momen, M. (ed.), *Selections from the Writings of E.G.Browne on the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, Oxford: George Ronald Press 1987, "A Summary of the Persian Bayan", Wáhid VI, Chapter 14.
- 16 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitábu'l-Aqdas*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre 1995, Risálíh (Su'ál va Javáb) no. 35 (my transcription).
- 17 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre 1992, "Questions and Answers" no. 35, p. 118.
- 18 For the purposes of the Jalálí calendar, it would seem (though sources are not in unanimous agreement) that midday is nowadays defined as 12:00 true solar time calculated on the basis of the reference longitude for Iran Standard Time (52°30'E). At the time of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, however, it was most probably still determined by

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- observation, i.e. the moment when the sun stood due south (azimuth 0°) relative to that longitude which passed through a particular reference location in Teheran (approx. 51°25'30"E, or roughly four minutes and eighteen seconds earlier).
- 19 Nabil-i A'zam, *Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, part 2 (unpublished). Text kindly made available to me by the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa (my transcription).
- 20 *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, note 26, p. 177.
- 21 In his review of Hatcher, John S., *The Ocean of His Words. A reader's Guide to the Art of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1997), Sen McGlinn stresses, in an impressive manner, the importance of the detachment of the literary-critical inspection of a text from extraneous expectations, especially in the sections "Subjectivism" and "Docetism" (*Bahá'í Studies Review* vol. 9, 1999-2000).
- 22 See *Time and the Bahá'í Era*, pp. 161-163.
- 23 Memorandum of 18. April 2001 from the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa to the present writer.
- 24 Communication of 31 July 2006 from the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre to the present writer.
- 25 A parallel search in *Directives from the Guardian* is ruled out on account of that work's lack of source references.
- 26 *Lights of Guidance* no. 194, p. 55.
- 27 *Lights of Guidance* no. 515, p. 154.
- 28 *Lights of Guidance* no. 1623, p. 486.
- 29 Excerpt from a letter of 25 February 1951 written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, quoted in a Memorandum of 12 January 2006 to an individual believer from the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre, reprinted in: Iraj Ayman, ed., *Lights of 'Irfán – Papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars, Book Eight*, Evanston: Bahá'í National Center 2007, p. 398. Remarks about the relative authority of such texts have been omitted, since this issue does not concern us here.
- 30 The ramifications of the infallibility conferred upon the Guardian of the Cause by virtue of the Lesser Covenant are certainly of relevance with regard to the status of Shoghi Effendi's communications, but they do not contribute to the literary-critical analysis of them.
- 31 *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* verse 111, p. 60.
- 32 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1974, p. 370. I am indebted to the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre for pointing this out to me.
- 33 *The Bahá'í World*, vol. VI (1934-1936), pp. 363 - 379.
- 34 *The Bahá'í World*, vol. VIII (1938-1940), pp. 493 - 499, as well as vols. IX und X.

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- 35 *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* verse 16, pp. 24-25; verse 127, p. 64; "Questions and Answers" no. 35, p. 118.
- 36 Facsimile reproduction in *The Bahá'í World* (my transcription). Note that the Arabic *tá' marbút&at* (i.e. the feminine ending) is here rendered uniformly as *at*, whether medially (rather than *-at-*) or finally (rather than *-a*, *-ah* or occasionally *-at*).
- 37 Facsimile reproduction in *The Bahá'í World* (my transcription).
- It is also conceivable that the American National Spiritual Assembly was in possession of a copy of an English-language translation completed in India in 1939: cf. the letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi on 26 November 1939 to the National Spiritual Assembly of India: "The copy of the English translation of the compilation on 'Bahá'í Laws on Matters of Personal Status' which you had submitted for the Guardian's consideration has safely reached him, and while he does not advise that your Assembly should proceed with the publication of the English text at present, he has no objection to its being translated and published in Urdu and Burmese. As to the Iranian translation of the same; the friends in Iran have already completed this work, and the Guardian would therefore advise that you consult the Iranian National Spiritual Assembly on the subject before deciding to publish the text of the Iranian translation." Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Indian Subcontinent 1923-1957*, New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1995, p. 183.
- 38 *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Introduction, p. 9.
- 39 *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, note 26, p. 177.
- 40 See *Time and the Bahá'í Era*, pp. 164-171.
- 41 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Will and Testament* part I: 17, p. 11.
- 42 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Will and Testament* part II: 8, p. 19.
- 43 Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1974 (reprinted 1980), p. 150.
- 44 I make reference once again to my remarks in note 21.

The Path of God

Declaration Towards a Global Ethic and the Bahá'í Faith

Wolfgang A. Klebel

Introduction

The question “What is religion?” can be answered in many ways. As the title of this paper indicates, religion is seen here as a path, as a way, as a special way of life, i.e., the “good life”. It will be shown that the concept of religion as a path is embodied in all religions and is almost the only concept that describes all of the world religions today. Even Buddhism, which does not have a conceptual understanding of God, is above all described as “The Eightfold Path.”

The philosophical discipline describing the good life is Ethics, which follows the concepts of Aristotle who begins his treatise on ethics with the words: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”¹

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, in 1943, when describing the “three embryonic Bahá'í educational institutions in the North American continent,” mentions “courses on Bahá'í ethics” and “lectures on Comparative Religion.” (GPB 340) Combining these two lines of inquiry, this paper attempts to describe the ethical implications of the “Path of God” in the search for the unifying principle of the major world religions. Such a study of comparative religion could be

the point of departure on the path towards the unity of all religions, which is a major principle of the Bahá'í Faith.

The recent "Declaration Towards a Global Ethic"² indicates Ethic, as described above, may in this time and evolutionary setting be seen as a unifying principle of all religions. This Declaration (henceforth abbreviated DGE) is based on the conviction that the basis for such a global ethic already exists in the teaching of all religions, as follows:

We affirm that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of the religions and that these form the basis of a global ethic. (DGE 14)

In the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly expressed that the basis of ethics, that is, morals and conduct, is the teaching of the Religions of God:

... the fundamental principles of the Religion of God, which are morals and conduct ... (SAQ 53)

He further reminds us that religion is not belief and customs, but rather God's teachings, which constitute the very life of humankind:

Religion, moreover, is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs; religion is the teachings of the Lord God, teachings, which constitute the very life of humankind, which urge high thoughts upon the mind, refine the character, and lay the groundwork for man's everlasting honour. (SWAB 53)

In the following passage Bahá'u'lláh not only said that man is like a mine of hidden treasures, which has to be discovered through education, but also encourages the learned and worldly-wise men of this age to discover these values and bring true liberty and undisturbed peace to humankind.

The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom. ...

If the learned and worldly-wise men of this age were to allow mankind to inhale the fragrance of fellowship and

love, every understanding heart would apprehend the meaning of true liberty, and discover the secret of undisturbed peace and absolute composure. (GWB 259)

The first meeting of the Parliament of Religions convening in Chicago in 1893, a year after the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, can well be described as a meeting “*of learned and worldly-wise men of this age.*” Hundred years later in 1993 the Parliament of Religions convened in Chicago again, and these learned men and women of many religions accepted the “Declaration Towards a Global Ethic,” which was signed by members of the assembled religious groups. Representatives of the Bahá'í Faith participated in the hosting committee of the meeting, and they were alphabetically the first to sign the declaration.

Shoghi Effendi, in his book *God Passes By*, described the original meeting of the Parliament of Religions and stated that, in this very meeting, the first mention of the Bahá'í Faith in America was made. He referred to the Rev. George A. Ford of Syria, who had mentioned Bahá'u'lláh.³ One year later, the Bahá'í Faith was establishing a strong foothold in the city of Chicago, the city of that very Parliament. This is how the Shoghi Effendi describes this event:

It was on September 23, 1893, a little over a year after Bahá'u'lláh's ascension, that, in a paper written by Rev. Henry H. Jessup, D.D., Director of Presbyterian Missionary Operations in North Syria, and read by Rev. George A. Ford of Syria, at the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago, in connection with the Columbian Exposition, commemorating the four-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America, it was announced that “a famous Persian Sage,” “the Bábí Saint,” had died recently in 'Akká, and that two years previous to His ascension “a Cambridge scholar” had visited Him, to whom He had expressed “sentiments so noble, so Christ-like” that the author of the paper, in his “closing words,” wished to share them with his audience. (GPB 256)

Shoghi Effendi continues to describe that soon after this announcement the Bahá'í Faith found its first believers in Chicago:

Less than a year later, in February 1894, a Syrian doctor, named Ibrahim Khayru'llah⁴, who, while residing in Cairo, had been converted by Haji Abdu'l-Karim-i-Tihriani to the Faith, had received a Tablet from Bahá'u'lláh, had communicated with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and reached New York in December 1892, established his residence in Chicago, and began to teach actively and systematically the Cause he had espoused. (GPB 256)

Can it not be said that the Parliament of Religion convening in Chicago, unknowingly followed direction, given by Bahá'u'lláh to humankind, which makes it incumbent on everyone to consort with *followers of all religions*, i.e., with each other, *in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship?*

It is incumbent upon every man, in this Day, to hold fast unto whatsoever will promote the interests, and exalt the station, of all nations and just governments. Through each and every one of the verses which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed, the doors of love and unity have been unlocked and flung open to the face of men. We have erewhile declared – and Our Word is the truth – “Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.” (GWB 94)

In this paper the global ethic will be compared with the Bahá'í Faith. This comparison was suggested by the commentary of the German theologian Hans Küng, who prepared the text of the 'Declaration Towards a Global Ethic' in 1993 for the Parliament of the World's Religions. Hans Küng, a Catholic theologian, was one of a group of progressive theologians at the Vatican Council II in 1962.⁵

The relationship of the Bahá'í Faith with the idea of a global ethic is expressed in the following statement:

The central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's message is that humanity is one single race and that the day has come for humanity's unification into one global society.

While reaffirming the core ethical principles common to all religions, Bahá'u'lláh also revealed new laws and teachings to lay the foundations of a global

civilization. “A new life,” Bahá’u’lláh declared, “is, in this age, stirring within all the peoples of the earth.”⁶

As much as possible, the continuous development of the world’s religions and the growing understanding of the Bahá’í Faith must be taken into account. The hope is expressed that this development will lead towards an increasing familiarity between the religions and will eventually lead towards the unity of all religions, understood in a new way. Any attempt thus far at religious unity, even at the level of agreement within the various branches of existing religions, has been an unreachable goal. Therefore a new vision of unity is imperative.

Global ethic is described by Küng as “a fundamental consensus concerning binding values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitudes.” Küng further insists “There can be no better global order without a global ethic” and states that “global ethic means neither a global ideology, nor a single unified global religion transcending all existing religions, nor a mixture of all religions.” (DGE 14)

The Bahá’í Faith talks about the unity of all religion in a different way, neither proposing a unified global ideology or religion, nor a mixture of all religions, but putting forward a new appreciation for the underlying unity of all religions, as will be described below. Once this underlying unity of all religions is understood, a new concept of unity will have to develop. This unity of the religions cannot be clearly envisioned today, but can best be described as “Unity in Diversity”.

The Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, Shoghi Effendi, seemed to indicate that a genuine appreciation of the new concept of unity is not reached at this point but is being instilled in the adherents of the Bahá’í Faith.

Far from wishing to add to the number of the religious systems, whose conflicting loyalties have for so many generations disturbed the peace of mankind, this Faith is instilling into each of its adherents a new love for, and a genuine appreciation of the unity underlying, the various religions represented within its pale. (WOB 196)

It can be expected that it will take time before this understanding is spread out into the followers of other

religions. This means that this understanding of unity will take time to become functional as a uniting principle, acceptable to all religions. Consequently, only after this understanding becomes accepted can real unity follow, and it is not possible today to describe the form it will take.

It could be stated that this appreciation of the underlying unity of various religions was expressed in the “Declaration Towards a Global Ethic” as a unity in the area of ethics. As a matter of fact, it is the contention of this paper to demonstrate that the area of ethics is the point from where such an appreciation can best be launched. In other words, the unity of religion is inaugurated by the unity of the ethical principles of all religions, i.e., by a global ethic. This foundational unity between all religions is best described as a unity in diversity, as the ethical elements of all religions are not uniform, but are diverse. Yet, these principles are confluent with each other; they form a bridge between the diverse religions. The term confluence has been described with the dictionary as “a meeting or joining of two or more things, or the place where two or more things meet or join.”

Could it not be said, that true followers of all religions are more alike to each other in their ethical behavior, when compared to superficial and external followers of their own religion? In other words, the difference between the adherents of any single religion could well be greater than the difference between the followers of all religions who take the ethical principles of their religion seriously and follow the “straight path.”

The need for a joining of religions becomes especially obvious when considering today’s opposing forces, such as atheism, materialism, fanaticism and the widespread ethic of hedonism, which are all threatening the religions, especially and practically in their ethical principles,.

Bahá’u’lláh sees *the Faith of God* expressed in all of God’s Religions, which He here calls “*Faith of God and His Religion*”:

The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and

promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men. (TB 168)

Again, what could be a better beginning for “*the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men*” than an agreement over a common and global ethic, especially if we understand ethics not only as the moral guidelines for a just and correct life but as a way, or a path towards a good, happy and fulfilled life? In a similar way the Wikipedia notes about ethics that besides its moral aspect, “a central aspect of ethics is the good life, the life worth living.” In the following sections of this paper this aspect of ethics and the distinctive and special contribution of the Bahá’í Faith in this area will be explored.

Religion, the Path of God

When talking about the world’s religions, the question has to be raised: What is Religion? Is it the administration and the ministers of churches, is it their dogmas and creeds, is it the Holy Scriptures, or is it their liturgy and rituals? What in the whole range of experiences, customs and consideration that are connected with religion is the crucial issue that describes and defines what people call religion? We all know that religion deals with God, or the “numinous”, even though there is at least one religion, Buddhism that does not talk about God.

There is one concept that is usually overlooked which seems to be common to all religions. It is the word “Path” or the synonym “Way”, words which are combined in the English word “Pathway.” This word describes a central concept of religion, which is not a philosophical, moral or legal aspect, but describes what religion actually does: it gives any human individual, any human group or organization: from the village to the state, to all of humankind – a path, a way for a good life, a life worth living, a life that is valuable and leads to God.

Religions derive this way of life from their specific sources, that is, from the revelation and the example of their founder Prophets, but all agree that the emphasis is on the path, rather than the accompanying circumstances, rules, regulations and definitions. Buddhism as a religion occupies a special place among all the religions because it is only concerned with the

path and does not talk much about anything else that is usually connected with the idea of religion. It does not even have an idea or description of God, but still is clearly accepted as a major world religion.

When describing religion as a path, something different is expressed than the usual understanding of religion as church membership or adherence to certain beliefs like creed, dogmas or church laws. The path is not a concept of sociology, law or order, it is not an idea usually used in theology, but it could be best described as the actual living religion in an ethical way. In other words, ethic is describing conceptually the path a religious person, group or church is supposed to take. In this paper, therefore, the words path or way are used in the context of ethic, or ethical prescriptions and encouragements or behavior towards the religious life. When talking about ethic in the Global Ethic document, ethic is described as common values, standards or attitudes, which lead to a specific way of life, a specific path making life meaningful, good and worth living for the individual and communities.

The Path of God in Religious Scriptures

How do the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh describe religion? For a believer in the reality of the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God, Their writings are believed to be the Word of God made manifest by the Prophet. In the verse below, revealed by the Báb, first God speaks about what He has done for the Báb and then God defines His religion, which the Báb is to present to the world as none other than *this glorious and exalted Path*. Even for an unbeliever or historian, this verse expresses the idea the Báb had about His religion.

I have called Thee into being, have nurtured Thee, protected Thee, loved Thee, raised Thee up and have graciously chosen Thee to be the manifestation of Mine Own Self, that Thou mayest recite My verses as ordained by Me, and may summon whomsoever I have created unto My Religion which is none other than this glorious and exalted Path. (SWB 158)

Bahá'u'lláh has affirmed similarly that the sole purpose of religion as manifested by the Prophets of God is to guide mankind to the Path of God, or the straight Path of Truth:

The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth. (GWB 156-157)

Jesus had described Himself as the way, or the path unto the Father, when He said: (John 14:6)

I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

Bahá'u'lláh uses similar words in describing Himself:

I, verily, am the Path of God unto all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth; well is it with them that hasten thereunto! (SLH 3)

As will be explained next, this is said in a tradition that includes all major religions which are defined with the same word, the Path or the Way of God.

Religion as Path, or Way of God

A few examples from some of the world's religions are cited below to clarify that the terms "Path" or "Way" are apt; in fact, they are often the preferred terms in which the world's different religious Scriptures describe their reality. These terms are not only common expressions; they seem to be the fundamental and most universal descriptions of religion in all of these Holy Writings.

Zoroaster

(Zend-Avesta, Avesta – Yasna) has several mentions of the path and "*the path of Good Thought,*" of "*Righteousness,*" or "*Blessedness,*" which talks about:

... making straight the paths for the Religion of the future Deliverer

This path is the best, is shining, and all glorious:

Grant to us both the desire of, and the knowledge of that straightest path, the straightest because of Righteousness, and of (Heaven) the best life of the Saints, shining, all glorious.

Lord Krishna

He recommends the fair path leading to heaven:

O Indian Prince! of him whose feet are set On that fair path which leads to heavenly birth! (Hindu, Bhagavad Gita)

There are many places in the Hindu Scriptures where the path of God is mentioned like the following:

Agni, lead us on to wealth (beatitude) by a good path, thou, O God, who knowest all things! Keep far from us crooked evil, and we shall offer thee the fullest praise! (Upanishads vol. 1, Vagasaneyi-Samhita-Upanishad 18)

Lord Buddha

The Religion of Lord Buddha (The Word, The Eightfold Path) consists almost exclusively in describing the Path, not talking about God or other issues:

It is the Noble Eightfold Path, the way that leads to the extinction of suffering.

Moses, the servant of God

From the Books of Moses (Exodus 18:19-20)

Hearken now unto my voice, I will give thee counsel, and God shall be with thee: Be thou for the people to God-ward, that thou mayest bring the causes unto God: And thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, and shalt shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do.

Abraham in the book of Genesis (18:19) speaking of way of the Lord:

For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

King David in the book of Psalms (16:11)

Thou makest me to know the path of life; in Thy presence is fullness of joy, in Thy right hand bliss for evermore.

The Prophet Isaiah (48:17):

I am the LORD thy God which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go

Lord Jesus, the Christ

In the Gospels of Luke (3:3-4) John the Baptist prepares the way of the Lord which is the straight path:

And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

In the Gospel according to John (14:6) Jesus calls Himself the Way:

Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

Islam, Lord Muhammad

In the opening chapter of the Qur'an the "Path of God" is mentioned and there are very few Suras where the path or way of God is not mentioned. Here the Opening of the Qur'an:

IN the name of the merciful and compassionate God. Praise belongs to God, the Lord of the worlds, the merciful, the compassionate, the ruler of the Day of

Judgment! Thee we serve and Thee we ask for aid. Guide us in the right path, the path of those Thou art gracious to; not of those Thou art wroth with; nor of those who err. (Sura 1)

In Sura 6 – Cattle, Muhammad describes His Faith as the straight path, the same path Abraham has followed:

Say: As for me, my Lord hath guided me into a straight path; a true religion, the creed of Abraham, the sound in faith; for he was not of those who join gods with God.

Even other religious persuasions and moral authorities are using this term in describing their religions.

Sikh: (Shri Guru Granth Sahib, Section 6 - Raag Maajh)

Those, within whom the Truth dwells, obtain the True Name; they speak only the Truth. They walk on the Lord's Path, and inspire others to walk on the Lord's Path as well.

Tao: (Chuangtse (Lin Yutang tr.))

If each man keeps his own virtue, the world will avoid deviation from the true path.

The idea of religion as Path of God comes closer than any other term to what Shoghi Effendi calls the unity underlying the various religions:

...this Faith is instilling into each of its adherents a new love for, and a genuine appreciation of the unity underlying, the various religions represented within its pale. (WOB 196)

The unity of all religions is the avowed goal of the Bahá'í Faith. The way to this unity is the appreciation of the path of God, which all religions profess to present. Consequently, in this paper the conclusion is made that talking about unity of religion is talking about the one Path of God.

Ethics as the Practice of the Good Life

Ethics or moral philosophy is described as the attempt to formulate codes and principles of moral behavior. The history of ethics starts with the Sophists of the Greek world in the fifth century BC. Plato, in opposition to the sophists, describes in his dialogues the teachings of Socrates in regard to the question “why should I be moral,” developing the philosophy “that the good life consists in the harmony of the soul with each part of the soul – reason, spirit, appetite – performing its proper function”⁷ From this point of departure he describes the traditional virtues.

Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* develops a general theory of virtues. There are two important issues we will emphasize, one being the fact that virtues are learned and that one becomes virtuous by practicing virtues. In the words of Aristotle:

The virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happen in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g., men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre, so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.⁸

The things we learn – and that applies to virtues, which have to be learned – we learn by doing them. Being virtuous or leading an ethical life is learned, and it is learned by practicing it, by making choices and following good judgment. The other issue stressed by Aristotle is the fact that virtues are the middle between excess and defect, i.e., they are practiced in moderation.

or the man who strays a little from the path, either towards the more or towards the less, is not blamed ...

How far, therefore, and how a man must stray before he becomes blameworthy, it is not easy to state in words ...

But so much at least is plain that the middle state is praiseworthy ... While the excesses and defects are blameworthy.⁹

More specifically, Bahá'u'lláh places moral behavior and wisdom in the heart and in the innate powers of believer

Nay, from their hearts and the springs of their innate powers hath gushed out unceasingly the inmost essence of human learning and wisdom. (GWB 263)

Consequently, He states in the Arabic Hidden Words:

1. O SON OF SPIRIT!

My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting.

In this context it must be understood that the seat of moral behavior – of the virtues, is referred as being in the heart; that they are learned and need to be practiced in order to give to the heart an everlasting and imperishable quality.

In the Christian tradition of Ethics, Thomas Aquinas has become the foremost representative in this area of thought. He tried to solve the problem, which still occupies ethicists today, how a secular understanding of man and of ethical behavior can be harmonized with the idea that ethical behavior means following the commands of God. This dilemma could be formulated in the following way: Is the “good” good because it is good, or is it good because God commands it?

This is a reformulation of the Euthyphro dilemma, as found in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates asks Euthyphro: “Is the pious (τὸ ὅσιον) loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?”¹⁰

The second part of this question can be interpreted as arbitrariness on the side of God, the first implies that God has to follow a moral rule, i.e., God is not omnipotent. In Christian Ethics, both are true as God is the creator who established human nature with the ability to recognize the good life as commanded by God through human reason and understanding.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives a practical understanding for this difference and for the need to base morals in the area of religion:

This transformation of morals, this improvement of conduct and of words, are they possible otherwise than through the love of God? No, in the name of God.

If, by the help of science and knowledge, we wished to introduce these morals and customs, truly it would take a thousand years, and then they would not be spread throughout the masses. (SAQ 304)

In the above quoted verses of Bahá’u’lláh, He places the ability of man to recognize learning and wisdom in the powers of the human heart. As pointed out in last year’s presentation, the human heart is able to distinguish between positive and negative emotions in its “little brain” and can be the instrument of the soul of man to express this difference of values, which can be monitored by the variation of heart rhythms. In a paper on “Psycho-physiological Correlates of Spiritual Experience” the training in positive emotions is described and the following conclusion is made.

We believe that heart rhythm coherence training holds promise as a practical and potent approach to empower individuals to improve the quality of their lives. By enabling the intentional self-generation and reinforcement of physiological states that are correlated with increased love, care, compassion, inner harmony, vitality and flow, in essence this intervention helps individuals create an internal environment that is conducive to fostering spiritual experience.

Some might indeed describe the end result as being able to live more “from the heart.” in alignment with their deepest core values, or with greater connection to spirit.¹¹

How these findings correlate with the Bahá’í Faith was explained in last year’s presentation. Here it suffices to state that the metaphorical understanding of heart in poetry and religion is based on the nature of the human heart as an

instrument of the soul and is much more realistic when the findings of modern neurocardiology are considered.

Recent work in the relatively new field of Neurocardiology has firmly established that the heart is a sensory organ and a sophisticated information encoding and processing center. Its circuitry enables it to learn, remember, and make functional decisions independent of the cranial brain.¹²

This corresponds well with the Bahá'í understanding that the human heart needs to be pure, kind and radiant, and that in man is the innate spiritual power of human wisdom and correct action.

Küng's Questions to the Scholars of the Various Religions

At the opening of the Exhibit on the World's Religions at Santa Clara University, March 31, 2005, Hans Küng said:

There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.

The First World War was a war between empires and nations; the Second World War was a war between ideologies, which can be called religions (if we call Nazism and Communism a religion); the Cold War was continuing this war between ideologies; today's War against Terrorists is clearly a war that has a fanatical religious underpinning.

Bahá'u'lláh clearly distinguishes between the Path of God and the path of error, and He explains what happened to religion when religious leaders diverted the old religions from this Path of God. Bahá'u'lláh accuses them outright of issuing *new commands* that are leading into error giving as the motivation for this behavior their *pride and haughtiness*.

Though they recognize in their hearts the Law of God to be one and the same, yet from every direction they issue a new command, and in every season proclaim a fresh decree.

No two are found to agree on one and the same law, for they seek not God but their own desire, and tread no path but the path of error.

In leadership they have recognized the ultimate object of their endeavour, and account pride and haughtiness as the highest attainments of their heart's desire. (KI 29)

Speaking to Napoleon III of France, Bahá'u'lláh reminded him that His Path is the same path presented by Christ; it is the *Straight Path*, which was revealed by all Manifestations. As a matter of fact, Bahá'u'lláh simply advises Napoleon to follow in the path of Christ, to follow the religion he already confesses. He admonishes him to arise and follow the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, and in so doing Napoleon would also follow Christ in this Straight Path. He warns the emperor that otherwise his people will rebel against him, which actually happened.

Commotions shall seize all the people in that land, unless thou arisest to help this Cause, and followest Him Who is the Spirit of God (Jesus Christ) in this, the Straight Path. (PB 20)

In the following section the Declaration Towards a Global Ethic will be compared with the principles of the Bahá'í religion; this comparison was suggested by the commentary of the German theologian Hans Küng, who prepared the text of the 'Declaration Towards a Global Ethic' in 1993 for the Parliament of the World's Religions:

It will now be an enjoyable task for the scholars of the various religions to work out the project for a global ethic further in the light of their own religions and to bring out three things:

How strongly the 'Declaration Towards a Global Ethic' is rooted in their own tradition;

How far their own tradition corresponds with other ethical traditions;

How far their own tradition has a distinctive, specific, special contribution to make to the ethic.¹³

The first two questions can easily be answered from the Bahá’í Faith, since this Faith claims that all religions (including the Bahá’í Faith) are “stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part.” (Shoghi Effendi WOB 114) Consequently, a Global Ethic, which is deduced from the ethical principles of all prior religions, will be equally rooted in the Bahá’í Faith, which understands itself as the most recent stage in the evolution of the understanding of God’s changeless Religion.

There are multiple references to the Islamic and Christian religion, as well as to the Zoroastrian and other religions in the Bahá’í Writings, stressing the unity of religions and the meaning of religion seen as a successive process of the one progressive Revelation of God.

The comparison between principles presented in the Global Ethic and in the Bahá’í Scriptures presented below will exemplify this correspondence.

Principles Shared by the Global Ethic and the Bahá’í Faith

This comparison can only be selective, but it demonstrates the corresponding spirit and could be extended to a much more comprehensive exemplification, which is here not possible considering the limits of this paper. The statements from the Global Ethic are selected from that part of the Declaration of the Parliament of Religions, which was verbally presented in the last plenary session and accepted there. (DGE 12-15)

From the Declaration Towards a Global Ethic	From the Bahá’í Writings ¹⁴
We consider humankind our family	<i>Compare the nations of the world to the members of a family. A family is a nation in miniature.</i> (FWU 100)
We must strive to be kind and generous	<i>Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart</i> (HW A 1)

	<i>To give and to be generous are attributes of Mine; well is it with him that adorneth himself with My virtues. (HW P 49)</i>
We must treat others as we wish others to treat us	<i>And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbor that which thou chooseth for thyself (ESW 29)</i>
We respect life and dignity, individuality and diversity, so that every person is treated humanely, without exception.	Its [the Bahá'í Faith's] watchword is unity in diversity (WOB 42)
We commit ourselves to a culture of non-violence, and respect for life	<i>Violence and force, constraint and oppression, are one and all condemned. (KA 238)</i>
To a culture of solidarity and just economic order	The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated (WOB 2040)
To a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women	<i>Yet another of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the equality of men and women and their equal sharing in all rights. (SWA 249)</i>

The following points of comparison better fit the third of Kūng's questions, i.e., "How far their own tradition has a distinctive, specific, special contribution to make to the ethic." It will be demonstrated that there is a distinct difference, not so much in the statements themselves, but in the context in which these assertions are placed, indicating that the Bahá'í Faith has revealed a new worldview, a new "Weltanschauung," which does not change or abolish, but rather enhances and renews the traditional worldview of the previous religions.

The progress of Divine Revelation can be recognized in this new context; as a matter of fact, this makes the Bahá'í Faith truly a Faith for our time, a new Faith that corresponds to the new understanding of the world and the new findings and discoveries of science, as has been pointed out in previous contributions by this author.

Although, there is no way to demonstrate the distinctive, specific, and special contributions of the Bahá'í Faith in their entirety, some aspects will be accentuated here, giving the reader an example and a paradigm for the fact of the Unity of all Religions, in which the Bahá'í Faith participates. This will demonstrate, as well, the progress the one Divine Religion of God is making from one Revelation to the next, as described in the Bahá'í principle of Progressive Revelation.

In the following four statements selected from the Declaration, it is pointed out that only in the context of the Bahá'í Revelation can they properly be understood and actualized. In other words, only when these statements are interpreted or understood through the Bahá'í writings can they make sense in today's world and bring forth the intended fruit

Principles of the Global Ethic Improved upon by the Bahá'í Faith

There are other principles declared in the Global Ethic that are in the Bahá'í Faith as well, but seen in a different context and therefore enhanced, when compared with the statements of the Global Ethic, four of these principles will be outlined here, and it will be shown how they are enhanced and put in a more realistic context in the Bahá'í Faith. Some of the reasons why the Global Ethic statements could not do that is indicated as well.

The World is in Agony

The "Declaration Towards a Global Ethic" makes an initial statement about the fundamental condition of today's world by stating:

The world is in agony. The agony is so pervasive and urgent that we are compelled to name its manifestations so that the depth of this pain may be made clear.

Following this, the declaration describes the agony and the suffering that are common today, mentioning unemployment, poverty, hunger and destruction of families. The declaration talks about corruption, racial and ethnic conflicts, abuse of drugs, crime and anarchy. Additionally they mention the near collapse of the ecosystem of the world. They further deplore the fact that the leaders and members of religions “incite aggression, fanaticism, hate and xenophobia – even inspire and legitimate violent and bloody conflicts.” Expressing their feelings of disgust, the members of the Parliament of Religions “condemn these blights and declare that they need not be.”

The same understanding about the situation of today’s world is expressed in the Bahá’í Writings. One prayer of Bahá’u’lláh will be quoted to demonstrate that the agony is well perceived, but the answer to this situation is different and on another level of reality, the spiritual or religious level. Only the first two sections of this prayer will be quoted here and analyzed sentence by sentence.

Lauded be Thy name, O Lord my God!

Darkness hath fallen upon every land, and the forces of mischief have encompassed all the nations. Through them, however, I perceive the splendors of Thy wisdom, and discern the brightness of the light of Thy providence.

They that are shut out as by a veil from Thee have imagined that they have the power to put out Thy light, and to quench Thy fire, and to still the winds of Thy grace. Nay, and to this Thy might beareth me witness! Had not every tribulation been made the bearer of Thy wisdom, and every ordeal the vehicle of Thy providence, no one would have dared oppose us, though the powers of earth and heaven were to be leagued against us. (PM 14)

As in many prayers, in the first sentence God is praised and His name lauded. This beginning does not prepare us for the next sentence, in which the topic of the whole prayer is announced. In one short and pregnant sentence Bahá'u'lláh describes the situation of the world today. In many other places He has described it in more detail; here it is a straightforward sentence that brings the situation of today's world in the focus of our view, when He says:

Darkness hath fallen upon every land, and the forces of mischief have encompassed all the nations.

The whole contrast between light and darkness, as developed throughout the history of religion is here pointed out, beginning with the book of Genesis (1:3-4) where it is said:

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

This light of creation is applied to Christ in the Gospel of John (1:4-5):

In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

And later: (8:12)

Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

In this context we have to understand the surprising next sentence of the prayer of Bahá'u'lláh:

Through them, however, I perceive the splendors of Thy wisdom, and discern the brightness of the light of Thy providence.

We perceive through this darkness, through this absence of the light – light of Creation and of the Manifestation – the Splendor of God's Wisdom and the Light of God's Providence. How can we understand that? It does not make sense in any

ordinary way. How can the darkness of the world make us see the light of God's providence?

Yet, this is not new. A similar understanding is clearly expressed in the letter of the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 1:23-24)

But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

In the cross of Christ the power and the wisdom of God becomes evident, just like Bahá'u'lláh stated in the prayer below.

Had not every tribulation been made the bearer of Thy wisdom, and every ordeal the vehicle of Thy providence, no one would have dared oppose us, though the powers of earth and heaven were to be leagued against us.

The darkness of the world opposes the Manifestation, and the victory of the Manifestation over the darkness, through cross and suffering, can only be understood when this very suffering, this very tribulation and ordeal is seen as bringing the victory of the Light of God through the Resurrection to the world.

In a similar way, the victory of the Manifestation over the darkness of the world is expressed in the hymn "Exulted," being sung in the Easter Night celebration in the Catholic Church, where the victory of Christ over death in His resurrection is celebrated with these words:

Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendor, radiant in the brightness of your King! Christ has conquered! Glory fills you! Darkness vanishes forever!

These statements and affirmations are only understandable when we accept a new worldview, a new Heaven and Earth, presented in every Manifestation of God to this World, as expressed in the following section of the prayer:

They that are shut out as by a veil from Thee have imagined that they have the power to put out Thy light,

and to quench Thy fire, and to still the winds of Thy grace. Nay, and to this Thy might beareth me witness!

The understanding of the enemies of the Faith of God has been proven as nothing other than imagination and idle hope. The light is always victorious over darkness, as all known religions explain, from Zoroaster to Bahá'u'lláh. This victory is, as Paul has said, a stumbling block and foolishness for unbelievers. On the other hand, as it was written in a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi: "with the aid of Bahá'u'lláh ... we can turn our stumbling blocks into stepping stones ..." (LG 602). The life and the teachings of the Manifestations of God demonstrate this truth, as Bahá'u'lláh stated in this prayer:

Had not every tribulation been made the bearer of Thy wisdom, and every ordeal the vehicle of Thy providence, no one would have dared oppose us, though the powers of earth and heaven were to be leagued against us. (PM 14)

We might speculate that in a world that is progressing and heading towards a goal, changes from darkness to light, from evil to good must happen. Considering that darkness is only the absence of light and evil the absence of good, a process of evolution will necessarily imply that there will be darkness in order that there be improvement, and there will be evil in order to accentuate and bring forth the good.

'Abdu'l-Bahá gives a long discourse about good and evil and concludes:

The epitome of this discourse is that it is possible that one thing in relation to another may be evil, and at the same time within the limits of its proper being it may not be evil. Then it is proved that there is no evil in existence; all that God created He created good. This evil is nothingness; so death is the absence of life. When man no longer receives life, he dies. Darkness is the absence of light: when there is no light, there is darkness. Light is an existing thing, but darkness is nonexistent. Wealth is an existing thing, but poverty is nonexistent.

*Then it is evident that all evils return to nonexistence.
Good exists; evil is nonexistent. (SAQ 264)*

In light of this understanding it is clear that the evil, which is lack of good, has a function in development of good in the providence of God and can lead to a better understanding of God's wisdom.

World Transformation

The Declaration towards a Global Ethic expresses its promise of world transformation by affirming that reflection, mediation, prayer and positive thinking will result in a conversion of the heart:

Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of the individuals is changed. We pledge to work for such transformation in individual and collective consciousness, for the awakening of our spiritual powers through reflection, meditation, prayer, or positive thinking, for a conversion of the heart. Together we can move mountains! (DGE 36)

One, actually the most essential element necessary for this transformation, is not mentioned here; it is the power of God's Revelation. It is interesting to note that the Declaration avoids here and in other places the reference to God and especially to His different Manifestations. The Catholic theologian Küng could not have missed this essential element, but probably left it out deliberately to avoid getting involved in the interreligious argument regarding which of the different Prophets truly revealed the Words of God.

This politically necessary omission again seems to indicate that only the Unity of all Manifestations can explain the Unity of all Religions, and all attempts to avoid this issue are detrimental, not only to one or the other but to all religions of God. Consider; if only one religion is true, then all of them have to be doubted, at least by some or most of the other religions. Only the Bahá'í belief that there is only one Religion, as revealed by God, and that consequently there is only one Revelation to humanity in a historical sequence through the many Prophets, can solve the dilemma of the multiplicity of religions.

The statement of the Declaration that “together we can move mountains” certainly reflects the Biblical Word, implying that this togetherness must be based on the belief in a Manifestation. In the Words of Jesus, in whom the Father is manifest, we find:

And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. (Matthew 17:20)

Reading the following statement of Bahá'u'lláh, it is clear in the context of the Bahá'í Faith that with “these exalted words” the Revelation of God, as presented by all Prophets of the different religions are intended, with special reference to the Revelation of this day, that is the Word of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

Through the power released by these exalted words He hath lent a fresh impulse, and set a new direction, to the birds of men's hearts, and hath obliterated every trace of restriction and limitation from God's holy Book. (GWB 95-96)

While reflection, meditation, prayer, or positive thinking are certainly elements in this transformation, it is stated here that they are not by themselves effective, they are only bringing about the transformation when based on the Word of God, as revealed in every Manifestation.

Moderation and Political Power

The next issue to be dealt with in this comparison is twofold. The Declaration recommends two things: the first is to use a sense of moderation and modesty when it says: “We must value a sense of moderation and modesty.”

The second is, that the Declaration recommends using economic and political power in order to implant the global ethic into this world, when it says: “We must utilize economic and political power for service to humanity.” (p. 29)

Here again, the Bahá'í Faith has a more integral answer. While affirming the first part, it disagrees with the use of power in the sense of political or economic power.

Bahá'u'lláh recommends moderation in many places such as the application to the progress of civilization, He sees civilization as being both a source of evil or of good, depending if the virtue of moderation is used in developing civilization: *"If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation"*. (GWB 342)

Not only is moderation recommend here, but it is clarified as well that moderation actually makes the difference between good and evil action, quite similar to the statement of Aristotle mentioned above.

When talking on 30 May 1912 in a Theosophical Lodge on Broadway and Seventy-Ninth Street in New York, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated clearly that political and economic power cannot be used to achieve unity and world peace, which would include a binding agreement on a global ethic. He indicates that such powers can never succeed. While this writer cannot assure the reader that these are the actual words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá given in an authorized translation, they clearly are consonant with other statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Therefore, a power is needed to carry out and execute what is known and admitted to be the remedy for human conditions – namely, the unification of mankind.

Furthermore, it is evident that this cannot be realized through material process and means. The accomplishment of this unification cannot be through racial power, for races are different and diverse in tendencies. It cannot be through patriotic power, for nationalities are unlike. Nor can it be effected through political power since the policies of governments and nations are various. That is to say, any effort toward unification through these material means would benefit one and injure another because of unequal and individual interests. Some may believe this great

remedy can be found in dogmatic insistence upon imitations and interpretations. This would likewise be without foundation and result.

Therefore, it is evident that no means but an ideal means, a spiritual power, divine bestowals and the breaths of the Holy Spirit will heal this world sickness of war, dissension and discord. Nothing else is possible; nothing can be conceived of. But through spiritual means and the divine power it is possible and practicable. (PUP 157)

What 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to say here is that the unification must come first, before peace and acceptance of a global ethic is possible, and that this unification presupposes a spiritual power unifying the world. In other words unification of the world is only possible on the spiritual basis of the unification of the religions of the world. The Declaration also realizes that any real change comes from insight, and from the power of meditation and prayer, or positive thinking as it is called. This aspect will be followed up below.

Conversion of the Heart

The Declaration acknowledges the need for transformation and asserts that such a transformation must come from a conversion of the heart:

We pledge to work for such transformation ... for the awakening of our spiritual powers through reflection, meditation, prayer, or positive thinking, for a conversion of the heart. (p. 36)

As mentioned before, the Declaration does not refer to the Divine influence exerted through the Manifestation, or Prophet, in order to avoid the issue of who is and who is not a "real" Manifestation of God. Considering the present state of affairs this seems to be a necessary precaution in order to avoid the old argument between religions, questioning which the true religion is and which is not. This very argument has caused many wars and disagreements in the past.

Only the Bahá'í solution, to acknowledge all world religions as being founded by God for their time, can solve this problem. Therefore the Bahá'í Scriptures have no hesitation in asserting that the influence of God is needed to achieve the proposed transformation

Through the power released by these exalted words He hath lent a fresh impulse, and set a new direction, to the birds of men's hearts. (GWB 95)

The Declaration only mentions the activities on the side of man, like prayer, meditation and positive thinking, but does not mention that this is futile unless it is based on a Revelation of God, as the Catholic theologian Küng well knew. Prayer and meditation does not originate in the human condition, and man cannot elevate himself towards the Divine. This power to address the Creator in prayer does not come from the creation. It is a gift, a token of God's grace to man. Bahá'u'lláh clearly expressed the impossibility of the "birds of the human heart" to achieve this task, i.e., to be able to reach God, when He said:

How can I make mention of Thee, assured as I am that no tongue, however deep its wisdom, can befittingly magnify Thy name, nor can the bird of the human heart, however great its longing, ever hope to ascend into the heaven of Thy majesty and knowledge. (GWB 3)

In the following passage taken from the beginning of the Seven Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh expressed in poetic language, and in reference to the Qur'án and the Imám 'Alí, the thought that the prayer is originated in the heart by the Fear of God and as a fruit of memory of the lost paradise, which is approached when one walks in the Path of God, i.e., follow the Revelation of the Manifestations.

Of this hath the nightingale of oneness sung in the garden of Ghawthíyih [Sermon by Ali] He saith: "And there shall appear upon the tablet of thine heart a writing of the subtle mysteries of 'Fear God and God will give you knowledge'; [Qur'án 2:282] and the bird of thy soul shall recall the holy sanctuaries of preexistence and soar on the wings of longing in the heaven of 'walk the beaten paths of thy Lord', [Qur'án 16:71.] and gather

the fruits of communion in the gardens of 'Then feed on every kind of fruit.' (SFV 3)

It is not unimportant to keep this in mind, because in the New Age Movement of today it is contended that man can, by his own power through mediation and spiritual development, reach an access to the Divine. This was most powerfully presented by Ken Wilber and can be called spiritual materialism, where the human power can by itself reach towards God, or what Wilber calls the "World Soul" or "God or Goddess." This basically materialistic understanding of the world, which is presented in transcendental psychology, is expressed by Wilber in the following sentence:

*And every I becomes a God, and every WE becomes God's sincerest worship, and every IT becomes God's temple.*¹⁵

Therefore, in this view, it is not God Who is transcendent, but the human psyche can transcend this world by higher forms of reason and mediation. This thought was further developed in a previous paper by this writer.¹⁶

God as Ultimate Reality

Here again the Declaration presents the truth very cautiously and avoids calling God by any name, but replaces this concept with the term "ultimate reality". Hans Küng explains that this was necessary in order to not offend the Buddhist Religion, which does not talk about God but acknowledges a transcendent reality towards which we strive.

As religious and spiritual persons we base our lives on an Ultimate Reality, and draw spiritual power and hope therefrom, in trust, in prayer or meditation, in word or silence. (DGE 19)

It is interesting that the Bahá'í Faith can easily accept this formulation as the Bahá'í writings clearly state that the essence of God is unknowable and inaccessible:

God in His Essence and in His own Self hath ever been unseen, inaccessible, and unknowable. (ESW 118)

There are many statements explaining this fact and consequently the term “ultimate reality,” for what is usually called God, fits this understanding. Again as before, the Bahá’í Faith insists that all assistance in delivering mankind from its state of grievous abasement comes from the Hand of Divine power and not from prayer and meditation alone as the Declaration seems to insinuate.

We cherish the hope that the Hand of Divine power may lend its assistance to mankind, and deliver it from its state of grievous abasement. (GWB 93)

The Bahá’í Understanding of Religious Unity

The Bahá’í Faith asserts the unity of all religions and the unity of all the Prophets and Founders of the major world religions, calling them the Manifestations of God for their time. They renew the one religion of God by restating, updating and presenting again the fundamental verities of all of God’s religions, as well as changing, promoting and adjusting the moral rules to the time, considering the changes in the evolution of mankind. This is expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

They establish a new religion and make new creatures of men; They change the general morals, promote new customs and rules, renew the cycle and the Law. (SAQ 164)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá distinguishes between Founders of religions like Buddha and philosophers who renew the morals of their time like Confucius:

Buddha also established a new religion, and Confucius renewed morals and ancient virtues, but their institutions have been entirely destroyed. (SAQ 165)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the following passage (SWA 15.7) opens up the vision of unity in this world which has as its center the unity of religion. He describes the process of unification in the picture of the light of seven candles, saying “Behold how its light is now dawning upon the world’s darkened horizon.” Talking about these seven candles of light, the unity of religion takes the center place as the fourth candle, which can be compared to the

arrangement of the Seven Valleys of Bahá'u'lláh, where the Valley of Unity is the fourth of seven valley as well. 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives this unity the place of a cornerstone, stating:

The fourth candle is unity in religion, which is the cornerstone of the foundation itself, and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendor. (SWA 15.7)

The first three candles present “unity in the political realm”, “unity of thought in world undertakings,” and “unity in freedom which will surely come to pass.”

The fifth candle after the unity of religion is “unity of nations,” which unity will be “causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland.” The sixth candle is “unity of races, making of all that dwell on earth peoples and kindreds of one race,” and the final candle is described as “unity of language, i.e., the choice of a universal tongue in which all peoples will be instructed and converse.”

This arrangement indicates that unity of religion is the centerpiece or cornerstone of all unity, it does not give us a timeline, and describes these unifications rather as a process “*now dawning upon the world's darkened horizon.*”

He concludes with this statement indicating that

Each and every one of these will inevitably come to pass, inasmuch as the power of the Kingdom of God will aid and assist in their realization. (SWA 31-32)

In this verse He seemingly refers to the progress and the evolution of humanity, asserting that this progress will happen as prophesied by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer. (Matthew 6:10)

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

The question arises: How does this relate to the contention made in this paper that the first step towards a unity of religion will be in the area of ethics, as anticipated by the Declaration Towards a Global Ethic? As it has been mentioned above, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, while not mentioning ethics in this

enumeration of progressive unification of the world, has stated the following about the Founders of the world's religions, which is a statement of ethics, of making men new creatures and changing general morals by new customs and rules:

They establish a new religion and make new creatures of men; They change the general morals, promote new customs and rules, renew the cycle and the Law. (SAQ 164)

This change of morals has to be understood as a renewal and improvement in the area of ethics that every Manifestation has promoted. One could compare it as the growing of a tree from insignificant seeds to an ever growing, fully developed structure. In the same way has the ethic of the different religions been growing, has been adjusted to the development of man, and therefore all these ethical principles of different religions are building a complete structure that can today be described as a global ethic. This is the value of this Declaration for all religions, so that they can compare and agree upon these general principles and become increasingly united through these considerations.

There are differences in particular ethical statements between different religions, but it can be assumed that these differences are manmade. For example, in Islam it is generally allowed to disavow one's faith in order to save oneself, while in Christianity and in the Bahá'í Faith, this is not allowed, and the death of the believer as a martyr could sometimes be the outcome of this ethical principle.

How will unification of religions come about?

The Declaration raises some warning signs about a possible unification of religions and states clearly what it could not be (emphasis in the original):

By a global ethic we do not mean a global ideology nor a single unified religion beyond all existing religion, and certainly not the domination of one religion over all others. By a global ethic we mean a fundamental

consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards and personal attitudes.

What kind of misunderstanding has to be excluded from this global ethic or in any unification of religion? The four possible principles are excluded as leading to a real unity in ethic understanding and even more significantly in religion.

Triumphalism

The Declaration clearly states that any form of triumphalism does not lead to a unity of religion, when it said:

By a global ethic we do not mean a global ideology or a single unified religion beyond all existing religions, and certainly not the domination of one religion over all others. (GE 21)

Eclecticism

This is another form of attempted unification that picks and chooses parts from the different religions and attempts to form a unified religion, missing the essential of what religion is. This would be like picking the best from all religions and making a combination thereof (Supermarket or Smorgasbord of Religions).

Collectivism

When unity is misunderstood as uniformity the result would be a system of collective control and uniformity of all religions in a global ideology. In the last century, several ideologies have tried this approach and the world is still suffering from these attempts. At the turn of the last century two books described this process. A. N. Wilson in *"God's Funeral"*¹⁷ describes the increasing atheism during the last two centuries, and Mark Mazower in *"Dark Continent"*¹⁸ describes Europe as a nightmarish laboratory for social and political engineering, explaining fascism and communism as the ideological struggle for Europe's future.

Minimalism

This principle is best described by Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), founded in 1961 as a consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church in America. While the certain laudable attempt “to achieve free and responsible search for truth and meaning” is pursued, the result is a minimalistic acceptance of everything without guidance and without a discernable goal.

The Unity of Religion in the Bahá’í Faith

Shoghi Effendi (WOB 57) responds to these attempts of unification in a lengthy passage, stating the following about the unity of religions:

Let no one, however, mistake my purpose. The Revelation, of which Bahá’u’lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value.

It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings.

It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause.

These sentences clearly explain how the Bahá’í Faith understands the unity of religion as not at all based on abrogating, dwarfing or undermining any of the existing religions of the world. The opposite is true. Shoghi Effendi declares here that it is the purpose of the Bahá’í Faith to enable the followers of all religions to understand their own religion more fully:

Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose.

This will exclude a superficial eclecticism, as well as any arrogant triumphalism:

It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims.

This understanding is based on a new understanding of religion and of the fundamental unity of all religions and their historical evolution, claiming that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final.

Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final.

Summarizing this explanation he states the fundamental unity of all religions in origin, aim, function and purpose:

Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.

Contrasting his understanding of religious unity with previous attempts described above, which have had devastating effects on society, the Guardian here indicates how this unity can come about, and describes that this is already seminally practiced in the Bahá'í Faith:

Far from wishing to add to the number of the religious systems, whose conflicting loyalties have for so many generations disturbed the peace of mankind, this Faith is instilling into each of its adherents a new love for, and a genuine appreciation of the unity underlying, the various religions represented within its pale. (WOB 196)

The unity of religion cannot come from any external, artificial, or political and diplomatic process: it has to come from a new understanding of what religion is, and of a vision that finds the underlying unity of all religious. Can it not be said that the first inkling of such a new vision can be observed in the attempts made by the Parliament of Religions, which was expressed in the Declaration Towards a Global Ethic?

Towards a Bahá'í Ethic

In a prayer Bahá'u'lláh has given us an indication where this unity will lead humanity. After the initial praise of God, Bahá'u'lláh expresses that those “*who have recognized Thy [God's] reality*” ... “*can never hope to pass beyond the bounds, which ... have been fixed in their own hearts.*” He further explains that “*every created thing hath recognized its own impotence, and the power of Thy might, and hath confessed its own abasement and Thy great glory.*”

Having clarified here, as in many other places, the impotence of human reason to reach to God, He declares what access God has given humankind to *know Him* and to *worship Him*, by referring to God's Firstness and Lastness which is identical to His Revelation and Concealment. This understanding will then, as a gift to the believers, allow them to reveal this truth about God to all creatures by becoming manifest signs of God's grace, and by following the Path of God.

I beseech Thee by Thy Lastness which is the same as Thy Firstness, and by Thy Revelation which is identical with Thy Concealment, to grant that they who are dear to Thee, and their children, and their kindred, may become the revealers of Thy purity amidst Thy creatures, and the manifestations of Thy sanctity amongst Thy servants. (PM 229)

In another place Bahá'u'lláh has more clearly spoken about these four states of man and how they relate to God. What is here called Firstness and Lastness, Revelation and Concealment, is in the Four Valleys called Firstness and Lastness, Outwardness and Inwardness, as explained in a previous paper of this author.¹⁹

In the same Tablet of the Four Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh speaks about the four journeys in the Pathways of Love, describing the Path of God in this fourfold structure. A brief prayer of the Báb, which was highly recommended by Bahá'u'lláh, completes this structure as is being pointed out in the following picture. When we put these four fourfold statements together in this arrangement, the basic structure of life, especially of life as the Path of God, becomes transparent. This view can be regarded

as an attempt to formulate a Bahá’í Ethic based on the human essence as described in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh.

The below presented figure consists of three statements of the Bahá’í Writings and one collection of four basic Bahá’í concepts, which are here presented first as they appear in the Writings and are below combined in the figure of four quadrants.

The framework for this figure is taken from Bahá’u’lláh’s descriptions in the Seven Valleys (SVFV 27) of “*these four states*” that are “*true of thyself*” and “*conferred upon thee:*”

Inwardness – Outwardness
Firstness – Lastness

Four basic concepts of Bahá’í Life are in the top of each of the four squares:

Prayer – Unity
Service – Order

Below this are the four statements from the Báb’s “Remover of Difficulty” Prayer (SWB 216):

Praised be God – He is God
All Are His servants – All abide by His bidding

The last are the four statements of Bahá’u’lláh’s *Journeys in the Pathway of Love* (SVFV 25):

Creature to True One – True One to True One
True One to Creature – Creature to Creature

THE BĀB'S REMOVER PRAYER BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S FOUR STATES & PATHWAYS OF LOVE



This figure is based on four statements from the Bahá'í Scriptures, which are here unified and organized as a whole, in an attempt to better understand these statements in the context of each other. All of these statements have the same structure: they consist of four quadrants, each of them consisting of a pair of oppositional concepts that are united and set against another pair of oppositional concepts. In a sense this can be understood as an ontological principle of the created world, and examples of this structure can be found in Bahá'í Scripture in many places. It is understood by this writer as an expression of what Shoghi Effendi calls, in several places, the watchword of the Bahá'í Faith: "Its watchword is unity in diversity such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself has explained" (WOB 42):

In the following, these four different quadrants will be explicated towards a Bahá'í Ethic. Several issues need to be clarified before the quadrants can be explored by themselves in their practical meaning towards the ethical behavior of people

in the Path of God. These guidelines apply, not only to Bahá'ís, but to people of all religions in their honest attempt to travel this Straight Path according to the directions of their Prophets or Manifestations.

First: What are these quadrants, and what do the different statements in them mean in relation to each other, i.e., being differentiated from and united with each other?

Second: How do they relate to each other on an essential or ontological level?

And, third: How do they relate to the actual ethical behavior of the individual, to any organization, from family to nation to humanity, or to the world as a whole.

Since it is not very difficult to find more quadruple statements of the same structure in other Bahá'í writings, there must be a special meaning to this arrangement. This writer almost accidentally found the first of these statements after reading the books of Ken Wilber, who has a similar structure on the basis of his integral understanding of human nature and of the world. In a previous paper of this writer²⁰, he described what this surprising correspondence might mean and how the Wilberian concept needs to be extended and improved when applied to concepts used in the Bahá'í Writings.

The four quadrants are formed by the framework of the statements of Bahá'u'lláh in the Seven Valleys (SVFV 27) and can be described as follows:

1. Inwardness and Firstness
2. Inwardness and Lastness
3. Outwardness and Firstness
4. Outwardness and Lastness

With Inwardness the Spiritual, the Hidden, the Concealed is expressed; with Outwardness its opposite, the Material, the Manifest and the Revealed is indicated. The opposition between hidden and manifest, or inward and outward, or concealed and revealed, is what in today's parlance is called the opposition between spiritual and material. What needs to be

repeated here is that both sides of these opposing concepts are seen not only as opposing each other but at the same time as forming a unity, which is expressed in the next paragraph where Bahá'u'lláh states that in the *sphere of that which is relative*, i.e., in the created world, these concepts are separated because of the *limitation of men*. On the other hand Bahá'u'lláh affirms that those who *have passed over the world of the relative and the limited have burned away these relativities*. They will then *swim in the sea of the spirit and soar in the holy air of light*. In this vision, in this realm, *the first is the last itself, and the last is but the first*.

These statements are made in the sphere of that which is relative, because of the limitations of men. Otherwise, those personages who in a single step have passed over the world of the relative and the limited, and dwelt on the fair plane of the Absolute, and pitched their tent in the worlds of authority and command – have burned away these relativities with a single spark, and blotted out these words with a drop of dew. And they swim in the sea of the spirit, and soar in the holy air of light. Then what life have words, on such a plane, that “first” and “last” or other than these be seen or mentioned! In this realm, the first is the last itself, and the last is but the first. (SVFV 27)

This can be understood as implying that in this world of the relative and limited, where unity is created from the unification of parts and where the parts are constituted through the whole which they form, the world has to be seen in these oppositions, while from a higher perspective, these oppositions fall together in an integrated unity. There is not only a unity in the opposing concepts, like first and last, as Bahá'u'lláh explains: because the same person is first to his son and last to his father, in the same way hidden and manifest has to be seen as belonging to both and at the same time to every individual person, animal, plant or thing.

The whole creation is also always both, spirit and matter, hidden and manifest, concealed and revealed, first and last, individual and collective. And yet, from a spiritual point of view, these oppositions are again forming a higher unity, and

therefore Bahá'u'lláh can say that first is the last and last is the first – or the often repeated phrase, that God is the most hidden of the hidden and the most manifest of the manifest. At the end of this statement in the Seven Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh reaches in the area of the mystical, and therefore He quotes from the Mathnaví of the great mystic, Jalálu'd-Dín Rúmi (1207-1273 A.D.) the following verse, combining this spiritual vision with love and the fire of ecstasy, which will burn all limitations and relativities of this world:

In thy soul of love build thou a fire

And burn all thoughts and words entire. (SVFV 27)

When later these quadrants are applied to the ethical behavior on the Path of God, this unity of the opposites must never be forgotten. Consequently it is explained by Bahá'u'lláh that prayer and service have the same value, even though, one, the prayer, belongs to the inward and hidden aspect of this world, while, the other, service clearly belongs to the manifest and material action of a person. And this is true of all the quadrants. None has a prerogative or priority in the relative world of ethical action; only in the unity of these aspects is the spiritual nature of the world manifest.

It is clear from many statements of the Writings that this is not only a practical and ethical principle, but it is a constituent and fundamental aspect of the created world, the world of limitation and relativity. If the four quadrants are explicated in the realm of ethics and are describing the Path of God, these three principles need always to be kept in mind.

The Four Quadrants, Possible Cornerstones of a Bahá'í Ethic

In the following the four quadrants will be described separately, with their spiritual unity taken into account. This is a brief description of what could be an extensive outline towards the development of a future Bahá'í Ethic. Obviously, a more extensive outline is not possible in the frame of this paper. What is here presented is more of a description of basic principles that could be the basis of a Bahá'í Ethic if it stands

the test of time and consultation. Therefore it has to be regarded as containing tentative and prospective suggestions for further studies.

Prayer

This is the title of the left upper quadrant which is framed by the concepts of inwardness or concealment and firstness or individuality. In this quadrant the focus is on the personal and individual life of man. It is what we would call the spiritual and the religious aspect of man. Usually, the concept of soul is placed in this area, but it needs to be expanded. Because soul is not restricted to this area, it is really establishing the unity of all of these four quadrants. The soul is in all of them and is a *single reality*, as Bahá'u'lláh clearly states:

Say: Spirit, mind, soul, and the powers of sight and hearing are but one single reality which hath manifold expressions owing to the diversity of its instruments.
(SLH 155)

The soul is differentiated only by the instruments it uses. In other words, the soul of man must be in all four spheres, and cannot be restricted to one aspect of man.

In this quadrant we place the statement of the Báb's prayer "Praised be God" and it is related to the statement of the journeys on the pathway of love as being from the "Creature to the True One". From this inner aspect of the person, the prayer is directed to the True One in a very individual and personal process of elevating the heart in love to God. The statement of the fifth Arabic Hidden Word fits this intention:

5. O SON OF BEING!

*Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not,
My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O
servant.* (AHW)

This love is expressed in the praise of God, that is, the correct approach of the creature to the True One. Prayer in the love of God is not only a *fountain of living waters* for the one, who prays, attracting the love of God; it furthermore announces the message of the loving God in *every world of*

God's *worlds*. Prayer has not only global reach, but a truly cosmic significance, as stated in a prayer of Bahá'u'lláh:

Make my prayer, O my Lord, a fountain of living waters whereby I may live as long as Thy sovereignty endureth, and may make mention of Thee in every world of Thy worlds. (PM 318)

Prayer, while individual and personal, is not limited in its meaning to the individual, but its goal is to mention God *in every world of Thy worlds*, that is, in the whole creation of God. Therefore, it is not restricted to the individual, in the sense of excluding others. It must be connected with the other three quadrants as well; it goes out from the individual but encompasses all. It must include and will attract all of humanity and the entire world, affecting all four quadrants. By causing the *heart of every righteous man to throb* the prayer said *in the privacy his chamber* influences and elevates, “*these four states*” that are “*true of thyself*” and “*conferred upon thee*” (SVFV 27) i.e., all the four quadrants in the above picture. The following words of Bahá'u'lláh need to be understood in this context:

Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men. Whoso reciteth, in the privacy of his chamber, the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth, and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb. (GWB 295)

Unity

Unity is the next quadrant; it is related to inwardness and concealment like prayer, but it is formulated in the area of lastness or collective. Before going into details of this quadrant, it can easily be seen that it is closely connected with the previous quadrant, with prayer. The fact that there is no official congregational prayer in the Bahá'í Faith becomes clear from this distinction. The Prayer for the Dead is the only

exception to this rule, and it is related to a specific and manifest occasion. Otherwise Bahá'u'lláh has abrogated all official community prayers of prior religions. Prayer is restricted to the individual and does not belong in this quadrant. This does not exclude the fact that people can pray together; it only means that there is no distinctive different value to such prayers; it is not an official prayer any different than the individual prayer. When Bahá'ís pray together they pray to God as individuals, not as a church with official priests or leaders of this prayer.

While, as mentioned before, all quadrants have to be seen in a mystical unity, this quadrant is exclusively dedicated to the unity of humankind, to the unity of all Manifestations and ultimately to the Unity of God. Therefore it corresponds to the statement of the Báb's prayer *He is God* and to the journey on the Pathway of Love stating from the *True One to True One*, indicating that the unity of God can only be seen in the unity of the Manifestations.

Considering this from the point of view that all quadrants are unified on a higher spiritual and mystical level, we can state here as an ethical principle, that any prayer to God, which is not carried by the spirit of Unity of humanity and of all Manifestations, becomes defective and vice versa – that any consideration of unity, be it the unity of family, nation, or humanity, as well as the unity of all religions, can only be true when based on the individual prayer and included in the praise of God. This unity needs to be supported by individual service and carried forward through the institutions to keep it in order. Whenever a Bahá'í expresses the praise of God, all of the religions and all of mankind must be included in this elevation of the individual soul. Therefore, most Bahá'í prayers start with this praise of God.

Service

Here we are in the area of Outwardness or that which is revealed and seen. The other frame of this quadrant is the aspect of firstness and of the individual. Certainly, service and work are material efforts, can be seen, can be rewarded materially and promote civilization.

Again considering the unity of all quadrants, work does not acquire the status of service if it is not directed towards unity, towards promotion of humanity and its civilization. This direction has to include the personal spiritual life of the servant; otherwise it would be only an external exercise. It is becoming evident how these quadrants support, promote and undergird each other.

In the “The Remover of Difficulties,” prayer of the Báb, this is clearly expressed by the statement: *All are His servants*. Service is His service. The journeys in the pathway of love bring another aspect into this consideration. When combined with prayer service, is described as *From the True One to the Creatures*. Generally, this is not how we think. We regard any service, any job, as our achievement, as our own effort and would not see it as something that comes from God to the creature. Let's consider what Bahá'u'lláh expresses in the following statement:

The tie of servitude established between the worshiper and the adored One, between the creature and the Creator, should in itself be regarded as a token of His gracious favor unto men, and not as an indication of any merit they may possess. (GWB 193)

What is this tie of servitude between the Creator and the creature? Primarily it is the duty prescribed to God's servant to extol His majesty and glory, in other words, to praise God, as this verse of Bahá'u'lláh clearly expresses:

Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves. (GWB 4)

But must not this bond of servitude be extended to all service of man? Is not all of human work a service in praise of God? And does not the statement above clarify that service is not an *indication of any merit* for the servant? It is a token of the grace of God that alone makes it meritorious and valuable for man.

Service has to be seen as a token of God's grace, as a gift to allow us to ascend to a higher station of the self. The example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá certainly gives testimony to that kind of spiritual progress. Another consideration can help us understand this ethical principle. Today's unemployed would certainly see it as a gift if somebody gave them a job. So a person, who has not been given the gift of service from God, is like a beggar, a useless member of society who fails to reach the inmost value of being human.

Order

This fourth quadrant is dominated by its outwardness and lastness or collectiveness. It is the order which has to make unity manifest in this material world. This is the reason why the administrative order of the Bahá'í Faith is not a worldly and unimportant aspect of life, but is equally important as prayer, spiritual unity and service. An administrative order must be based on all of these aspects of life; otherwise it will not function well. When electing the administrative institutions, prayer and knowledge of the community are required, so the election becomes an essential aspect of the Bahá'í life.

When we consider the many things the Guardian says about the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and especially his statement that we cannot know how it will look in the future, it becomes quite clear that only if all of these four quadrants are verified in society can this administrative order be fashioned. This is the ultimate goal of the new world order.

In such an order and civilization the "Remover of Difficulties" prayer of the Báb will be fulfilled because: *All abide by His bidding*, and this order and structure will be what the *creatures will give to the creatures* as expressed in that journey on the pathway of love, creating a humanity that is unified, at peace and animated by the individual's prayers, by the spiritual unity of mankind and promoted by the service of all.

Towards a Bahá'í Ethic

It is hoped that this combination and structure imminent in the Bahá'í Writings will not only allow us to look into the future of the Bahá'í commonwealth, but give us a guideline on the Path of God, make this the Straight Path, the True Path, and lead mankind to the Most Great Peace. Individually, it could be stated that we must learn to see all aspects of life as this Path of God; we cannot exclude or separate the material, the administrative, the unity of mankind and everyday service and prayer from this path.

Whenever someone believes they are “living the life” as a Bahá'ís, yet overlook this total integration of all aspects of the human being, they are in danger of going astray. Some signs of these errors are the following:

- Words, thoughts and even prayers that do not include all, but separate and exclude others.
- Scientific pursuits fall into this category if they overlook the organic structure of the Faith, if they are not executed in the service of the community, or if they disrupt the harmony between science and religion.
- Individual actions, which are not coordinated with the administrative order, even community action following other than these principles, will not promote the fourfold structure of the Path of God.
- Believers, who are not in touch with the ethical principles of the Faith and do not accept the guidance of their assemblies, place themselves outside of the community in some way. Not in every case will that behavior deprive them of their voting rights, but it could well deprive them of the spiritual connection with the Faith.

On the other hand the administrative organs of the Faith can never forget that the unity they need to promote is a unity in diversity, and everybody has to be respected and valued in their individual ability and nature. Only when both the individual and the community aspect of the Bahá'í Cause are respected

and find a living harmony, can the New World Order of Bahá'u'lláh be realized in the future.

We have to be cautious not to be one-sided, we have to constantly redirect our efforts, and this is only possible if we continuously dive into the Ocean of His Words and make the Bahá'í Scripture the compass of all ethical striving.

NOTES

¹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethic*, translated by David Ross, Oxford University Press, 1998

² Hans Küng and Karl-Joseph Kuschel, editors, *A Global Ethic, The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, Continuum, New York, 1993

³ A more extensive description of this event can be found in H.M. Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, George Ronald, Oxford 1972, pp. 63-65

⁴ About Khayru'llah see Robert H. Stockman, in *The Bahá'í Faith in America, Origins 1892-1900*, volume 1, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1985. In this book the life of Kheiralla (this is the transcription used in this book) and his teaching method is comprehensively describes, as well as the people he converted to the Bahá'í Faith.

⁵ The Wikipedia has the following note on Hans Küng:

Born 1928 he studied theology and philosophy at the Pontifical Gregoriana University in Rome and was ordained in 1954 (this author studied at the same University philosophy, later he studied theology with Karl Rahner in Innsbruck, Austria).

He then continued his education in various European cities, including the Sorbonne in Paris.

In 1960 Küng was appointed professor of theology at the University Tübingen, Germany.

Just like his colleague Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) and Karl Rahner (1904-1984), in 1962 he was appointed *peritus* by Pope John XXIII, to the Second Vaticanum Council.

At Küng's instigation, the Catholic Faculty at Tübingen appointed Ratzinger as professor of dogmatic.

Later Hans Küng rejected the doctrine of papal infallibility, and was stripped of his license to teach Catholic theology in 1979, continuing teaching ecumenical theology.

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- ⁶ The Bahá'í Faith, the official website of the Bahá'ís of the United States: <http://bahai.us>
- ⁷ Ted Honderich, editor, *The Oxford Guide to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, 2005 under 'history of moral philosophy'. In the section on 'ethics and aesthetics' the virtue ethics of Aristotle is described and compared with other systems of ethics.
- ⁸ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethic*, translated by David Ross, Oxford University Press, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford 1998, Kindle location 638
- ⁹ Ibid., Kindle location 1391
- ¹⁰ Wikipedia under Euthyphro dilemma
- ¹¹ This article was found at the www.heartmath.org website and it is a reprint from AAPB/Biofeedback Magazine, Winter 2001 page 13-17 www.aapb.org
- ¹² Rollin McCray, Ph.D. and Doc Childre, *The Psychophysiology of Positive Emotions and Optimal Functioning*, *ibid* page 1
- ¹³ Hans Küng and Karl-Joseph Kuschel, editors, *A Global Ethic, The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, Continuum, New York, 1993, p 73
- ¹⁴ As is the custom in 'Irfán publications, the Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are italicized, the Writings of Shoghi Effendi are not.
- ¹⁵ Ken Wilber; *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality, The Spirit of Evolution*, Shambhala, Boston & London, 2000, Chapter: The Unpacking of God, page 550
- ¹⁶ Wolfgang Klebel, *Lights of Irfán*, Book Seven, 2006, "Law-i-Hikmat, Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Wisdom, Towards a Progressive Bahá'í Theology", pp. 143-148
- ¹⁷ W. W. Norton & Company, New York London 1999
- ¹⁸ Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1999
- ¹⁹ Wolfgang Klebel, *Lights of Irfán*, Book Six, 2005, "True of Thyself: The Mystical Writing's of Bahá'u'lláh and Ken Wilber's System of Integral Philosophy" pp. 87-120
- ²⁰ Ibid.

Neoplatonism and the Bahá'í Writings

Part 1

Ian Kluge

1. Preface: What This Paper Is and Is Not

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the philosophy embedded in the Bahá'í Writings bears numerous similarities to a group of philosophies generally referred to as 'Neoplatonism' which originated in the 3rd century CE with the *Enneads* of Plotinus. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to show that there are (a) foundational principles and ideas on which the Writings and the *Enneads* agree and (b) significant convergences between the Writings and Neoplatonic thought even when there is not always detailed agreement. We hasten to add that our focus is strictly on the ideas themselves and is not concerned with the history of how the *Enneads* entered into Muslim and Persian philosophy nor the vast extent of their influence.¹

It is, of course, not our intention to suggest that the Writings are simply a man-made philosophy, for as Shoghi Effendi tells us, Bahá'u'lláh "has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be."²

Therefore, it must be clearly stated that this paper studies the *philosophical aspects* of the Writings, just as other papers or books study the social, ethical, psychological or economic aspects. The Writings include all these aspects but transcend them all since they are inexhaustible divine revelation. Moreover, this paper follows Shoghi Effendi's suggestion about the importance of "correlating philosophy with Bahá'í

teachings.”³ Neoplatonism may be an ancient philosophy but it is currently undergoing an extraordinary revival not just at the scholastic but also at the popular level.⁴ Consequently, a study of the Writings and Neoplatonism may prove to be timely for engaging in dialogue with those who thinking is sympathetic to Neoplatonism.

It may be objected that Neoplatonism and the Writings has already been studied in Mark Foster’s “*Neo-Platonism: Framework for a Bahá’í Ontology*,” Nima Hazini’s “*Neoplatonism: Framework for a Bahá’í Metaphysics*” and to some extent in Juan Cole’s “*The Concept of the Manifestation in the Bahá’í Writings*.” Valuable as these contributions are, they do not, as we shall see, go nearly far enough in exploring the extent of the similarities between the Writings and the *Enneads*. For the most part, they focus on the theme of emanation which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions in *Some Answered Questions*⁵ as well in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.⁶ However, as we shall see, the similarities go far beyond the subject of emanations.

It is natural to wonder what benefits can be derived from “correlating philosophy with the Bahá’í teachings.”⁷ The first, and most obvious is that doing so builds bridges to other schools of philosophy and to religions that have strong philosophical traditions. Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism are examples of such faiths. The better our philosophical understanding of the Bahá’í Faith, the better is our ability to engage in serious, in-depth dialogue on philosophical-theological subjects with these religions. Second, and more specifically, elucidating such correlations encourages bridge building to those religions and philosophies which, like Christianity were heavily influenced by Neoplatonism through the work of Origen, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas among others. Third, understanding the philosophic aspects of the Writings also facilitates apologetics because a philosophic understanding often helps in constructing strong explications for what the Writings say. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers several proofs of God, one of them being the First Mover argument which requires the rejection of an actual infinite regress as “absurd.”⁸ A philosophic understanding of the problems inherent in the concept of an actual infinite regress

helps us explain why 'Abdu'l-Bahá says this concept is untenable.

2. Ontology

Broadly put, ontology studies the nature of reality, i.e. the nature, constitution and structure of reality as a whole. It concerns such questions as what is real; what are the kinds or categories of things (e.g. sensible realities, intelligible realities); what attributes must all existing things have; and the assumptions about reality underlying various philosophies, world-views and even the sciences.⁹ Ontology differs from the sciences insofar as the sciences focus on one special aspect of physical reality such as living organisms or stars, whereas ontology is concerned with the universal framework or context in which all specific beings are found. Thus, ontology deals with the broadest and most fundamental aspects of reality and for this reason, understanding any system of thought requires insight into its explicit or implicit ontological beliefs.

3. The One and Its Essential Attributes

In the philosophy of Plotinus, the foundational concept is that of the One, or, as it is often called, the Good, which is the source and sustainer of all that exists. For the Bahá'í Writings, the One or the Good, is, of course, known as God, Who is "*the Creator of all*,"¹⁰ from Whom "*all creation sprang into existence*"¹¹ and Who is "*the Sustainer*"¹² of the being of all things.

The One or God is fundamental to Neoplatonic and Bahá'í thought because most if not all subsequent ideas and teachings are directly and/or indirectly related to the existence and nature of the Divine.

One of the most important similar foundational premises concerns the relationship of God or the One – we shall use these terms interchangeably – to its essential attributes. It is important to note that the One or 'the Good' as Plotinus calls it does not have 'goodness' as an attribute but rather is goodness itself. If the One possessed goodness as an attribute,

it would already be divided into two – itself and the attribute it possesses¹³ – and would no longer be an absolute unity. *Some Answered Questions* makes the same point about God's unity with His attributes:

*the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension. If the attributes are not identical with the Essence, there must also be a multiplicity of preexistences, and differences between the attributes and the Essence must also exist; and as Preexistence is necessary, therefore, the sequence of preexistences would become infinite. This is an evident error.*¹⁴

God's unity would be compromised by if there were a difference between His essential attributes and His Essence, and, of course God would be dependent on these attributes which are other than Himself, i.e. these attributes would be "preexistences" just as God is the "Preexistent"¹⁵ and the attributes must exist with Him. There must also be an infinite number of such attributes since God is without limits. However, there would have to be an infinite sequence of "preexistences", i.e. pre-existing attributes between God-in-Himself and His own attributes. Not only does such a division make God multiple, but it is also impossible because according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there can be no actual infinite regress.¹⁶ (A theoretical infinite regress of abstract numbers is possible, but the number of actual things is always some definite number). Thus, in the Writings, God, like the One is an absolute unity. Plotinus also tells us that the One is one with its activity¹⁷ and its own will.¹⁸ Although the Bahá'í Writings contain no explicit statement on these points, they are logically implied by the teaching of the absolute unity and simplicity of God and the statement that God is identical with His "essential names and attributes."

As noted above, if God were not one with His essential attributes, i.e. if His essential attributes were separate from Him, then He would be dependent on them for His nature to be what it is. This is not feasible. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, "God is absolutely independent;"¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh states that the existence of all things is

*contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as the former is preceded by a cause, whilst the latter is independent thereof. Absolute existence is strictly confined to God ...*²⁰

The reason God cannot be dependent on anything else is that He is the reason why all other things exist, He is the cause of their being, and therefore, He cannot depend on them. In other words, God, or the One has ontological priority. If He were dependent on anything, this priority would be lost. Plotinus states, "There must be something simple that is before all things, and must be other than all the things which derive from it."²¹ If the One is first, it cannot be dependent on anything.

Another way of saying that the One is absolutely independent is say it is self-sufficient:

This self-sufficiency is the essence of its [the One's] unity. Something there must be Supremely adequate, autonomous, all-transcending, most utterly without need ... Any manifold [phenomena], anything beneath the Unity is dependent.²²

Plotinus refers to the unity of the One because the One's condition of absolute unity requires it to be completely independent of anything else; if it were not, its unity would be a 'hostage' to other things, and, therefore, not absolute. Bahá'u'lláh states categorically that "God is Self-Sufficient, above any need of His creatures,"²³ an idea that is re-enforced by also referring to God as "Self-subsistent."²⁴ In other words, God's existence is completely independent of anything else. The One is absolutely self-sufficient, having no need of anything else and exists, so to speak, in and through itself.²⁵ Moreover, God, or the One, is His own good i.e. goodness Itself and has no higher good to which to aspire: He is "self-related and self-tending,"²⁶ i.e. tending toward Himself which is, in effect, an affirmation of self-unity. This accords with the Writings' reference to "the Oneness and unity of God."²⁷ This in turn leads us to be aware of the simplicity, i.e. non-composite nature of God, i.e. the simplicity of God which is one of the reasons God is eternal, not subject to decay: "compositions are destructible"²⁸ while simple things like God or the One or the

rational soul are not. By definition they have no parts into which they can decay.

The fact that the One is also beyond being²⁹ is another way of pointing to its unity and self-sufficiency. The One cannot be identified with 'being' because the One is the necessary precondition for all 'being,'³⁰ which requires a dyad of matter and form and the resulting multiplicity. Such multiplicity is incompatible with the One. 'Being' is what the One bestows upon its emanations; it is what humans experience but is not appropriate to the One. "It is precisely because there is nothing within the One that all things are from it; in order that Being may be brought about, the source must be no Being but Being's generator."³¹ 'Being' as we shall see later is established by the Nous which is the first hypostasis to emanate from the One.

4. The Uniqueness of the One

This unity of God makes God ontologically unique, since all things besides God are composites. This is especially evident in material creation in which all things are composites of atoms.³² Indeed, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

*all things are composites of four causes: the existence of everything depends upon four causes – the efficient cause, the matter, the form and the final cause ... Therefore, this chair is essentially phenomenal, for It is preceded by a cause, and Its existence depends upon causes.*³³

This analysis cannot possibly apply to God or the One, Who has no causes at all; He is not the result of any process of any kind. More specifically, He has no efficient or final cause bringing Him into being for otherwise He would not be the "Preexistent" but secondary to His cause. Plotinus says that the One is its own cause³⁴ which, in effect, is to say, the One has no cause at all since a literal interpretation would mean that the One is divided into cause and effect – which violates its unity. Such a claim also violates logic for to bring itself into existence the One would have to exist before it exists!

Because it has no pre-existing cause, the One exists necessarily, i.e. is a being Who cannot not exist. Unlike phenomenal or contingent beings, God or “Essential pre-existence [God] is an existence which is not preceded by a cause,”³⁵ which is to say that God is not a contingent but a necessary being. The same idea is found in Plotinus’ statement that “There must be something simple before all things, and this must be other than all the things which come after it...”³⁶ Because the One’s existence is not dependent on a preceding cause, its existence is not a mere possibility but a necessity. To argue that God may simply be a ‘potential’ or ‘possible’ is, in effect, to argue that a cause precedes the One to bring it into being which both the Writings and the *Enneads* reject.

God is also not limited by form and matter. God is not matter because if He were, He would be divided (and composite) as matter is, and He is not form because form by definition requires exclusion or limitation³⁷ to be something identifiable, definite and definable. That clashes with His unlimited nature. As Plotinus says, “The Unity is without shape, even shape intellectual.”³⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that “God is unlimited,”³⁹ in any way, which implicitly contains the idea that God is not limited by ‘form.’ If God were material (a stoic concept rejected by Plotinus) He would also be subject to the limitations of time and space and this is impossible for the being whose existence is the necessary pre-condition for the very existence of space and time.

Another way in which God’s unity makes Him unique is that, in the words of Plotinus, “The First remains intact even when other entities spring from it.”⁴⁰ As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says of God, “*The Real Speaker, the Essence of Unity, has always been in one condition, which neither changes nor alters, has neither transformation nor vicissitude.*”⁴¹ In other words, creation neither diminishes nor changes the Creator and is, therefore, eternal – which lays the ontological foundation for the belief that there has always been a creation of one kind or another: “*The Creator always had a creation; the rays have always shone and gleamed from the reality of the sun, for without the rays the sun would be opaque darkness.*”⁴² Furthermore, divine unity lays the foundations for the doctrine of emanation, which, as we shall see, both Plotinus and the Writings share. God or the

One cannot be diminished by creation since that would compromise His unity by being 'dissoluble' into separable parts, a method of creation which 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to as "manifestation." Such diminishment would also undermine the simplicity of the One which would scatter into parts. 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly contrasts 'manifestation' with "emanation."⁴³ In the latter, the creator and the created are related like "*action from the actor, [or] the writing from the writer,*"⁴⁴ which is to say the writing is not a separable aspect of the writer. We shall discuss this in more detail later.

5. The Question of Creation

The unity of the One and the question of the One's diminishment in creation inevitably raises the issue of how the One can create without undergoing change itself. Any alteration in God introduces the idea of multiplicity – and that is not acceptable. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that "*Changes and transformations are not applicable to that eternal reality [God]. Transformation from condition to condition is the attribute of contingent realities.*"⁴⁵ According to Plotinus, the One does not change.⁴⁶ That being the case, how can we explain the undiminished, i.e. unchanged condition of God? Plotinus' answer is that he distinguishes between (a) the act of a thing and (b) the act *from* a thing. As noted Plotinus scholar John Deck says,

There is heat *of* fire which is the same as the fire itself, and a heat that derives *from* fire. When the fire, by remaining just what It is, exercises the heat within Itself which is the Same as Itself, then the heat 'towards the external' ... has already necessarily come to be.⁴⁷

In other words, the fire itself is unchanged even though other things around it are heated. More technically, the One "exercises its own co-subsistent act which is itself."⁴⁸ In short, the act of the thing is the thing itself and the act *from* the thing is towards something else. The first refers to the One's unity, the latter to the One's creativity. The act emanating from the One is distinct from the act of being the One, and therefore, emanation does not change the One.

In keeping with this theme, we might also say that the One acts merely by being, by its presence in the same way that a magnet creates a magnetic field around itself simply by its presence. The field does not diminish the magnet in any way and, like creation, is a dependent correlate of the magnet. Thus, the One's existence is identical to its activity, a fact which yet again emphasises the absolute unity of the One.

Yet another consequence of God's unity and simplicity is that He has no external relations. Bahá'u'lláh says that

*there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute ...*⁴⁹

Plotinus says the One is "unrelated to all"⁵⁰ and adds, "We cannot think of the First as moving towards any other; He holds his own manner of being before any other was; even Being we withhold and therefore all relation to beings."⁵¹ "[M]oving towards another" refers to entering relations which is made explicit in the second half of the quote. The reason the One or God has no external relations is that such relations would limit God's independence since the relation would 'tie' Him to something lesser than Himself; this would also compromise His freedom and ontological pre-eminence. Finally, it would also limit God, i.e. deny His essential ontological nature such as self-sufficiency: "This self-sufficing is the essence of its unity. Something there must be supremely adequate, autonomous, all-transcending, most utterly without need."⁵² God, or the One, is radically transcendent.

This lack of external relations is an important matter because it is the basis not only for Plotinus' philosophy of emanationism and intermediary hypostases of the One, but is also the basis for the Bahá'í teaching that an intermediary or Manifestation is necessary:

since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure

*and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.*⁵³

In other words, the existence of the Manifestation (or Plotinus' Nous and Soul) are not arbitrary, external impositions on philosophy and theology but are inner logical necessities mandated by the nature of God. For Bahá'ís it is the first indication that the Manifestation is more than a human being divinely elected and is, instead, a Being ontologically different from humanity in essential respects.

Another aspect of the One's radical transcendence is its complete freedom from external constraint. Plotinus tells us that the One (sometimes called the First) is only "determined by its uniqueness and not in any sense of being under compulsion; compulsion did not co-exist with the Supreme but has place only among secondaries..."⁵⁴ The "secondaries" are those things that God created, and, therefore, come after Him ontologically speaking. However, according to Plotinus and the Writings, the "secondaries" have no power over God. In Bahá'í terms, He is the "the One, the All-Powerful, the Almighty, the Unconstrained."⁵⁵ From God's absolute freedom, we may also deduce His omnipresence, since to be truly "All-Powerful" He must be present everywhere, i.e. unconstrained by limits of time and space. According to Plotinus, the One is "everywhere yet nowhere."⁵⁶ God, or the One is, of course, "nowhere" because He is unlike ordinary things which are definitely located in time and space. He is everywhere insofar as He is the necessary pre-condition for the existence of time and space and thus 'is' wherever time and space are found. It should be noted that being a necessary pre-condition for time and space means that the One cannot be identical to them.

6. God Contains All

One of the key features of God or The One is that God 'contains' everything. This, of course, explains why He 'is everywhere.' Plotinus writes,

Everything brought into being under some principle not itself is contained either within its maker or, if there is an intermediate, within that; having a prior

essential to its being it needs that prior always, otherwise it would not be contained at all.⁵⁷

In other words, a being is 'in' some other entity if it depends on that entity for its existence. It is virtually within its source, i.e. is present in its source *qua* the (emanative) action of that source just as 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that the action is virtually present within the speaker, or the writing within the writer.⁵⁸ The idea of containment is also present in the Bahá'í Writings. Bahá'u'lláh writes, "*Likewise hath the eternal King spoken: "No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it."*"⁵⁹ This idea in turn serves to provide ontological foundations for God's omnipresence, for if God is before, after and in everything, then He is obviously present everywhere, i.e. omnipresent as we have noted previously.

At this point a clarification is necessary. Saying that God contains everything because of their dependence on Him does not introduce multiplicity into God Himself. This 'containment' is simply the result of God's ontological position as the apex, i.e. the most inclusive form of being and the source and foundation of all other beings. Moreover, He is the necessary and sufficient condition of their existence and in this sense 'contains' them simply by virtue of His being. We might also say that God contains through His powers or names such as "the Creator." Bahá'u'lláh says, "*His name, the Creator, presupposeth a creation, even as His title, the Lord of Men, must involve the existence of a servant.*"⁶⁰ The virtual containment of things 'within' God or His names is the 'presupposition' of their existence in the name of 'Creator.'

However, because the One contains all things does not mean that Plotinus or the Writings advocate some form of pantheism which identifies God and His creation. Plotinus makes it clear that the One transcends all and though it contains all things it is not any of these things: "All in that region [of creation] is the One and not the One – nothing else because deriving thence, yet not that because the One is giving it forth is not merged into it."⁶¹ Things 'are' the One because they are the signs of its creative power, but they are not the One because the One cannot be limited by any of the

conditions to which created things are subject. This is precisely 'Abdu'l-Bahá's point:

*the superior reality does not descend nor abase itself to inferior states; then how could it be that the Universal Reality of God, which is freed from all descriptions and qualifications, notwithstanding its absolute sanctity and purity, should resolve itself into the forms of the realities of the creatures, which are the source of imperfections? This is a pure imagination which one cannot conceive.*⁶²

Supporting pantheism would, in effect, be an admission that God is not a simple, i.e. non-composite unity but rather is dispersed throughout creation – a belief that 'Abdu'l-Bahá associates with “manifestation.”⁶³ From this doctrine we can also deduce why the Writings reject the Christian concept of the incarnation: God cannot diminish Himself and descend into a phenomenal being. It violates His very nature to do so.

The One is omnipresent not only as an efficient cause bringing all things into being, it is also present as their final cause. As Plotinus says,

*The Good [the One] is that on which all else depends, towards which all Existences aspire as to their source and their need, while Itself is without need, sufficient to Itself, aspiring to no other, the measure and Term of all ...*⁶⁴

The One, God, is both the efficient and final cause of all existence, i.e. the source and ground of their being as well as the goal for which they strive, each in a manner appropriate to their nature.

'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “*The Creator of all is One God. From this same God all creation sprang into existence, and He is the one goal, towards which everything in nature yearns,*”⁶⁵ Bahá'u'lláh describes God as the “*Desire of all created things.*”⁶⁶ By being the ‘Great Attractor’ and drawing all things towards Him, God, the One is the final cause which will complete their being for in the process of evolving towards God, they will attain their own highest perfection. The precise nature of this perfection depends on the nature of the evolving being: for an

atom it may be motion, for an animal the life of instinct, for a human being, a life dedicated to the spirit.

The belief that God is the final cause of all things also indicates that creation, the universe, is teleological in its deepest nature, i.e. goal oriented. This, in turn, suggests that the development of nature is not purely a matter of chance, i.e. "is not a fortuitous composition and arrangement."⁶⁷ Consequently, any cosmological explanations that ignore teleology must be intrinsically incomplete, a viewpoint that obviously has enormous implications for the Bahá'í teachings about the harmony of science and religion. Science rejects teleological explanations and this position will be difficult to reconcile with the teleological views of the Writings.

7. The Knowledge of the One

One of Plotinus' most surprising statements is that the One does not have knowledge – at least not knowledge in the human sense which depends on a division between subject and object. If the One possess this kind of knowledge, then knowledge and the One are distinct, and this in turn implies a division in the One. Thus, it cannot have objects of knowledge.

The One, as transcending Intellect [Nous, the "First Mind"] transcends knowing; above All need, it is above the need of knowing which pertains solely to the Secondary Nature [Nous] ... The Transcendent, thus, neither knows itself nor is known in itself.⁶⁸

If God or the One had objects of thought, He would no longer be independent since He would need these objects in order to know them. Knowledge, after all, requires a subject and an object.

This would also compromise the unity of God, since the act of thinking about things creates a division within the thinker, i.e. between the thinker himself and the object of thought. Insofar as God does not have knowledge or think as we do, God is beyond knowledge and thought, i.e. He includes and transcends them. Oddly enough, as Plotinus points out, this means that God does not know Himself as an object of

knowledge – although of course He may know Himself in ways that transcend the human mode of knowledge. The Good does not need self-consciousness.⁶⁹

Furthermore, God, the One, is not limited by ‘intellection’, i.e. rational discursive thought conditioned by the subject/object division and the matter/form distinction⁷⁰ which characterizes created beings. As Plotinus says, “intellection and the Intellectual-Principle [Nous] must be characteristics of beings coming later.”⁷¹ Elsewhere Plotinus says,

In sum this intellection of the Good is impossible: I do not mean that it is impossible to have intellection of the Good – we may admit that possibility – but there can be no intellection by the Good itself, for this would be to include the inferior with the good... Anyone making the Good at once Thinker and Thought identifies it with Being ...⁷²

According to Plotinus, “intellection seems to have been given as an aid to the diviner but weaker beings, an eye to the blind.”⁷³ Humans are among these “diviner” beings who possess intellection.

The Bahá'í Writings agree with Plotinus' basic teachings on this issue of the absolutely unique nature of God's knowledge. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

The Prophets say, *The Knowledge of God has no need of the existence of beings, but the knowledge of the creature needs the existence of things known; if the Knowledge of God had need of any other thing, then it would be the knowledge of the creature, and not that of God. For the Preexistent is different from the phenomenal, and the phenomenal is opposed to the Preexistent; that which we attribute to the creature – that is, the necessities of the contingent beings – we deny for God.... The phenomenal knowledge has need of things known; the Preexistent Knowledge is independent of their existence.*⁷⁴

In other words, God does not require objects of knowledge to know. While such knowing is inconceivable to human

beings, the necessity of this attribute can be logically deduced from God's unity and simplicity. The other characteristics of God's knowing as outlined by Plotinus – the lack of the subject/object and matter/form division, the absence of self-consciousness as we experience it and the lack of ratiō discursive intellection – all can be logically deduced from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's foregoing statement. To the best of my knowledge, the Writings do not contain explicit statements on these issues, but they are implicitly present in other teachings about God not requiring an object of knowledge.

This difference between human and divine knowledge brings us to a fundamental principle of ontology and epistemology in the *Enneads* and the Writings. In both of them, ontology and epistemology, i.e. the nature of reality and our position in it and what we can or cannot know are closely inter-related. What we are able to know depends on our ontological degree or condition. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

*Difference of condition is an obstacle to knowledge; the inferior degree cannot comprehend the superior degree. How then can the phenomenal reality comprehend the Preexistent Reality? Knowing God, therefore, means the comprehension and the knowledge of His attributes, and not of His Reality.*⁷⁵

In other words, beings which stand lower in the hierarchy of being cannot comprehend or understand the nature of those beings above them. “*The mineral cannot imagine the growing power of the plant. The tree cannot understand the power of movement in the animal,*”⁷⁶ says 'Abdu'l-Bahá and adds, “*All superior kingdoms are incomprehensible to the inferior; how therefore could It be possible that the creature, man, should understand the almighty Creator of all?*”⁷⁷

Humankind cannot adequately understand God because “*That which contains is superior to that which is contained.*”⁷⁸ We have already noted that ‘contained’ in this context means ‘dependent on.’ By being ‘dependent on’ the One, all things are inferior or secondary to it both in the order of being (ontology) and in the order of logic, i.e. the One is the logical pre-condition for the others. Because God occupies the supreme ontological position, “the essential knowledge of God

surrounds, in the same way, the realities of things.”⁷⁹ That is why God has perfect understanding of them. We, however, cannot form an adequate or complete conception of the One because it is not limited by any of the conditions of existence that limit us. We hasten to add that this does not necessarily mean that all our conceptions are false. Logically, incompleteness and falsity are not the same things since the latter refers to a defect in the content of a statement while the former does not.

It should be noted that in the Bahá'í Writings, the use of the word “comprehend” combines the meanings of ‘contain’ and ‘understand,’ i.e. combines the ontological and epistemological meanings of the word. For example, “*Minds are powerless to comprehend God*”⁸⁰ exhibits both meanings: minds cannot contain God, i.e. be independent of God, and therefore, they cannot understand Him more than their ontological position allows. “*For the phenomenal reality can comprehend the Preexistent attributes only to the extent of the human capacity.*”⁸¹ In a statement that explicitly shows both meanings simultaneously, He says,

*For comprehension is the result of encompassing – embracing must be, so that comprehension may be – and the Essence of Unity surrounds all and is not surrounded.*⁸²

Thus, we can see how in the Writings, ontology and epistemology are closely correlated and cannot be understood apart from each other. The same is true in the *Enneads*: the One which is the pre-condition for all existence and which transcends all particular existences cannot be adequately known by what it emanates.

8. Knowledge About God

This, of course, raises a serious issue: how can we learn about the One or God? The idea that God is completely unknowable in anyway whatsoever is untenable for, among other reasons, such a statement even refutes itself. To say that God is unknowable is already to say that we know at least one

thing about Him. The Writings, however, tell us more precisely what such phrases as 'knowing God' actually mean.

*Knowing God, therefore, means the comprehension and the knowledge of His attributes, and not of His Reality. This knowledge of the attributes is also proportioned to the capacity and power of man; it is not absolute. Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things as they exist, according to the capacity and the power of man.*⁸³

In other words, we know as much as human capacity allows about God's attributes or names but not about God-in-Himself. Moreover we do not learn directly about God but rather through the reliable instruction of the Manifestation.

Plotinus agrees that the One-in-itself is unknowable:

Certainly the Absolute is none of the things of which it is the source – its nature is that nothing can be affirmed of it – not existence, not essence, not life – since it is that which transcends all these.⁸⁴

Elsewhere he says, "nothing can be affirmed of it [the One];"⁸⁵ the One is ineffable, it cannot be written or spoken.⁸⁶

We do not, it is true grasp it by knowledge, but that does not mean that we are utterly void of it ; we hold it not so as to state it, but so as to be able to speak *about* it. And *we can and do state what it is not, while we are silent as to what it is*: we are, in fact, speaking of it in light of its sequels ...⁸⁷

Thus, we can deny imperfections to the One, and we can talk 'about' it in our limited human terms derived from our experience from created things, i.e. "its sequels." As Dominic O'Meara says,

When we speak 'about' the One, saying that it is the cause, we are in fact speaking about ourselves, saying that we are casually dependent and expressing what we experience in this condition of dependence ... In this way the One remains ineffable in itself, even though we speak about it.⁸⁸

We can only speak of the One in our terms, not its terms.

For Their part, the Bahá'í Writings also agree that God, the One, is unknowable in Himself and knowable only in our human terms. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "*it is certain that the Divine Reality is unknown with regard to its essence and is known with regard to its attributes.*"⁸⁹ In other words, knowledge *about* (not *of*) God is available, but we must understand the term 'knowledge' correctly:

*Nevertheless, we speak of the names and attributes of the Divine Reality, and we praise Him by attributing to Him sight, hearing, power, life and knowledge. We affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections ... It is not that we can comprehend His knowledge, His sight, His power and life, for it is beyond our comprehension; for the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension.*⁹⁰

Here, too, we observe that when we speak of God — as we cannot avoid doing — then our speech must be understood in a certain way, as a denial of imperfection rather than as an attribution of perfections. This is precisely what Plotinus says: "*we can and do state what it is not, while we are silent as to what it is.*"⁹¹ The one thing God or the One cannot be is imperfect. For Bahá'ís, however, reliable knowledge of God comes from the Manifestation of the age.

The knowledge of the Reality of the Divinity is impossible and unattainable, but the knowledge of the Manifestations of God is the knowledge of God, for the bounties, splendors and divine attributes are apparent in Them. Therefore, if man attains to the knowledge of the Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God; and if he be neglectful of the knowledge of the Holy Manifestations, he will be bereft of the knowledge of God.⁹²

Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

with reference to this plane of existence, every statement and elucidation is defective, all praise and all description are unworthy, every conception is vain,

*and every meditation is futile. But for this Essence of the essences, this Truth of truths, this Mystery of mysteries, there are reflections, auroras, appearances and resplendencies in the world of existence. The dawning-place of these splendors, the place of these reflections, and the appearance of these manifestations are the Holy Dawning-places, the Universal Realities and the Divine Beings, Who are the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of God. All the perfections, the bounties, the splendors which come from God are visible and evident in the Reality of the Holy Manifestations.*⁹³

This means that for Bahá'ís, there is a reliable source of knowledge appropriately adapted to human capacity and that all discourse about God is not necessarily futile if guided by the Manifestations. Naturally, humans need to undergo spiritual exercises to prepare themselves to accept this knowledge (all receive this knowledge but not all choose to accept it) of God, but the fact remains it is available for those who choose to accept it. Nonetheless, in the Bahá'í view, our personal efforts while necessary are not sufficient to attain this knowledge: *“Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through their own unaided efforts, nor can it ever be possible for the mirror to free itself from its dross.”*⁹⁴

*Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being. At that hour will the Mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit, shine forth from the City of God resplendent as the morn, and, through the trumpet-blast of knowledge, will awaken the heart, the soul, and the spirit from the slumber of heedlessness.*⁹⁵

Making an effort on our own is the necessary pre-condition for the completion of the quest for knowledge by the holy spirit or ‘Mystic Herald.’ With Plotinus, however, there is no

counterpart to the holy spirit or the “Mystic Herald” to fully actualize our quest for knowledge of the One. Nor is there in the *Enneads* any guarantor of the knowledge we receive by our own efforts, whereas in the case of the Writings, there is. In the *Enneads*, we are completely left to our own spiritual efforts in the quest for knowledge of the One.

9. The One and Emanation

Having found numerous and far-reaching agreements between Plotinus' and the Bahá'í Writings' concept of God or the One, we shall now turn our attention to the issue of how the One creates, i.e. to the issue of emanation. It should be noted that the issue some controversy. Dominic O'Meara for example, prefers the word “derivation”⁹⁶ since ‘emanation’ has too many problematical connotations. Lloyd P Gerson challenges the applicability of the very concept of ‘emanation’ as traditionally understood in studying Plotinus.⁹⁷ However, this paper shall retain the traditional term ‘emanation’ not only because it is used in the Bahá'í Writings but also because it is the term most commonly used terms in discussions of Neoplatonism.

Perhaps the best way to understand the concept of ‘emanation’ is to examine one of the most frequently used images of emanation both in Plotinus and in the Writings. Speaking of the One in relationship to its creations, Plotinus says,

The only reasonable explanation of [creative] act flowing from it lies in the analogy of light from the *sun*. The entire intellectual order [a lower level of creation] may be figured as *a kind of light with the One in repose at its summit* as its King: but this manifestation is *not cast out from it* [the sun] ... but the One *shines eternally*, resting upon the Intellectual Realm [Nous]; this [Intellectual Realm] *not identical with its source ...*⁹⁸

We observe important aspects of emanationism in this selection: creation as a ‘light’ or efflux from the sun; the unchanged and unchanging sun as the source of the light; the

source lasts eternally; the distinction between the light and the sun. (Readers must, of course, bear in mind that it was generally believed until relatively recent times that the sun was unchanged and undiminished by the process of giving light.) Noteworthy, too, is the ontological distinction between the Creator, “source” and what is created (the Nous).

Elsewhere, Plotinus writes that the relationship between the One and its creation

must be a circumradiation – produced from the Supreme but from the Supreme unaltering – and may be compared to the brilliant light encircling the sun and ceaselessly generated from that unchanging substance.⁹⁹

Here, too, we observe the sun image with its emphasis on the unchanging, and, by implication, undiminished being of the sun as well as the surrounding. The fact that the sun radiates “ceaselessly” also suggests another Neoplatonic and Bahá'í teaching, viz. the eternity of the created world, i.e. that there has always been a creation.

The Bahá'í Writings also compare God to the sun and creation to the ‘circumradiant’ light.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá informs us that “*Creation is like the sunlight; God is the sun. This light comes forth from the sun; that does not mean that the sun has become the light. The light emanates from the sun.*”¹⁰⁰ Here, too, we observe the ontological distinction between the sun (God) and the light (creation) and that sun itself is not dispersed into the light. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes such a dispersal as ‘manifestation’ which He clearly distinguishes from emanation:

But the appearance through manifestation is the manifestation of the branches, leaves, blossoms and fruit from the seed; for the seed in its own essence becomes branches and fruits, and its reality enters into the branches, the leaves and fruits. This appearance through manifestation would be for God, the Most High, simple imperfection; and this is quite impossible, for the implication would be that the Absolute Preexistent is qualified with phenomenal attributes.

*But if this were so, pure independence would become mere poverty, and true existence would become nonexistence, and this is impossible.*¹⁰¹

God, the sun, does not manifest Himself because to do so would not only disperse God into phenomenal parts and, thereby, demote Him to the level of His creations, but also would diminish God Himself. The concept of emanation is intended precisely to avoid such suggestions. The importance of this point cannot be overstressed because it is the very fact of non-dispersal that distinguishes emanationism from all forms of pantheism. 'Abdu'l-Bahá categorically rejects pantheism when He says, "[T]he sun does not descend and does not abase itself,"¹⁰² a position with which Plotinus agrees.

It should be mentioned in passing that although Plotinus uses other images to illustrate the nature of the One and its emanations, the underlying implications are always those cited above. "Imagine a spring that has no source outside itself; it gives itself to all the rivers, yet is never exhausted by what they take, but remains always integrally as it was,"¹⁰³ he says, and then adds,

think of the Life coursing throughout some mighty tree while yet it is the *stationary Principle of the whole, in no sense scattered over all that extent* but, as it were, vested in the root: it is the giver of the entire and manifold life of the tree, but remains *unmoved itself*, not manifold but the Principle of that manifold life. And this surprises no one: though it is in fact astonishing *how all that varied vitality springs from the unvarying*, and how that very manifoldness [multiplicity] could not be *unless before the multiplicity there were something all singleness*; for, *the Principle is not broken into parts to make the total; on the contrary, such partition would destroy both*; nothing would come into being if its cause, thus broken up, changed character.¹⁰⁴

This passage also shows the Plotinian principle that multiplicity must be preceded by oneness, something emphasised when he writes, "Standing before all things, there must exist a Simplex [the One] differing from all its sequel, self-

gathered not interblended with the forms that rise from it.”¹⁰⁵ Dominic O’Meara calls this the “principle of Prior Simplicity.”¹⁰⁶ According to him, this idea is common both to Neoplatonism and science, which both seek to explain the present state of the universe by reference to a simpler state, i.e. deriving the complex from the simple, or, in the terms of ancient philosophy, the many from the one. “Something all singleness” must precede the creation of many. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms the same principle in various applications when He states,

it is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning – *for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two.* Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element ... This composition and arrangement, through the wisdom of God and His preexistent might, were produced from one natural organization ...¹⁰⁷

Applied to ontology or metaphysics, the “principle of Prior Simplicity,” inevitably leads to postulating a single source for the entire universe, a concept that in physics may be termed a ‘singularity’ while in ontology the same idea is expressed as ‘the One’ or ‘God.’ The significance of this principle is that it highlights an underlying similarity between science both in theory and practice and the philosophy inherent in Plotinus and the Bahá’í Writings.

10. Why Emanation?

If the One exists, why does it create? Trouble-free as it might appear, this question, as we shall see, can lead to some difficult considerations about necessity and free will. According to Plotinus, the One “is perfect and, in our metaphor has overflowed, and its exuberance has produced the new.”¹⁰⁸ In *Enneads* V, 4, Plotinus explicates the universal principle that underlies the concept of emanation:

If The First is perfect, utterly perfect above all, and is the beginning of all power, it must be the most

powerful of all that is, and all other powers must act in some partial imitation of it. Now other beings, coming to perfection, are observed to generate; they are unable to remain self-closed; they produce: and this is true not merely of beings endowed with will, but of growing things where there is no will; even lifeless objects impart something of themselves, as far as they may; fire warms ... How then could the most perfect remain self-set- the First Good, the Power towards all, how could it grudge or be powerless to give of itself, and how at that would it still be the Source?¹⁰⁹

The principle that 'perfection generates beyond itself' is modelled by the One and imitated by all other things, each in its own degree.¹¹⁰ The One sets this example, and to do otherwise, i.e. to be 'grudging' of its inexhaustible power would be less than perfect by the standard the One itself has set for itself. Such superabundant generosity is the only appropriate attribute to its infinite nature.

The Bahá'í Writings have a similar explanation for the principle underlying God's creation. The most succinct statement comes from *Gleanings*: "His name, the Creator, presupposeth a creation, even as His title, the Lord of Men, must involve the existence of a servant."¹¹¹ In a more detailed explanation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

the reality of Divinity is characterized by certain names and attributes. Among these names are Creator, Resuscitator, Provider, the All-Present, Almighty, Omniscient and Giver. These names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental. This is a very subtle point which demands close attention. Their existence is proved and necessitated by the appearance of phenomena. For example, Creator presupposes creation, Resuscitator implies resuscitation, Provider necessitates provision; otherwise, these would be empty and impossible names. Merciful evidences an object upon which mercy is bestowed. If mercy were not manifest, this attribute of God would not be realized ...Therefore, the divine names and attributes

*presuppose the existence of phenomena implied by those names and attributes ...*¹¹²

First, we should note that these attributes are “not accidental,” they are essential, i.e. attributes identical with God’s Essence.¹¹³ This is how God wills Himself to be. Second, the name of “Provider” calls to mind Plotinus’ belief that the One must be generous, not grudging; must have an abundance from which to provide willingly. The same idea is implicit in the names “Giver,” “All-Mighty,” and “Creator.” In other words, the idea that God, the One, the “All-Possessing”¹¹⁴ creates out of generosity and inherent wealth. Third, the passage indicates that these creations are necessary because otherwise these “attribute[s] of God would not be realized.” This leads to a serious issue, namely, the freedom of God, or the One.

Plotinus asserts the One’s freedom, when he writes,

It [the One] is, therefore, in a sense determined – determined, I mean by its uniqueness and not in any sense being under compulsion; compulsion did not coexist with the Supreme but has place only among the secondaries this uniqueness [of the One] is not from outside.¹¹⁵

This means that freedom of will is established whenever we act without pressure from external compulsions that force us to do one thing or another. In the case of the One, which is free of all external relations – as is God in the Bahá'í view as we recall – there obviously cannot be any external compulsion acting on the One. Thus, the actions of the One are entirely its own; if it exercises will, it is pure self-will. The One’s generosity is free. The Bahá'í Writings lead us to the identical conclusion. God is the “All-Powerful,”¹¹⁶ which clearly tells that there is nothing external to God which can exercise compulsion on Him. That being the case, His actions are self-evidently free.

What about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that if there were no recipients of mercy, God’s name of the Merciful “*would not be realized?*”¹¹⁷ Does this not suggest compulsion, i.e. requirements being exercised on God insofar as there is a standard that He must meet? To answer this, we must distinguish between verbal and logical necessity. For example,

saying that God must create beings for His mercy to be revealed is an example of verbal necessity; the wording — “must” — appears to suggest that God is being externally compelled, but in actual fact, He is not so. God’s unique nature and will have willed the situation to be such that the revelation of His mercy includes the greatest number of beings. Logically, He cannot be compelled by external forces and so, any ‘compulsion’ must come from within Him — but that is the very definition of freedom. The only constraints on the One or God are ‘constraints’ of its own nature, which are not distinct from it but rather, identical with it.

11. Emanation and the Emanative Order

The concept of emanations is key to any comparison between the Writings and the *Enneads*. There is no doubt that the Bahá’í Writings advocate emanation as the means of creating and structuring reality. For this reason, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Chapter 53 of *Some Answered Questions* expends considerable effort in explaining the difference between emanation and manifestation. In manifestation

*the seed in its own essence becomes branches and fruits, and its reality enters into the branches, the leaves and fruits. This appearance through manifestation would be for God, the Most High, simple imperfection; and this is quite impossible, for the implication would be that the Absolute Preexistent is qualified with phenomenal attributes.*¹¹⁸

The seed develops into the branches and leaves and is thus ontologically one with them. In contrast, light emanates from the sun; the sun is not changed or diminished and remains ontologically distinct from the sun. Therefore, “*Therefore, all creatures emanate from God.*”¹¹⁹

With this statement ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has already shown how Bahá’í cosmology shares an emanationist foundation with the *Enneads*. However, the similarities run further. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

all creatures emanate from God – that is to say, it is by God that all things are realized, and by Him that all beings have attained to existence. The first thing which emanated from God is that universal reality, which the ancient philosophers termed the “First Mind,” and which the people of Bahá call the “First Will.” This emanation, in that which concerns its action in the world of God, is not limited by time or place; it is without beginning or end – beginning and end in relation to God are one ...

Though the “First Mind” is without beginning, it does not become a sharer in the preexistence of God, for the existence of the universal reality in relation to the existence of God is nothingness, and it has not the power to become an associate of God and like unto Him in preexistence.¹²⁰

Here we observe agreement with Plotinus' statement that Nous or “Mind” or “First Mind” is the first level of emanation from the One, or God. The “philosophers” to whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers are in all likelihood the Neoplatonists, i.e. followers of Plotinus or at least those influenced by Plotinus who have adopted his emanationist schema. Further, we note that Nous or “First Mind” is not constrained by time or space, just as it is not in Plotinus, according to whom, time and space are part of nature as an emanation of the Soul.¹²¹ In other words, Nous is ontologically superior to time and space. For Plotinus, as for the Writings, Nous has always existed but, unlike God, or the One, it is not its own precondition for existence, i.e. does not have “the preexistence of God.” Thus it remains ontologically inferior to the One, because in both systems, it is derived from the One and, therefore, dependent on it.

According to Plotinus, the order of emanations runs as follows:

THE ONE

NOUS

SOUL – higher Soul (receptive)

SOUL – lower Soul (active)

Contains NATURE

Briefly, the One emanates the Nous, which contemplates the One and becomes an image of it. It is important to bear in mind that in Plotinus, contemplation is itself a form of creation/emanation and, therefore, the Nous emanates the Soul which is itself an image of the Nous.¹²²

Here is how Plotinus describes the emanation of the Nous, sometimes translated as 'Spirit,'¹²³ the Intellect, "the Intellectual Principle" or "the Divine Mind."¹²⁴

Seeking nothing, possessing nothing, lacking nothing, the One is perfect and, in our metaphor, has *overflowed*, and *its exuberance has produced the new*; this product has turned again to its begetter and been filled and has become its contemplator and so an *Intellectual-Principle*.¹²⁵

The first product of the One's superabundance is the Nous or Mind, which represents a new, secondary and lower level of reality, insofar as the Nous depends on the One. Indeed, the Nous is the beginning of Being, for as Plotinus says, "the source [the One] must be no Being but Being's generator ... [the Nous] establishes Being."¹²⁶ In other words, the One, or God Himself is above Being because He is the necessary (and sufficient) pre-condition for Being itself, i.e. "Being's generator." If He were not, then He would, in a significant way, be of the same ontological kind as His creations and the Nous. This negates the absolute uniqueness of the One or God and is an impossible state of affairs for Plotinus and the Writings.

Plotinus also mentions that like all existing things, the Nous represents "in image the engendering archetype,"¹²⁷ i.e. the Nous reflects its archetype, the One. However, because "all that is fully achieved engenders"¹²⁸, i.e. 'creates' or emanates a subsequent, ontologically lower level of being, the Nous reflects the attributes of the One into the still lower, i.e. more dependent levels of being that emanate from Nous itself. In the Plotinian schema, this means that the Nous emanates the Soul

and with the Soul, we have nature. Of course the Nous can only do this because it is turned or oriented towards the One since the “offspring must seek and love the begetter.”¹²⁹

This latter point is worth exploring: the Nous fulfills its own being by turning towards the One, i.e. by reflecting the light of the One like a perfect mirror. This theme of turning towards the One runs through the *Enneads* and the Bahá'í Writings; in the latter, for example, the Manifestations are described as

*Primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles. By the revelation of these Gems of Divine virtue all the names and attributes of God, such as knowledge and power, sovereignty and dominion, mercy and wisdom, glory, bounty, and grace, are made manifest.*¹³⁰

The assertion that the “Primal Mirrors” are “expressions” of God, recalls ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that “*The proceeding through emanation is like the coming forth of the action from the actor, of the writing from the writer.*”¹³¹ The “action” and the “writing” are expressions of the actor or writer; they come from the actor or writer but are not the same. In short, they emanate from their source. Thus, to say that the “Primal Mirrors” are an “expression” of God is to say that They are emanations but, of course, emanations with ontological priority over lower levels of reality.

*The dawning-place of these splendors, the place of these reflections, and the appearance of these manifestations are the Holy Dawning-places, the Universal Realities and the Divine Beings, Who are the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of God.*¹³²

Elsewhere the Writings say,

These Tabernacles of holiness, these primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles. By the revelation of these gems of divine virtue all the names and attributes of God, such as knowledge and power, sovereignty and dominion,

*mercy and wisdom, glory, bounty and grace, are made manifest.*¹³³

Unlike all other things which, in their own way and indirectly by way of the Manifestation, also reflect God's light, the "Universal Realities" reflect God's light or creative power directly; that is why They are "the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of God." The word "universal" also suggests that they affect all of reality and not only the aspects of reality known to us. The Writings also say, "*In the Manifestation of God, the perfectly polished mirror, appear the qualities of the Divine in a form that man is capable of comprehending.*"¹³⁴ In other words, the "Primal Mirrors," the Manifestations, make the "names and attributes of God" apparent or "manifest," in a form comprehensible to lower levels of creation. Here we observe how the Manifestations fulfill the major function of the Plotinian Nous.

Let us now turn our attention to the Plotinian Soul. The Soul reflects the Nous but not in a straight forward way since the Soul itself has two aspects. First, there is a higher or "pure"¹³⁵ aspect which reflects the Platonic Ideas, or, as we shall see, the names of God; this is the Soul-in-itself which is sometimes described as the "intelligible world."¹³⁶ Second, there is also an active 'lower aspect' of the Soul which emanates nature itself. As Plotinus says, "soul has a double efficacy, its act *within* itself and its act *from* within outwards towards the new production."¹³⁷ The act "within" itself is the unknowable inner essence of the higher Soul and its act "from itself" is the 'lower' Soul which directs action outward.

To explain why Soul creates the natural world, Plotinus asserts,

In the absence of body, soul could not have gone forth, since there is no other place to which its nature would allow it to descend. Since go forth it must, it will generate a place for itself; at once, body also exists.¹³⁸

The Soul sees the darkness beneath it – the light of God has reached its emanative limit or lowest level of ontologically possible being.¹³⁹ Then the Soul "by seeing [contemplating] brings to shape [form]"¹⁴⁰ creates the ordered universe we

know. Dominic O'Meara tells us that "nature is not a reality separate from soul in the same way that soul is a reality separate from intellect [Nous]." ¹⁴¹ Nature receives only the faintest signs of this forming activity, but it is enough to make an image of the One present in all things. Similarly, the Bahá'í Writings say,

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. ¹⁴²

Even the light imagery here is consistent with the *Enneads*. In the Plotinian sense of 'dependence' Soul contains nature; therefore, "The Soul bears it up, and it lies within, no fragment of it unsharing." ¹⁴³ No aspect of nature is outside of or beyond Soul which gives life to the natural world.

However, at this point we have reached an important difference between the Writings and the *Enneads*. Whereas Plotinus separates the functions of the Nous and the Soul, the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation includes the functions of the Plotinian Nous and Soul, i.e. the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation combines the functions of the first two emanations in the Plotinian system. Bahá'u'lláh says of the Manifestations,

all else besides these Manifestations, live by the operation of Their Will, and move and have their being through the outpourings of Their grace. ¹⁴⁴

Here Bahá'u'lláh categorically asserts that "all besides these Manifestations" live by the "Will" of the Manifestations, Who, in this sense have the life-giving function of the Plotinian World Soul. It is by the Manifestations that all things "have their being," i.e. have their existence. This is exactly what the Soul does for everything in nature. Another similarity between the Manifestation and the Soul is that "the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing

realities.”¹⁴⁵ Nature, as Plotinus tells us, is contained by the Soul.

At this point a question arises. In the *Enneads* “Soul contemplates [Nous] and creates matter.”¹⁴⁶ Low as it is on the ontological scale of being, matter enables the One’s attributes to appear in the actual things in the world of nature. May we conclude that the Manifestation creates matter in a manner analogous to the Soul? It is certainly tempting to answer affirmatively especially in light of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement:

*And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.*¹⁴⁷

The fact that there is no “direct” tie between God and creation, might also suggest that the intermediary between the “transient and the Eternal” and the “contingent and the Absolute” could have been the agent of creation. This agent would also be responsible for the creation of matter. However, this only a logical possibility which cannot be supported by textual evidence from the Writings. Therefore, we must leave this question unanswered until such time as further research can clarify the issue.

Let us now examine a diagram comparing the emanative order in the Writings and in the *Enneads*.

THE ONE
NOUS

GOD
MANIFESTATION /
KINGDOM
“heavenly station”, “primal
Mirror”

SOUL – – higher Soul
(contemplative)

MANIFESTATION /
KINGDOM

– physical, rational
embodied station

SOUL – – lower Soul (active) WORLD OF CREATION
 Contains NATURE

Most obvious here is that in both the Writings and in the *Enneads* reality or existence is divided into three aspects. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, existence is 'divided; into three aspects, i.e. "*the world of God, the world of the Kingdom, and the world of Creation.*"¹⁴⁸ The Manifestation is the intermediary between the "world of God" and the "world of creation."¹⁴⁹ In Plotinus, we have the One, the Nous and the Soul. In both cases we observe a tripartite division of existence. We have already noted the similarity of function in the three "hypostases" as Plotinus calls them.

12. The Principle of 'Turning Towards God'

Clearly, in the *Enneads* and the Bahá'í Writings, the principle of 'turning toward the source' is established at both the ontological and spiritual-ethical level. Indeed, the two levels are related insofar as the highest ontological 'being,' i.e. the One or God, is also the highest spiritual and ethical good. Ontology thus determines ethics; the actual structure of the universe determines the hierarchy of goods we are intended to pursue with God at the apex and matter at the nadir. The order or scale of being establishes the scale of values. The two order of being and value are therefore correlated. As William Inge writes,

the hierarchies of existence and of value must ultimately be found to correspond ... it follows that that order of phenomena which has the lowest degree of reality in the existential scale must have the lowest degree of value in the ethical or spiritual scale.¹⁵⁰

It is important to note that turning towards God is not limited to the Manifestations. All beings do, and for humankind this is particularly important because that is the only way to realise our unique spiritual potential as humans. In many places throughout the Writings, we are reminded to turn

our minds and hearts to God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that the Manifestations

*must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the attributes and the names of God shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.*¹⁵¹

In Plotinian terms, only if we turn to our "begetter" will we reflect the divine names and powers, and, thereby, make the most of our potentials and be 'most ourselves.' This theme is supported by the various exhortations to "*polish the mirrors of our hearts*"¹⁵² which implicitly contains the idea of turning towards God since otherwise, the mirror will not reflect God's light. Our spiritual task is to reflect God's image, as Soul and nature reflect the image of the Nous and the Nous reflects the image and light of the One.

The implications of this correlation between the ontological and ethical are profound. For example, it means that ethics have an objective basis and are not only matters of personal choice. The correlation between the ontological and ethical orders allows us to assert that at least some ethical choices are objectively right or wrong precisely because they agree or conflict with the scale of being. Such choices are 'unnatural' because they violate the order of nature as established by the One. The most obvious illustration of this is the categorical Bahá'í rejection of materialism, at the ontological, scientific and social/consumer levels. Making matter the foundation of ontological and/or scientific explanation and the highest goal of human aspiration is wrong because doing so literally turns the "hierarchy of existence" on its head by giving priority to that which is last. Such an inversion is, in the deepest sense, 'unnatural,' i.e. contradicts the divinely established scale of being or "hierarchy of existence."

Consequently, both the Bahá'í Writings and the *Enneads* adhere to a concept of natural law – based on the scale of being – as binding on human beings. 'Natural law,' of course, does not mean that humans model themselves on nature as found on the material nature; rather, it means that we model ourselves on

our essential, spiritual nature as reflected in the “hierarchy of existence”: “*Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy.*”¹⁵³ Many arguments against ‘natural law theory’ fail on this ground: they assume that ‘nature’ means ‘physical nature’ – and then point to animal behaviors in nature as a way of justifying similar behaviors in humans. “Natural law’ in the sense of the Writings or the *Enneads* does not agree with this. In their view, certain behaviors are rejected because they are inappropriate to humankind’s spiritual nature or essence based on its high place in the “hierarchy of existence.”¹⁵⁴ These behaviors are inappropriate because they show our lower animal aspects dominating our higher spiritual aspects,¹⁵⁵ which is ‘unnatural’ precisely because it gives the lower precedence over the higher. It inverts the “hierarchy of existence.”

The Plotinian and Bahá'í view of ethics may also be described as ‘essentialist’ insofar as right and wrong are based on a creature’s place in the scale of being. This should not be confused with ethical relativism since in the essentialist view, there are objective standards by which to evaluate our actions. Differences in standards arise from differences in place in the scale of being, not from our personal viewpoints or preferences. However, beings that share the same essence, e.g. humankind, are subject to the same standard.

Another similarity between the Writings and the *Enneads* is that the higher levels of reality have knowledge not available to the lower levels. For example, the Nous contains all lower levels of reality because they depend on it (and ultimately on the One). Therefore, the Nous is cognizant of all that pertains to these lower levels because it contains them virtually and knows them “self-reflexively”¹⁵⁶; it does not think discursively and inferentially on the basis of the subject/object distinction. In human terms, the Nous is infallible. Lloyd Gerson informs us that “Plotinus is among the philosophers who hold that knowing thus implies infallibility.”¹⁵⁷

A similar line of reasoning is seen in the Writings. If, as we have suggested, the Manifestation in His highest station combines the functions of Nous and the Soul, then the Manifestation virtually contains the lower levels of reality,

and, thereby has infallible knowledge of them. Thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us,

*Since the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing realities and understand all things, therefore, Their knowledge is divine knowledge, and not acquired – that is to say, it is a holy bounty; it is a divine revelation.*¹⁵⁸

This knowledge is infallible because the Manifestations and Plotinus' Nous and Soul are not subject to time and place and not limited by restrictions such as 'future,' 'past,' 'here' or 'there.' Furthermore, they are not just beyond physical space, but also beyond phenomenological space such as 'within,' 'outside,' 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity.' Therefore, all possible knowledge is present to them. Hence, the Manifestation has "essential infallibility."¹⁵⁹

It is clear, therefore, that "essential infallibility" is not simply an arbitrary attribution to the Manifestation; nor is it merely a token of respect or exaggerated or even irrational religious veneration. Rather, it is a direct logical consequence of the Manifestation's place in the scale of being, i.e. a consequence of the emanationist world-view espoused by the Writings. There is no need to accept this teaching on 'blind faith' contrary to reason.¹⁶⁰

13. The 'Ideas' or 'Names of God'

There is yet another important issue to discuss regarding the Nous and the Bahá'í Writings, namely, the issue of intelligibles, or archetypes or as Plato called them, Ideas. According to J.M. Rist, "[Nous] however comprises the World of intelligible objects."¹⁶¹

if the Intellectual-Principle [Nous] is to be the maker of All, it cannot make by looking outside itself to what does not yet exist. The Authentic Beings [Ideas] must, then, exist before this All, no copies made on a model

but themselves archetypes, primals, and the essence of the Intellectual-Principle.¹⁶²

Elsewhere Plotinus says, “the Intellectual-Principle [Nous] is the *authentic existences and contains them all* – not as in a place but as possessing itself and being one thing with this content.”¹⁶³ The “intelligible objects” or the “Authentic Beings” are, in effect, Plato’s Ideas, i.e. models for nature, a lower level of reality, to aspire to and imitate in concrete individual examples. (They imitate these timeless models in the process of time to which nature is subject, a fact which allows Platonic theory and evolution to be combined. As Plato says, “Time [evolution] is the moving image of eternity.”¹⁶⁴) The Ideas exist in the Nous which reflects them into the Soul which in turn reflects them into the world of physical nature where they appear as the embodied physical forms of things. However, this still leaves us with the question of whether or not the Bahá'í Writings contain anything that confirms Plotinus’ teaching on this issue.

In our view, the Bahá'í Writings do, in fact, agree with Plotinus’ insight albeit from a new perspective. First, we should note ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that “*the earth is the mirror of the Kingdom; the material world corresponds to the spiritual world.*”¹⁶⁵ In other words, what we observe on earth are the images of higher realities in the spiritual world. There is a correspondence between the lower and higher. A similar idea is expressed in the following statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

*Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye.*¹⁶⁶

Here, too, we observe the contrast between the “real world” of the Kingdom of which this material world is only an imitation, a mirror image, or a shadow. This clearly implies that the ‘models’ or ‘archetypes’ or, as Plato called them, the ‘Ideas’ are in the Kingdom, which as we shall see is the world of the Manifestation. The idea of a correspondence between the earth and the Kingdom is re-emphasized from an ethical perspective when he says that “the nether world [should] become the mirror

of the Kingdom,”¹⁶⁷ i.e. the earth should reflect what is already found in perfect form in the Kingdom. William Inge calls this view real-idealism in which the world is “an actual but imperfect copy of the perfect archetype.”¹⁶⁸ He adds, “The sensible world is a reflexion of the spiritual world in the mirror of Matter.”¹⁶⁹

The unavoidable implication of these and similar statements is that the Kingdom contains models — or Plato’s ‘Ideas’ — which the world should strive to emulate. Yet, strong as the implication may be, such models are nowhere mentioned in the Writings, at least, not by that name. However, it is our contention that the Platonic ‘Ideas’ or Plotinian “authentic existences” contained by the Nous is similar to the Bahá’í concept of the names of God. For example, the Writings assign the following names to God: “the Fashioner” “the Creator,” “the Almighty” and the “Omniscient.” In our view, these names virtually contain within them the archetypes or potentials of everything that can exist. For example, Bahá’u’lláh states,

*through the mere revelation of the word “Fashioner,” issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. This, verily, is a certain truth. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected.*¹⁷⁰

God, the Speaker utters the word “Fashioner” and thereby sets into motion the generative, creative and energizing powers that culminate in the existence of new things in the ontologically lower levels of being. In other words, these processes realize the potentials they virtually contain. If there were no potential for order in the names of God, then the processes they unleash would be chaotic instead of creative, i.e. would not result in the creation of an ordered world. God reveals these names and attributes first through the Manifestation, Who then reflects them into the natural world in general and specifically, into the “reality of man”¹⁷¹ where they best develop under the education of the Manifestation.

Instead of thinking of the names of God as specific and static Platonic Ideas abiding in the “First Mind,” it is advantageous, in our view, to think of the names of God as dynamic, as actions from God into the lower levels of reality. To call God “the Creator” presupposes creative action in one form or another; to call Him “the Omnipotent” requires that He actually shows His power; to call Him “the Most Generous” or “the Sustainer” presupposes actions that demonstrate those traits; “*Resuscitator* implies resuscitation, *Provider necessitates* provision.”¹⁷² “The Merciful” presupposes the action of showing mercy, and “Lord” requires the exercise of power as well as subjects. A little reflection indicates that the existence of all the objects of these actions is presupposed within the actions themselves. In other words, the Platonic Ideas that exist as entities within Plotinus’ Nous, exist virtually as potentials within the actions that emanate from God.

This solution also has the advantage of avoiding conflict with the previously-discussed nature of God which does not require objects of knowledge, i.e. which is not subject to the subject/object dichotomy in knowing. If there are specific Platonic Ideas such as those of humans, roses or gold, it is difficult to see how they could exist without becoming objects of knowledge. However, if humans and roses are implicates of God’s essential name of Creator – which is identical with God Himself – then no subject/object dichotomy arises. This does not change even if we think of the names as dynamic actions. These are the actions *from* God.

14. Participation

The concept that the names of God correspond to the Ideas or “Intelligibles” in the *Enneads* points to yet another similarity – the theory of participation. According to Plotinus, all created things participate, i.e. reflect the image of the ontologically superior entity and through that reflection process imitate or participate in its being. Thus, the Nous participates in the One by reflecting its image like a mirror; the higher Soul reflects the Nous and the lower Soul and Nature reflect the higher Soul. Therefore,

[e]verything has something of the Good, by virtue of possessing a certain degree of unity and a certain degree of Existence and by participation in Ideal-Form: to the extent of the Unity, Being, and Form which are present, there is a sharing in an image, for the Unity and Existence in which there is participation are no more than images of the Ideal-Form.¹⁷³

In some way or another, all things reflect the One, and thus possess unity and “a certain degree of Existence;” the higher the degree of participation, the higher the degree of existence possessed; this process ends with the Nous or Manifestation in His station as “Primal Mirror” Who has more existence or reality than anything except God or the One. Belief in the relativity of degrees of existence is also reflected in the Bahá’í Writings: “*The second proposition is that existence and nonexistence are both relative.*”¹⁷⁴ Moreover in the Writings, just as in Plotinus, God, or the One sets the standard for measuring our existence: “*the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence.*”¹⁷⁵ The Manifestation, of course, enjoys a greater degree of existence because His ontological station as “Primal Mirror” is closer to God.

That said, it remains to note that in the Bahá’í Writings, created things reflect the names of God, and, thus become participants in the actions that these names refer to.

*Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light ... How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! To a supreme degree is this true of man ... For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him. Even as He hath said: “Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery.”*¹⁷⁶

Through the revelation of God’s names, all beings, and especially humankind, become participants in the divine

emanative process. Individual human beings, of course, are free to choose the extent and way in which they will reflect or participate in the divine names or actions. That is why it is so important to cleanse the mirrors of our hearts: “*May the mirrors of hearts be cleansed from dust in order that the Sun of Truth may be reflected therein.*”¹⁷⁷ The more we polish our mirrors, the more they will participate in the light of the divine truth, i.e. names. Humankind’s special measure of bounty in the regard constitutes its unique position in the order of creation.

15. Matter and Evil

Any study of the philosophy of Plotinus and the Bahá'í Writings is bound to consider the issue of matter and its relationship to evil. Before discussing this issue it is essential to draw attention to two important points. First, when Plotinus discusses matter he does not mean matter as we ordinarily think of it, for example, minerals, elements or compounds. According to the *Enneads*, this matter has already received form to be a particular kind of matter, e.g. gold, roses or granite.¹⁷⁸ Matter “lives on the farther side of all these categories [that identify particular forms of matter] and so has no title to the Name of Being.”¹⁷⁹ For Plotinus, matter is the “substratum”¹⁸⁰ on which all the particular forms of matter are imposed. It may also be described as ‘perfect receptivity’¹⁸¹ waiting for form and for this reason Plotinus compares it to a mirror and what it reflects to “phantasms.”¹⁸² Because matter is formless, it is also unbounded, unlimited, shapeless and without qualities and therefore has no particular form or being. Matter, says Plotinus, is “utter destitution,”¹⁸³ or, to use the more common term, it is ‘privation’¹⁸⁴ or lack of attribute. It is like a shadow. It should be noted that matter is the last stage or degree of the emanative process. As pure receptivity or potential, matter cannot emanate anything because in itself, it has nothing to give and can only receive. However, at the same time, Plotinus states that matter aspires to substance, i.e. real existence,¹⁸⁵ although this aspiration can never be met but must remain an aspiration. The One, or God, is, of course, the most real of all existents and for that reason,

matter also aspires towards the One. We shall deal with this topic below.

The second major point about matter and evil is that for Plotinus, there are two kinds of evil which must not be confused with each other.¹⁸⁶ Moral evil is committed by human beings as a result of free will while ontological evil is the result of matter being the lowest level of the emanative process. Because there are degrees of perfection in the stages of emanation, there must be a point where there no more perfections are possessed and there is only a perpetual receptivity to perfections from higher levels of the emanative process. Thus, when we say that matter is inherently evil in Plotinus, we mean that it is 'metaphysical evil,' i.e. a lack of attributes that can have any form imposed on it.

Evil is not in any and every lack; it is absolute lack. What falls in some degree short of the Good is not Evil; considered in its own kind it might even be perfect, but where there is utter dearth, there we have Essential Evil, void of all share in Good; this is the case with matter.¹⁸⁷

Plotinus explains why this lack makes matter evil:

[I]t corrupts and destroys the incomer, it substitutes its own opposite character and kind not in the sense of opposing , for, example, concrete cold to concrete warmth, but by setting its own formlessness against the Form of heat, shapelessness to shape, excess and defect to the duly ordered. Thus, in sum, what enters into Matter ceases to belong to itself, comes to belong to matter ...¹⁸⁸

In other words, matter brings about a lack of moderation, i.e. a lack of limitation, of order, measure, shape or constraint. Here we have not only an explanation for the ontological nature of evil – or absolute disorder – but also the ontological foundation for the Bahá'í emphasis on moderation,¹⁸⁹ and constraint as seen for example, in the emphasis on "true liberty"¹⁹⁰ which "*consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it.*"¹⁹¹

In these teachings, we observe that in the Bahá'í Writings, as in the *Enneads*, ethics are grounded in and correlated with ontology. The higher we rise above matter in the emanative order, i.e. the closer we approach the One or God, the closer we approach to form, 'Ideas,' or the names of God, and thereby, the closer we approach to own real nature or true 'selves.' Matter, of course, undermines form, order, measure and the spiritual which means that the more we fall into the power of matter, the less we shall be our 'true selves.' Applying this principle to human ethics, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. If a man's Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint ... Saints are men who have freed themselves from the world of matter and who have overcome sin. They live in the world but are not of it, their thoughts being continually in the world of the spirit.*¹⁹²

Elsewhere, He says that in receiving God's bounty "the reality of man becomes purified and sanctified from the impurities of the world of nature."¹⁹³ In other words, moral goodness requires that there be appropriate order in the soul. 'Appropriate' in the case of humankind means that the higher, i.e. spiritual control the lower, i.e. material nature. When this does not happen, when the soul turns away from the One and to itself, it descends into non-being, in which the lower is in control.¹⁹⁴ Because the higher should control the lower it is proper that man controls or masters nature (in a non-destructive way) for man represents the spiritual principle in the material world.¹⁹⁵ In both Plotinus and the Writings, the spiritual takes ontological and ethical precedence over the material.

At this point a note of caution is necessary. For the Writings, nature and matter are not necessarily morally evil in themselves. That is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "it is evident that in creation and nature evil does not exist at all; but when the natural qualities of man are used in an unlawful way, they are blameworthy."¹⁹⁶ An "unlawful way" is taken when we

choose to submit the spiritual to our animal nature. Consequently, Adam's physical nature is the "source of all imperfection"¹⁹⁷ and his spiritual nature is the "source of all perfection." Furthermore, in nature, all existences are good in themselves although they may not be good in relationship to each other:

*Are they [scorpions] good or evil, for they are existing beings? Yes, a scorpion is evil in relation to man; a serpent is evil in relation to man; but in relation to themselves they are not evil, for their poison is their weapon, and by their sting they defend themselves. But as the elements of their poison do not agree with our elements – that is to say, as there is antagonism between these different elements, therefore, this antagonism is evil; but in reality as regards themselves they are good.*¹⁹⁸

Thus, evil is relational insofar as a thing or an act can only be evil in relationship to something else. The *Enneads* reflect a similar view. Matter, i.e. utter privation or pure potentiality is not evil in itself but in relationship to form; its effects are evil because it undermines form with its formlessness and immoderation. Matter may be evil in relationship to the soul because the soul becomes fixated on the body and thus turns away from the One. For that reason matter, bodies, nature can drag humans into moral evil if humans choose to be dominated by them. This happens when the soul focuses only on itself and cuts itself off from the influence of higher emanations, and, ultimately, the One.¹⁹⁹ Cutting itself off from the One or the Manifestation of God from Whom all gifts and powers are obtained, causes the self to suffer deficiencies. This idea is apparent in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement,

*the sensible realities are absolutely good, and evil is due to their nonexistence – that is to say, blindness is the want of sight, deafness is the want of hearing, poverty is the want of wealth, illness is the want of health, death is the want of life, and weakness is the want of strength.*²⁰⁰

Here, too, evil is being defined as a privation or lack of that which is good, just as in Plotinus it is defined as that which

lacks form, order, or other positive attributes.²⁰¹ Thus, it is non-being,²⁰² i.e. not nothing but rather the difference that contradicts Being or the One.²⁰³ Of course, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reference is to moral evil but we observe that the same principle of ontological evil as privation is being applied. 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts,

*the intellectual realities, such as all the qualities and admirable perfections of man, are purely good, and exist. Evil is simply their nonexistence. So ignorance is the want of knowledge; error is the want of guidance; forgetfulness is the want of memory; stupidity is the want of good sense. All these things have no real existence.*²⁰⁴

By "no real existence," 'Abdu'l-Bahá means that evil has no substance, i.e. has no independent existence in itself but is simply the lack of certain attributes and/or virtues. It has 'presence' insofar as we can detect, feel, recognise these deficiencies ; however, this presence makes itself felt only by way of a negative contrast, a deficiency of something that should be there.

16. The Return to God

The final subject we shall refer to briefly in this outline of the similarities and convergences between the Bahá'í Writings and the *Enneads* concerns the return to God. Such a return is the deepest desire of all souls, whether they are aware of it or not because all souls are attracted to beauty. As Plotinus says,

Therefore, we must ascend again towards the Good, the desired of every Soul. Anyone that has seen This [Good or Beauty], knows what I intend when I say that it is beautiful. even the desire of it is to be desired as a Good. To attain to it is for those that will take the upward path ... divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent ...²⁰⁵

This statement is in complete harmony with Bahá'u'lláh's prayer, in which He addresses God as

*my Desire and the Desire of all things, my Strength and the Strength of all things, my King and the King of all things, my Possessor and the Possessor of all things, my Aim and the Aim of all things, my Mover and the Mover of all things! Suffer me not, I implore Thee, to be kept back from the ocean of Thy tender mercies, nor to be far removed from the shores of nearness to Thee.*²⁰⁶

What is striking about this prayer is that Bahá’u’lláh mentions not just His desire but “*the Desire of all things*” (emphasis added) and the “*Aim of all things*” (emphasis added). In other words, He expresses not only His own desire for God but universalizes His desire to include “all things” without any qualification. He also refers to God as His “Aim” and then again universalizes this claim to “all things;” He does not limit it to Himself or human beings or even sentient beings. From this perspective it appears that matter, since it is included in the category of “all things” aspires to something greater though how that aspiration makes itself known to us cannot be said at this point.

17. Conclusion

Even on the basis of an outline such as this, it is clear that the Bahá’í Writings and the philosophy of Plotinus share numerous similarities. There are, as we have noted, some important differences between the Writings and the *Enneads* but these are greatly outnumbered by the similarities we have encountered. These correspondences make this subject worth further in-depth study.

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NOTES

¹ The best known study of the origin and scope of Neoplatonic influence in Islamic culture is Peter Adamson's *The Arabic Plotinus*.

² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 19.

³ Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 445.

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- ⁴ At the scholarly level we have the lengthy series *Studies in Neoplatonism, Ancient and Modern* published by SUNY along with *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*; at the popular level there are the multiple volumes by Ken Wilber.
- ⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, throughout Chapter 54.
- ⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 49, 229, 315.
- ⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 445.
- ⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 18.
- ⁹ *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Audi p. 563, which subsumes ontology under metaphysics; Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 255; see also *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* ed. by Ted Honderich and *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* ed. by Simon Blackburn.
- ¹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 169.
- ¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 51.
- ¹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 5.
- ¹³ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 24.
- ¹⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148
- ¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ¹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 18
- ¹⁷ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 7.
- ¹⁸ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 13.
- ¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 231.
- ²⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXXI, p. 157.
- ²¹ *Enneads*, V, 4,1.
- ²² *Enneads*, VI, 9, 6.
- ²³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXX, p. 136.
- ²⁴ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 318.
- ²⁵ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 14.
- ²⁶ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 17.
- ²⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 283.
- ²⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 260.
- ²⁹ *Enneads*, V, 4, 1; also V 2, 1.
- ³⁰ *Enneads* VI, 9, 3.
- ³¹ *Enneads*, V, 2, 1.
- ³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 207.
- ³³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- ³⁴ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 13; VI, 8, 14; VI 8, 16.
- ³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.

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- ³⁶ *Enneads*, V, 4, 1.
- ³⁷ *Enneads*, V, 5, 6.
- ³⁸ *Enneads*, VI, 9, 7.
- ³⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 390.
- ⁴⁰ *Enneads*, V, 5, 5.
- ⁴¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 206.
- ⁴² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- ⁴³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 206.
- ⁴⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- ⁴⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 173
- ⁴⁶ *Enneads*, III, 8, 8.
- ⁴⁷ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 28; original emphasis.
- ⁴⁸ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 28.
- ⁴⁹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XXVII, p. 66.
- ⁵⁰ *Enneads*, VI 8, 8;
- ⁵¹ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 8.
- ⁵² *Enneads*, VI, 9, 6.
- ⁵³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XXVII, p. 66.
- ⁵⁴ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 9.
- ⁵⁵ *Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 80.
- ⁵⁶ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 16; III, 9, 4.
- ⁵⁷ *Enneads*, V, 5, 9.
- ⁵⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- ⁵⁹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XC, p. 178.
- ⁶⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, LXXVII, p. 150; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 272, 377, 462.
- ⁶¹ *Enneads*, V 2, 2.
- ⁶² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 295 – 296.
- ⁶³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ⁶⁴ *Enneads*, I, 8, 2.
- ⁶⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 51; emphasis added.
- ⁶⁶ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 177.
- ⁶⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.
- ⁶⁸ *Enneads*, V, 3, 12.
- ⁶⁹ *Enneads*, III, 9, 9.
- ⁷⁰ *Enneads*, III, 8, 11.
- ⁷¹ *Enneads*, V, 6, 3.

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- ⁷² *Enneads*, VI, 7, 40.
- ⁷³ *Enneads*, VI, 7, 41.
- ⁷⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 293 – 294; emphasis added.
- ⁷⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221; emphasis added.
- ⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 24.
- ⁷⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 24.
- ⁷⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 23 – 24; emphasis added.
- ⁷⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 138.
- ⁸⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- ⁸¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- ⁸² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- ⁸³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- ⁸⁴ *Enneads*, III, 8, 10.
- ⁸⁵ *Enneads*, III, 8, 10; V 3, 13, 14.
- ⁸⁶ *Enneads*, VI, 9,4.
- ⁸⁷ *Enneads*, V,3, 14; emphasis added.
- ⁸⁸ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 56.
- ⁸⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220 – 221.
- ⁹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- ⁹¹ *Enneads*, V, 3, 14; emphasis added.
- ⁹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222; emphasis added.
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- ⁹⁸ *Enneads*, V, 3, 12; emphasis added; see also I, 7, 1.
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- ¹⁰⁰ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 108.
- ¹⁰¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203; emphasis added.
- ¹⁰² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 296.
- ¹⁰³ *Enneads*, III, 8, 10.
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- ¹²⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ¹²¹ *Enneads*, III, 7, 11-13.
- ¹²² *Enneads*, V, 1, 3.
- ¹²³ William Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*.
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- ¹²⁸ *Enneads*, V, I, 6.
- ¹²⁹ *Enneads*, V, 1, 6.
- ¹³⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XIX, p. 48; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 66; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 206;
- ¹³¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- ¹³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147; emphasis added.
- ¹³³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XC, p. 179; emphasis added.
- ¹³⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 26.
- ¹³⁵ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 49.
- ¹³⁶ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 49.
- ¹³⁷ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 10; emphasis added.
- ¹³⁸ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 9.
- ¹³⁹ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 9.
- ¹⁴⁰ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 9.
- ¹⁴¹ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 77.
- ¹⁴² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XC, p. 177; emphasis added.

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- ¹⁴³ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 9.
- ¹⁴⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XC, p.179; emphasis added; see also XLIX, p. 102.
- ¹⁴⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157 – 158.
- ¹⁴⁶ J.M. Rist, *Plotinus The Road to Reality*, p. 90.
- ¹⁴⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 66.
- ¹⁴⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 295.
- ¹⁴⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 295.
- ¹⁵⁰ William Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, Vol. 1, p. 132.
- ¹⁵¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.9.
- ¹⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 14.
- ¹⁵³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 72.
- ¹⁵⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 130.
- ¹⁵⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 119.
- ¹⁵⁶ Lloyd P Gerson, *Plotinus*, p. 55.
- ¹⁵⁷ Lloyd P Gerson, *Plotinus*, p. 55.
- ¹⁵⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157 – 158.
- ¹⁵⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 171.
- ¹⁶⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.
- ¹⁶¹ J.M. Rist, *Plotinus, The Road to Reality*, p. 88.
- ¹⁶² *Enneads*, V, 9, 5.
- ¹⁶³ *Enneads*, V, 9, 6; emphasis added.
- ¹⁶⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*.
- ¹⁶⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 283.
- ¹⁶⁶ Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 178; emphasis added.
- ¹⁶⁷ Bahá'í World Faith, p. 400.
- ¹⁶⁸ William Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, Vol, I, p. 151.
- ¹⁶⁹ William Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, Vol, I, p. 152.
- ¹⁷⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXIV, p. 141 – 142.
- ¹⁷¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.9.
- ¹⁷² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 272.
- ¹⁷³ *Enneads*, I, 7, 2.
- ¹⁷⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- ¹⁷⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- ¹⁷⁶ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XC, p. 177; emphasis added.
- ¹⁷⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 244.
- ¹⁷⁸ *Enneads*, III, 6, 7.
- ¹⁷⁹ *Enneads*, III, 6, 7.

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- ¹⁸⁰ *Enneads*, II, 5, 5.
- ¹⁸¹ *Enneads*, II, 4, 4.
- ¹⁸² *Enneads*, III, 6, 7.
- ¹⁸³ *Enneads*, II, 4, 16.
- ¹⁸⁴ *Enneads*, III, 9, 3; II, 4, 1.
- ¹⁸⁵ *Enneads*, III, 6, 7.
- ¹⁸⁶ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 86.
- ¹⁸⁷ *Enneads*, I, 8, 5.
- ¹⁸⁸ *Enneads*, I, 8, 8.
- ¹⁸⁹ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 69.
- ¹⁹⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 336.
- ¹⁹¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 336
- ¹⁹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.- 61; emphasis added.
- ¹⁹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 92.
- ¹⁹⁴ *Enneads*, III, 9, 3.
- ¹⁹⁵ *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 11.
- ¹⁹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 215.
- ¹⁹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 118.
- ¹⁹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 263 – 264; emphasis added.
- ¹⁹⁹ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 83.
- ²⁰⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 263.
- ²⁰¹ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 82.
- ²⁰² *Enneads*, I, 8, 6.
- ²⁰³ *Enneads*, II, 4, 16.
- ²⁰⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 263
- ²⁰⁵ *Enneads*, I, 6, 7; emphasis added.
- ²⁰⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 59.

Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaḳíqa)

A Provisional Translation

Moojan Momen

Abstract: This paper consists of an introductory survey together with a provisional translation of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaḳíqa). The subject of the Tablet is the unresolved conflict in Islam between philosopher-mystics who adhere to the philosophy of existential oneness (waḥdat al-wujúd) and jurists and others who oppose this view regarding it as heresy and blasphemy. Bahá'u'lláh seeks to resolve the issue and bridge the gap between these two attitudes of mind by showing how both viewpoints can be true when taken within the context of the concept of the Manifestation of God.

The Tablet known as the *Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaḳíqa* (Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality) dates from the Akka period. In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh deals with one of the issues that has run through the Islamic world from the Middle Ages onwards. This is the controversy between two positions concerning the nature of the relationship between God and His creation. These two positions existed from the earliest days of Islam and eventually became known as *Waḥdat al-Wujúd* (existential unity, oneness of being) and *Waḥdat ash-Shuhúd* (unity in appearance only). The former was the position taken by the followers of Ibn al-'Arabí (d. 638 A.H./1240) and was more common among those inclined towards Sufism and mystical philosophy. The latter was the position commonly taken by

jurists and was given its name by Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindí (971 A.H./1563-1034 A.H. - 1034/1624-5) in the 17th century.

In brief it may be said that those who supported the position of *Waḥdat al-Wujúd* maintained that Being is one — it is that which exists. Since existence is also one of the essential attributes of God, then it may be said that all things are subsumed in the one Absolute Reality that we call God. This one Reality has different aspects according to the way that it is viewed.

Those who held to the opposing position of *Wahdat ash-Shuhúd* maintained that God is beyond any conceptualizations that can be made of Him; he is *wará' al-wará thumma wará' al-wará thumma wará' al-wará* (beyond the beyond, then beyond the beyond, and again beyond the beyond)¹. Hence the mystics' experience of unity or union or any apprehension of God through mystical experience is subjective only and has no objective validity. The unity that mystics claim with God is only an appearance and has no substance.

In Iran, the concept of *waḥdat al-wujúd* had a powerful influence especially upon many philosopher-mystics. The most important of these was Şadru'd-Dín Shírází, known as Mullá Şadrá. It is Mullá Şadrá whose dictum “All that which is uncompounded in Its Reality is, by virtue of Its [absolute] Unity, all things” (*kullu ma huwa basíṭu 'l-ḥaḳíqa fa-huwa bi-waḥdatihi kullu 'l-ashyá'*) is quoted and commented upon by Bahá'u'lláh in this Tablet. This dictum is one of the cornerstones of Mullá Şadrá's philosophy and is explicated in several of his works: *al-Ḥikmat al-Arshiyyah* (the Wisdom of the Throne)², *al-Mabda wa'l-Mu`ád* (the Origin and the Return)³, *al-Mashá'ir fí Ma'rifat Alláh* (the Staging-Posts in the Knowledge of God)⁴, and *al-Ḥikmat al-muta`áliyya fi'l-Asfar al-aqliyya al-arba`a* (The Transcendental Wisdom concerning the Four Journeys of the Rational Soul).⁵

In his work *al-Ḥikmat al-Arshiyyah*, the Wisdom of the Throne, Mullá Sadrá takes as his starting point the traditional philosophical concept that all things are composed of quiddity (*mahiyyah*, that which answers the question “what is it?”) and being (*wujúd*, that which gives existence to the quiddity). He then goes on to demonstrate that if an entity A has something

B negated of it (i.e. if A is stated to be “not B”) and if B is something that itself has being (i.e. is not merely a statement of privation or imperfection, such as “not blue” or “illiterate”), then A cannot be uncompounded in its essential reality since it must be composed of at least two aspects, an aspect by which it is A and an aspect by which it is not B. (These two aspects cannot be identical since that would mean positing that the very essence of A is something privative such that anyone who intellected “A” would also immediately intellect “not B”). Hence the converse of this must also be true, that which is uncompounded in its reality can have nothing that has being negated of it – otherwise it would consist of at least two aspects: an aspect by which it is such (such as A) and an aspect by which it is not some other (such as not B, not C, etc.), and would therefore not be uncompounded in its essential reality. Hence “that which is uncompounded in its reality” must necessarily be “all things”.⁶ Elsewhere, Mullá Sadrá makes it clear that “that which is uncompounded in its reality” is the “necessarily existent (*wájib al-wujúd*)”, i.e. God⁷, and this is the definition also given by other writers.⁸

Mullá Sadrá's pre-eminence in the field of Iranian Shi'ī mystical philosophy (*ḥikmat*) meant that this idea was adopted and commented upon by numerous other philosophers. For our purposes, the most significant of those who commented upon this dictum was the Shaykhí leader, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá'í. He severely criticized this dictum of Mullá Ṣadrá because of its implication of existential monism.

Shaykh Aḥmad wrote in several of his works commenting upon this dictum. The most extensive of these critiques was in a commentary that he wrote on Mullá Ṣadrá's work the *Mashá'ir* (composed in 1234/1818-9 in Kirmánsháh). He also deals with this subject in his last major work, his commentary on Mullá Ṣadrá's *Ḥikmat al-'Arshiyya* (completed in 1236/1820-1 in Kirmánsháh). In the latter, he states that this dictum is erroneous because:

He [Mullá Sadrá] has concluded that if one negates something of it and this negation is comprehended in the mind, then this necessitates composition. And we say to him: the uncompounded reality is a pure matter,

not something from which nothing can be negated because your words that “it is something from which nothing can be negated” is similar to your words that “it is something from which something can be negated”; for in both cases there is need for composition. There is need for composition from existent matter and non-existent matter in what you have rejected and there is need for composition from existent matter and existent matter in what you have taken recourse in, and it is that from which nothing can be negated.⁹

This subject also arises in a treatise that Shaykh Aḥmad wrote for Mullá Muḥammad Damaghání in 1232/1816-7, and in a treatise written for several unnamed Sayyids in (date not known)¹⁰. In the last-named work, Shaykh Aḥmad states that:

When he (Mullá Ṣadrá) says “the uncompounded reality is all things”, this expression would suggest that He [God], praised be He, is all accidents (*ḥawadith*), since things are accidents. The error of this statement is clear since accidents are in the realm of contingency (*al-imbkán*) and the necessarily [existent], praised be He, is pre-existent (*azal*) and is not in the realm of contingency ...

Shaykh Aḥmad goes on to give several possible meanings of Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum and demonstrates the falseness of each.¹¹

The Báb, in a few places, criticizes the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujúd* as it was generally understood among Sufis. He disapproved, in particular, of the concept that God could somehow be considered to be dispersed among created things. In the course of this criticism, He mentions the concept of *basít al-ḥaqíqa*. In His *Risála adh-Dhahabiyya*¹², the Báb states that:

Most of the Islamic philosophers, the peripatetic philosophers, the followers of Mulla Ṣadrá (aṣ-Ṣadrá'iyyin), and the Theosophical philosophers (al-iláhiyyin) have erred in their explanations of this station. The signs of the effulgences (tajalliyát) of creation were mistaken by them for the countenance of

the Essence [of God]. Thus they went along with erroneous statements concerning the Eternal Archetypes (a`yan thábita) being in the Essence [of God] in order to establish His knowledge (praised be He)¹³; and with mention of the Uncompounded Reality in order to establish causality (‘illiyya) in the Essence [of God]; and with mention of the connection between the Essence [of God] and [His] actions and attributes; and with the mention of the oneness of Being (waḥdat al-wujúd) between the Creator (mújid) and the one who has gone astray (al-mafqúd). All of this is absolute heresy (shirk maḥḍ) in the estimation of the family of God, the Imáms of justice, for God has always been the All-Knowing without the existence of anything having form and shape (? – shay'un bi-mithl ma inna-hu kana shayyár). Just as He does not need for His being alive the existence of anything other than Him, He also does not need for His knowledge the existence of objects of knowledge. And the Essence [of God] continues to be connected to things. The causation (‘illiyya) of created things is His handiwork (san`ihi) and this is the [Primal] Will, which God has created through itself by itself without any fire from the Essence [of God] touching it. And God has created existent things through it and it continues. The All-High does not speak except through it; and the All-High does not give any indication of its essence (dhátiyyatihá). And God has not given any sign of His Essence in [the whole of] creation (al-imkán), for His Being (kaynúnátihi) sets beings apart from being known, and His Essence (dhatiyyatihi) prevents essences from being explained. Verily the relationship of the [Primal] Will to Him is like the relationship of a verse [of scripture] to God. It is a relationship that is conferred upon Creation not upon the Essence [of God], for It is sanctified from the mention of any indications or relationships or evidences or signs or stations or effulgences or breezes relating to It; and that being the case none can know It except Itself. And such expressions as Oneness of Being and the mention of the Uncompounded Reality is witness, in the estimation of the people of the

covenants (ahl al-'uhúd), to its falsity, for He is the one who there is no-one other than He with Him. How then is it possible to say any words concerning His Being. On the contrary, all signs in the world of Láhút, Jabarút, Malakút and Mulk are possibilities of the hearts and souls [of human beings] and what has occurred to their imaginations. All who describe God, except Himself, have lied and deceived for anything other than Him is not of Him and cannot speak on His level and cannot have existence with Him, even the purest expression of the Oneness of God. And I have set forth proofs in two thousand manuscripts (fi'l-nuskha al-alifayn) in explanation of the secret of the confusion (? - ilhá') of the errors of the words of these men. The beginning of the saying of such words is the passage from Muhyi ad-Dín, may God delay his punishment, such as what he has said in the Fuṣúṣ [al-Ḥikám]. And this is sheer idolatry (shirk) in the estimation of those who have inner knowledge (ahl al-buṭún).

And in a letter addressed to Mírzá Muḥammad Sa'íd of Zavárih¹⁴, the Báb states:

And with regard to the reply concerning the uncompounded reality, which the philosophers have mentioned in order to assert that there is Being between the Creator and the one who has gone astray, there is no doubt that this is erroneous in the estimation of one who possesses the musk-like fragrance of fair-mindedness.

Bahá'u'lláh takes a much milder and more accommodating attitude towards the monist ideas in Sufism. In the Baghdad period, He spent some time associating with Sufis in Sulaymaniyya. He also wrote several works in the Sufi style and idiom. Among these were the Seven Valleys (*Haft Vádí*), the Four Valleys (*Chahár Vádí*), and the poem *Qaṣída 'Izz Varqá'iyyih* (The Ode of the Dove) which was written in the style of the famous poem *at-Tá'iyya* of the Sufi poet Ibn al-Fárid. Although Bahá'u'lláh wrote less on overtly Sufi themes in later years, the Tablet which is the subject of this paper and

which was revealed in the Akka period is one of those in which He returns to some of these themes.

Given the fact that both Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ahsá'í and the Báb had written on the theme of *Basīṭ al-Ḥaḳíqa*, it was perhaps inevitable that someone among his followers would ask Bahá'u'lláh for His comments on the theme of Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum. It would appear from the text that one of Bahá'u'lláh's followers, named Ḥusayn, had been asked by someone who was a follower of Mullá Ṣadrá to ask for Bahá'u'lláh's comments on the question of *Basīṭ al-Ḥaḳíqa* and this Tablet was revealed in response to the question.

In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh again displays his benevolent attitude towards Sufi themes. He refrains from condemning Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum outright, and instead states that those who have condemned this approach have misunderstood it and have taken it too literally.

Bahá'u'lláh first explains the nature of the division among Muslims over Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum and the associated concepts. He brings forward verses from the Qur'an in support of both positions. For those who follow Mullá Ṣadrá's position, which He here calls *Tawḥíd-i-Wujúdi* (existential oneness), Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Qur'anic verse "All things perish save [His] face" (28:8, cf. 55:27) and interprets this to support the position of those who assert that the only reality is the Divine Reality. For those who opposed Mullá Ṣadrá's position, which He here calls *Tawḥíd-i-Shuhúdi* (oneness in appearance only), Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Qur'anic verse "We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves." (41:53) This He interprets as saying that any evidence of union between the Divinity and creation is only the result of the fact that the signs of God are apparent in all things.

Having defined the two sides of the conflict, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that those who have attacked Mullá Ṣadrá's position have looked only at the literal meaning of his words rather than the underlying meaning. He then goes on to give an interpretation of Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum in terms of the concept of the Manifestation of God. This is one of Bahá'u'lláh's most explicit statements of one of the most interesting and potentially controversial aspects of His doctrine: His assertion

that all of the statements that occur in the scriptures relating to God (including references to His names and attributes, and statements about His actions and commands) refer in reality to the Manifestation of God, since no statement can be made about the Essence of God, which is unknowable.

The Tablet then continues with Bahá'u'lláh's statement that there is no benefit to be gained from disputing such points. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that His appearance renders all such disputation secondary. Whichever side of the argument an individual is on, his status with God depends only on whether he accepts or rejects Bahá'u'lláh.

There is not much history available regarding this Tablet. It is from the Akka period and is evidently addressed to an individual named Ḥusayn, but there does not appear to be any information regarding the identity of this individual. In the Tablet the contemporary Iranian philosopher Ḥájí Mullá Hádí Sabzivári is referred to and condemned for failing to respond to the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The following material from the manuscript history of the Bahá'í Faith in Ashkhabad by Ustád `Alí Akbar Banná is of interest in relation to this. In the course of his account of one of the Iranian Bahá'í emigres in Ashkhabad, Ustád Aḥmad Kuláh-dúz Sabzivári, Ustád `Alí Akbar Banná writes:

Prior to his conversion [to the Bahá'í Faith], he kept company with the mystical philosophers (*urafá*). Despite his illiteracy, he sought to acquire the illumination of wisdom (*ḥikmat*) from being in the presence of Ḥájí Mullá Hádí, Ḥakím-i Sabzivári. After his acceptance of the Faith, he related: "I went to the afore-mentioned philosopher (*ḥakím*) and informed him about this matter. The philosopher fell silent and after a pause said:

'Whatsoever has been accepted by the emotions of the heart (*wujdán*) cannot be opposed by explanation

So keep your lips from moving in explanation of these three B of opinion (*dhaháb*), of gold (*dhahab*) and of your religion (*madhhab*)"

Ḥájí Muḥammad Riḍá the martyr (killed in Ashkhabad in 1889) stated: "One day I went to the door of the house of Ḥájí Mullá Hádí and gave him a copy of the Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality. I said to him: 'Study this tablet today and I will come tomorrow to take it back.' He took the tablet and I left. The next day I went and took the tablet back, He did not say a word about it."¹⁵

This historical account would mean that the Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality must be dated to before 1878, the date of the death of Sabzivari. Thus this Tablet dates from the first decade of time in Akka.

The text which is provisionally translated here¹⁶ is that published in the compilation *Alváḥ Mubarakih Ḥaḍrat Bahá'u'lláh: Iqtidárát wa chand lawḥ digár* (usually known as *Iqtidárát*, no date, no of publication, pp. 105-116), the facsimile of a manuscript in the hand-writing of Mishkín-Qalam, dated Rajab A.H. 1310/January 1893. The text of this Tablet has also been published in *Ma'idih Asmání* (vol. 7, pp. 140-7) and by Alexander (Aleksandr) G. Tumanski (d. 1920) in his translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, *Kitabe Akdes*, Zapiski Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk S. Petersburg, 8th series, vol. 3, no. 6, 1899, pp. 61-4. Manuscripts of this Tablet include one in the collection of manuscripts bought from Mr. Dunlop of the British Legation in Tehran by the University of Leiden (Manuscript Or. 4971, section 7, item 1).

NOTES

1. Sirhindi quoted in Burhan Ahmad Faruqi, *The Mujjaddid's Concept of Tawhid*, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, repr. 1970, p. 81.
2. In this paper the text for this work is taken from Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í's commentary on the work (see note 9), the translation is adapted from James Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
3. In this paper, use has been made of the Persian translation by Ahmad Ardikání (Tihran: Markaz Nashr Danishgáhi, 1362).

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- ⁴. The Arabic text used is that found in unnumbered pages at the back of the Persian translation by Ghulam-Husayn Áhangí (Tihran: Intishárát Mawla, 2nd printing 1361).
- ⁵. Qumm: Maktabat al-Mustawfi, 1378/1958, vol.1, p. 116-7
- ⁶. Morris, *Wisdom*, pp. 98-9. A similar argument can be found in *al-Mashá'ir*, *Mash'ar* 6 of *Manhaj* 1 (Persian translation, p. 63).
- ⁷. See for example, *al-Mabda*, pp. 52-3
- ⁸. Muḥammad Sharíf Al-Jurjání, for example, in his dictionary of religious terms, *Kitab al-Ta'rifát* (Beirut: Maktaba Lubnan, 1969) states that *al-basit* can be considered in three ways. The first of these is *al-ḥaqíqí*, which is "that which has no parts (or divisions, *juz*)" to it at all, such as the Creator, exalted be He." (p. 46).
- ⁹. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í *Sharh al-'Arshiyya* vol. 1 (Kirman: Sa'ádat, 1361), pp. 80-1
- ¹⁰. For details of these works and manuscript and published sources for them, see M. Momen, *The Works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í* (Bahá'í Studies Bulletin Monograph, no. 1, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1991, nos. 22, 25, and 39, pp. 52, 55-6, 64-5.
- ¹¹. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í, *Majmu'a ar-Rasá'il*, vol. 30, (Kirman: Matba'a al-Sa'ádat, second printing, n.d.), pp. 131-2
- ¹². Iranian National Bahá'í Manuscript Collection, vol. 86, pp. 95-6. I am grateful to Stephen Lambden for finding this and the next quotation in this paper.
- ¹³. This refers to the assertion that if Knowledge is an essential attribute of God, then the Eternal Archetypes of all created things must be within the Essence of God in order for there to be something that is the object of God's knowledge.
- ¹⁴. Iranian National Bahá'í Manuscript Collection, vol. 69, p. 422-3
- ¹⁵. Ustád 'Alí Akbar Banná, *Taríkh 'Ishqábád* (manuscript in Afnan Library), p. 314-5
- ¹⁶. I am grateful to Keven Locke for some suggested corrections to the translation and to Jack McLean for his suggestions for the improvement of the English text. Others who suggested improvements and corrections to my commentary include John Walbridge, Nima Hazini, and Bijan Masumian

Lawḥ Basīṭ al-Ḥaqíqa

Provisional Translation

He is God, exalted be He in Might and Greatness!

Concerning what the questioner has asked regarding the statement of the philosophers (*ḥukamá*) that “the uncompounded reality¹ is all things”, say: know that what is intended by “things” in this context (lit. station, *maqám*) is none other than being (*wujúd*) and the perfections (*kamalát*) of being in so far as they are existent [and not privative]²; and by “all” is meant the obtainer (*al-wájid*).³ This “all” contains no plurality and no parts. The meaning is that the uncompounded reality, insofar as it is uncompounded in all respects, is the obtainer and gatherer of all the infinite and endless perfections.⁴ As it has been said: “His works are limitless.”

In the Persian language, it may be said that what the philosopher means by the word “things” in the afore-mentioned expression is the perfections of being in so far as these are existent [and not privative]; and by the word “all”, is meant possession (*dárá’í*) that is to say obtaining – the gathering together of all of the limitless perfections, in an uncompounded manner. They have mentioned similar things throughout their discourse on the unity (*tawḥíd*), power (*quwwat*), and intensity (*shiddat*) of existence.

The meaning of the philosopher was not that the Necessarily Existent [God] has become dispersed among (resolved into, lit. dissolved into, *munḥal*) the innumerable existent things. No! Praised be He! Exalted is He above that! Even as the philosophers themselves have stated: “The uncompounded reality is all things, but is not any one thing.”

And viewed from another aspect, the lights of the uncompounded reality can be seen in all things. This however is dependent upon the vision of the seer and the discernment of the beholder. A penetrating vision (*abṣar-i ḥadídih*) is able to

see the signs of the Primal Divine Unity in all things, since all things have been and are the places wherein the Divine Names are manifested. The Absolute Reality, however, has been and will continue unceasingly to be sanctified from ascent and descent, from limitations, connections and relationships, while “things” exist and appear in the condition of limitations. Thus it has been said: “The existence of the Necessarily [Existent] would not be in the full perfection of its power and intensity, were it possible for It to disperse Itself into the innumerable existent things, but such a dispersion is not possible.” There is much to be said about this statement and if one were to elaborate fully on the meaning of the philosophers, the matter would become lengthy.⁵[107] Because the hearts of the noble are perceived to be subtle and refined, the pen chooses to confine itself to brevity.

Two stations can be observed in the Divine Unity: Existential Oneness (*tawhíd-i wujúdí*), and this is that [station] wherein all things are negated with a “no” and only the Absolute Reality is affirmed. This means the existence of nothing is acknowledged except the Absolute Reality, in the sense that all things, when compared with Its manifestation and remembrance, have been and will continue to be absolute nothingness (*faná-yi maḥḍ*). “All things perish save the [Divine] Face”,⁶ which means that compared with Its existence, nothing else has the capacity for existence and so no mention of the existence of anything else should be made. It has been said “God was and there was nothing else beside Him. And He is now as He always has been.” And yet it can be seen that things exist and have existed. The meaning of these words is that, in His court, nothing has, or has ever had, existence. In the Existential Oneness, “all things” perish and are nothing and the [Divine] “Face⁷”, which is the Absolute Reality, is eternal and unceasing.

[The second station in Divine Unity,] Manifestational Oneness (*tawhíd-i shuhúdí*) is that [station] where the signs of the Primal Divine Unity, the manifestations of Eternity, and the effulgences of the light of Singleness can be observed in all things. Thus in the divine book it is revealed: “We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves.”⁸ [108] In this station the effulgences of the signs of the uncompounded reality can be observed and are apparent in all things. The

meaning of the philosopher was not that the Absolute Reality is dispersed among the innumerable existent things. Immeasurably exalted is It from being dispersed in any thing or from being constrained by any limits or from being associated with any other thing in creation. It is and continues to be sanctified from and exalted above all else except Itself. We bear witness that It is one in Its Essence and one in Its attributes. And all things are held in the grasp of the power of Him [God] Who is the sovereign Protector of all the worlds.

In one aspect, all that has been said or will be said refers back to the first assertion, that the glorified and exalted Absolute Reality is unknowable, unattainable, and invisible, and this station has been and will continued to be sanctified from all references and names, and freed from whatever the people of creation may understand of It. The path is barred and the quest denied. For whatever wondrous references and powerful descriptions have appeared from the tongue and pen refer to the sublime Word [of God], the most exalted Pen, the primal Summit, the true Homeland, and the Dawning-place of the manifestation of mercy. This is [109] the source of Divine Unity (*tawḥíd*) and the Manifestation of singleness and abstraction. In this station, all of the most beautiful Names [of God] and the most lofty [Divine] Attributes refer to Him (i.e. the manifestation of God), and do not refer to anything beyond Him, for, as has been stated, the Unseen Reality is sanctified from all reference. This locus of the light of Divine Unity, even though outwardly He is given a name and appears to be bound by limitations, is in His inner reality uncompounded (*baṣīṭ*), sanctified from limitations. This uncompounded state is relative and attributive (*iḍáfí wa nisbí*) and not uncompounded in an absolute sense (*min kull al-jihát*). In this station, the meaning is as follows: the Primal Word and the Dawning-place of the light of Primal Oneness is the educator of all things and the possessor of innumerable perfections. For this word in this station, there is an exposition, hidden in the treasures of purity (infallibility, *iṣmat*) and recorded in the guarded tablet, which it is not appropriate to mention now. Perchance God will produce it. He is the All-Knowing, the All-Informed.

And the objections that have been raised by some to the words of the philosopher are not based on evidence in that the meaning of his words has not been understood. Truly one cannot regard it as sufficient to look to the literal (external) meaning of a statement and then stir up malice. This is except in case of the words [110] of those who are notorious for their unbelief and idolatry. The words of such souls are not worthy of commentary.

The philosophers have been and are of various factions. Some have derived what they say from the books of the prophets. And the first who taught divine wisdom (*hikma*) was Idrís, on account of which he was given his name,⁹ and he is also called Hermes. He is called by a different name in each language. He has given thorough and convincing expositions in every arena of divine wisdom. And after him Balínús (Apollonius) derived some of the sciences from the Hermetic tablets. Most of the philosophers have derived their philosophical and scientific discoveries from his words and expositions.

Thus this exposition of the philosopher has been and is still capable of numerous praiseworthy and specific interpretations (*ta'wílát*). Some of those who have attained [the Divine Presence], wishing to protect the Cause of God, have outwardly refuted (the words of the philosopher). But this imprisoned servant does not mention anything but that which is good. Furthermore this day is not the day for human beings to occupy themselves with understanding such expositions, for such knowledge and its like has never been and will never be conducive to making human beings self-sufficient (able to do without, detached from all save God, *ghaní*). For example, the philosopher who spoke these words, [111] were he to be alive, and also both they who accepted what he said and those who opposed him over it, all of them would now be in one position: every single one of them who, after the raising of the call of the King of Names from the right hand of the luminous spot, affirmed his belief, is accepted and praiseworthy,¹⁰ and all others are rejected.

How many the souls who considered themselves as being at the highest pinnacle of reality and mystical knowledge to the extent that they considered that what issued forth from their mouths

was the balance by which [the truth of] human utterance should be weighed or the astrolabe with which the calendar of the beginning and the end should be fixed. Despite all this, in the days of the spring-time of the All-Merciful and the blowing of the winds of trials, we did not discover in them either acceptance or constancy. If a soul were today to be omniscient in all the sciences of the world and yet hesitate in affirming his belief (lit. speaking the word “yes”¹¹), he would not be mentioned in the Divine Presence and would be accounted among the most ignorant of people. The goal of the religious sciences is to attain knowledge of the Absolute Reality. Any soul who holds back from this most holy and most mighty adornment is recorded in the tablets as being of the dead.

O Husayn! This wronged one declares: words need deeds. Words without deeds are as bees without honey or as trees without fruit.

Consider the philosopher Sabzivári¹² [112]. Among his verses, there is a poem, which conveys the following meaning: “No Moses is alive to hear it, otherwise the chant of ‘I verily am God!’ exists in every tree [bush].” Such words as these has he spoken and his meaning is that the true knower of God rises to such a station that his eyes perceive the lights of the effulgences of the luminous Source of manifestation (*mujallí*) and his ears discern His call from all things. There is no objection to these words of the philosopher¹³, but, as we have already stated, this is the realm of words. In the realm of deeds, however, it can be seen that although the call of the divine lote-tree has been raised upon the highest spot in creation in clear and unambiguous (*min ghayr ta’wíl*) language and is inviting all beings through the loftiest of summonses, he has paid no heed whatsoever. For had he hearkened, he would have arisen to make mention of it. Either we must say that these were empty words which flowed from his mouth, or that, for fear for his reputation and love of his livelihood (lit. his bread), he remained deprived of this station (of belief) and of testifying to it. Either he understood and concealed [his belief] or he understood and denied [Bahá’u’lláh's claim].

Woe to those who waste [113] their whole lives in trying to establish the truth of their vain imaginings and yet, when the

lights of the Divine Presence are shining forth from the horizon of the name of the Self-Subsisting (*al-Qayyúm*), they remain deprived thereof. The Cause is in God's hands. He grants what He wishes to whomever He wishes, and withholds whatever He desires from whomever He desires. He is to be praised in His doings and obeyed in His judgements. No God is there but He, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.¹⁴

In these days, the following was revealed in a tablet: How many men, attired with a turban [i.e. learned], have held back and opposed and how many women wearing veils have recognized and accepted and have said "Praise be to Thee, O God of the Worlds!" Thus it is that we have made the most exalted among them to become the most abased, and the most abased to become the most exalted. Verily your Lord is Ruler over whatsoever He wishes.

O Ḥusayn! Say to the questioner: forsake this small pond when the most mighty ocean is before you. Draw near and drink from its waters in the name of your Lord, the Knowing, the All-Informed. By my life! It will cause you to reach a station wherein you will see in the whole world naught but the effulgences of the presence of the Ancient of Days and you will hearken unto the lote-tree which has been elevated upon the knowledge that there is no but He, the Powerful, the Mighty, the Omnipotent.

In this day, it is incumbent upon all souls, when they hear the call from the Dawning-Place of Creation, to leave behind [114] the people of the world and their opinions and arise and say: "Yes,¹⁵ O my Desire!" and then to say: "I obey! O Beloved of the Worlds."

Say: O questioner! Were the sweetness of the wine of the exposition of your Lord to seize you and were you to recognize the wisdom and illumination that is in it, you would forsake this contingent world and arise to assist this wronged exile and would proclaim: "Praise be to the one who has manifested the fluid [waters] as the solid [ice],¹⁶ and the uncompounded [reality] as a circumscribed [creation], and the hidden as the manifest; the one who, were one to behold him in his outward form, one would find him in the form of a man standing before the people of tyranny. Were one to contemplate his inner

reality, however, one would recognize him as lord over all who are in the heavens and earths.”

Listen to what the fire is proclaiming from the luminous lote-tree raised upon the crimson spot: “O People! Hasten with all of your hearts to the shore of the Beloved. Thus has the matter been decided and the decree has issued forth from He who is all-powerful and trustworthy.”

O questioner! Your words have been mentioned in the Divine Presence¹⁷ in this manifest prison. Thus has been revealed this tablet from the horizon of which shines forth the sun of the benevolence of your Lord the mighty, the all-praised. [115] Know its true worth and value it greatly. This would be best for you, if you are among those who have true knowledge. We ask of God that He confirm you in His Cause and make mention of you and decree for you that which will profit you in this world and the next. He verily answers the prayers of those who call upon Him and He is the most merciful of the merciful.

O servant! Were you to be attracted by the breezes of the utterances of the Lord of Names and were you to seek illumination from the lights of the [Divine] Face¹⁸, which shine forth from the Dawning-place of eternity, you would turn your face towards the all-highest Horizon.

Say: O Creator of the heavens and Lord of Names! I ask You by Your name through which You have opened the door of meeting with You to Your creatures and have caused the sun of Your bounty to shine forth upon those who are in Your kingdom, that You may cause me to be sincere in Your love, detached from all save You, arising for Your service, looking towards Your Face, and speaking in praise of You. O Lord! assist me in the days of the Manifestation of Your Self and the Dawning-place of Your Cause, such that I may burn away the clouds [that obscure You] by Your grace and favour and may consume the veils [that separate me from You] with the fire of Your love. O Lord! You are strong and I am weak; You are rich [116] and I am poor. I ask You, by the ocean of Your bounty, that You do not cause me to be deprived of Your grace and Your Love. All things bear witness to Your greatness, Your glory, Your power and Your might. Guide and assist me through (lit. take my hand

in the hand of) Your will and save me by Your sovereignty. Write down then for me what You have written down for Your confidants, those who have near access to You and are faithful to Your Covenant and Testament, who soar in the atmosphere of Your will and speak Your praise among Your creatures. Verily You are the Powerful, the Protector, the Lofty, the Mighty, the Generous.¹⁹

NOTES

- ¹. *Baṣīṭ al-Haqīqa*. *Baṣīṭ* is here translated as “uncompounded”. It has been translated by James Morris as “simple” (*The Wisdom of the Throne*, pp.). Although this is technically a correct translation in the philosophical sense of the word as something that is uncompounded, I felt that the word “simple” has too many other meanings in common use and would be confusing. The translator of the *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (p. 61) has translated the term as “elementary”. There is also the fact that this word is being used in a genitive construction and not adjectivally (i.e. the Arabic may be rendered literally as “the uncompounded of reality”). The root of the word *baṣīṭ* means “to spread out” or “to stretch out”, and in this sense of something spread out, I was tempted to translate the phrase as “the field of reality”. This would render the passage “the field of reality is all things” which has a striking resonance with modern physics in the sense that all physical reality is in modern physics considered to consist of electro-magnetic fields in which fluxes occur. This would however, apart from being anachronistic also be a departure from the sense in which the original author Mullá Sadrá intended this passage. His meaning was derived from the philosophical notion that all reality is compounded and that the only uncompounded reality is God.
- ². i.e. those perfections that are positive and existent, rather than those which are negative and privative.
- ³. This is a somewhat unusual use of the word *wájjid*, which derives from the root meaning “to get” or “obtain”. According to Sayyid Ja'far Sajjádí, (*Farhang-i Ma'árif-i Islámí*, Tehran, 1373, 3rd vol., p. 2090, citing *Sharḥ-i Kalamát-i Báábá Táhir*) *wájjid* is used by Báábá Táhir 'Uryán to refer to someone who has emptied himself of all vestige of self and has detached himself from all save God.
- ⁴. The basic language of the text changes from Arabic to Persian at this point, although there continue to be numerous Arabic phrases and passages in what follows.
- ⁵. These numbers refer to the page numbers in the original text in *Iqtidarát*.

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- ⁶. Qur'án 28:88; cf. its corollary 55:26-7. Also associated with this concept of the Face or Countenance of God is 2:115, which states that: Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. These verses are taken in the Islamic mystical and metaphysical tradition to mean that when one turns one's face towards (*tawajjuh* - derived from the same Arabic root as *wajh*) God, then everything else in Creation becomes as nothing.
- ⁷. Qur'án, see note 5
- ⁸. Qur'án 41:53
- ⁹. The name Idrís can be considered to derive from the root “d-r-s” which means “to teach”.
- ¹⁰. Lit. Attained to the word “*Balá*” (lit. “Yes”). A reference to Qur'án 7:172, where, in the pre-eternal Covenant, to God's question “Am I not your Lord?” The children of Adam are made to reply “Yes (*Balá*).” In other words, Bahá'u'lláh is saying that were Mullá Sadrá together with his supporters and opponents all to be alive in Bahá'u'lláh's day, they would all be in the position of having to face the challenge of Bahá'u'lláh's claim.
- ¹¹. See note 9
- ¹². Mullá Hádí Sabzivári (d. 1878) the most prominent of the Iranian philosophers of the nineteenth century. An English translation of one of his major works is available *The Metaphysics of Sabzavári* (trans. T. Izutsu and M. Mohaghegh, New York, 1977).
- ¹³. Indeed Bahá'u'lláh himself says much the same in one of the prayers for the fast: “...this Revelation - a Revelation the potency of which hath caused every tree to cry out what the Burning Bush had aforesaid proclaimed unto Moses, Who conversed with Thee” (*Prayers and Meditations*, no. 85, p. 144).
- ¹⁴. This paragraph is paraphrased and quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in the Words of Paradise (*Kalimát Firdawsiyyih*), *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 61
- ¹⁵. See note 9
- ¹⁶. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, no. 38, p. 49
- ¹⁷. lit. “before the Face”; a Qur'anic allusion, see note 5
- ¹⁸. Qur'anic reference, see note 5
- ¹⁹. This paper was originally completed 1 August 1995. It was edited on the basis of the suggestions made by the individuals named in note 16 and an additional paragraph drawn from the history of Ustád 'Alí Akbar Banná was added, 18 June 2000. Some slight further modifications were made preparatory to this publication in 2010.

Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaḳíqa)

A Provisional Translation

Moojan Momen

Abstract: This paper consists of an introductory survey together with a provisional translation of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaḳíqa). The subject of the Tablet is the unresolved conflict in Islam between philosopher-mystics who adhere to the philosophy of existential oneness (waḥdat al-wujúd) and jurists and others who oppose this view regarding it as heresy and blasphemy. Bahá'u'lláh seeks to resolve the issue and bridge the gap between these two attitudes of mind by showing how both viewpoints can be true when taken within the context of the concept of the Manifestation of God.

The Tablet known as the *Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaḳíqa* (Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality) dates from the Akka period. In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh deals with one of the issues that has run through the Islamic world from the Middle Ages onwards. This is the controversy between two positions concerning the nature of the relationship between God and His creation. These two positions existed from the earliest days of Islam and eventually became known as *Waḥdat al-Wujúd* (existential unity, oneness of being) and *Waḥdat ash-Shuhúd* (unity in appearance only). The former was the position taken by the followers of Ibn al-'Arabí (d. 638 A.H./1240) and was more common among those inclined towards Sufism and mystical philosophy. The latter was the position commonly taken by

jurists and was given its name by Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindí (971 A.H./1563-1034 A.H. - 1034/1624-5) in the 17th century.

In brief it may be said that those who supported the position of *Waḥdat al-Wujúd* maintained that Being is one — it is that which exists. Since existence is also one of the essential attributes of God, then it may be said that all things are subsumed in the one Absolute Reality that we call God. This one Reality has different aspects according to the way that it is viewed.

Those who held to the opposing position of *Wahdat ash-Shuhúd* maintained that God is beyond any conceptualizations that can be made of Him; he is *wará' al-wará thumma wará' al-wará thumma wará' al-wará* (beyond the beyond, then beyond the beyond, and again beyond the beyond)¹. Hence the mystics' experience of unity or union or any apprehension of God through mystical experience is subjective only and has no objective validity. The unity that mystics claim with God is only an appearance and has no substance.

In Iran, the concept of *waḥdat al-wujúd* had a powerful influence especially upon many philosopher-mystics. The most important of these was Şadru'd-Dín Shírází, known as Mullá Şadrá. It is Mullá Şadrá whose dictum “All that which is uncompounded in Its Reality is, by virtue of Its [absolute] Unity, all things” (*kullu ma huwa basíṭu 'l-ḥaḳíqa fa-huwa bi-waḥdatihi kullu 'l-ashyá'*) is quoted and commented upon by Bahá'u'lláh in this Tablet. This dictum is one of the cornerstones of Mullá Şadrá's philosophy and is explicated in several of his works: *al-Ḥikmat al-Arshiyyah* (the Wisdom of the Throne)², *al-Mabda wa'l-Mu`ád* (the Origin and the Return)³, *al-Mashá'ir fí Ma'rifat Alláh* (the Staging-Posts in the Knowledge of God)⁴, and *al-Ḥikmat al-muta`áliyya fi'l-Asfar al-aqliyya al-arba`a* (The Transcendental Wisdom concerning the Four Journeys of the Rational Soul).⁵

In his work *al-Ḥikmat al-Arshiyyah*, the Wisdom of the Throne, Mullá Sadrá takes as his starting point the traditional philosophical concept that all things are composed of quiddity (*mahiyyah*, that which answers the question “what is it?”) and being (*wujúd*, that which gives existence to the quiddity). He then goes on to demonstrate that if an entity A has something

B negated of it (i.e. if A is stated to be “not B”) and if B is something that itself has being (i.e. is not merely a statement of privation or imperfection, such as “not blue” or “illiterate”), then A cannot be uncompounded in its essential reality since it must be composed of at least two aspects, an aspect by which it is A and an aspect by which it is not B. (These two aspects cannot be identical since that would mean positing that the very essence of A is something privative such that anyone who intellected “A” would also immediately intellect “not B”). Hence the converse of this must also be true, that which is uncompounded in its reality can have nothing that has being negated of it – otherwise it would consist of at least two aspects: an aspect by which it is such (such as A) and an aspect by which it is not some other (such as not B, not C, etc.), and would therefore not be uncompounded in its essential reality. Hence “that which is uncompounded in its reality” must necessarily be “all things”.⁶ Elsewhere, Mullá Sadrá makes it clear that “that which is uncompounded in its reality” is the “necessarily existent (*wájjib al-wujúd*)”, i.e. God⁷, and this is the definition also given by other writers.⁸

Mullá Sadrá's pre-eminence in the field of Iranian Shi'ī mystical philosophy (*ḥikmat*) meant that this idea was adopted and commented upon by numerous other philosophers. For our purposes, the most significant of those who commented upon this dictum was the Shaykhí leader, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá'í. He severely criticized this dictum of Mullá Ṣadrá because of its implication of existential monism.

Shaykh Aḥmad wrote in several of his works commenting upon this dictum. The most extensive of these critiques was in a commentary that he wrote on Mullá Ṣadrá's work the *Mashá'ir* (composed in 1234/1818-9 in Kirmánsháh). He also deals with this subject in his last major work, his commentary on Mullá Ṣadrá's *Ḥikmat al-'Arshiyya* (completed in 1236/1820-1 in Kirmánsháh). In the latter, he states that this dictum is erroneous because:

He [Mullá Sadrá] has concluded that if one negates something of it and this negation is comprehended in the mind, then this necessitates composition. And we say to him: the uncompounded reality is a pure matter,

not something from which nothing can be negated because your words that “it is something from which nothing can be negated” is similar to your words that “it is something from which something can be negated”; for in both cases there is need for composition. There is need for composition from existent matter and non-existent matter in what you have rejected and there is need for composition from existent matter and existent matter in what you have taken recourse in, and it is that from which nothing can be negated.⁹

This subject also arises in a treatise that Shaykh Aḥmad wrote for Mullá Muḥammad Damaghání in 1232/1816-7, and in a treatise written for several unnamed Sayyids in (date not known)¹⁰. In the last-named work, Shaykh Aḥmad states that:

When he (Mullá Ṣadrá) says “the uncompounded reality is all things”, this expression would suggest that He [God], praised be He, is all accidents (*ḥawadith*), since things are accidents. The error of this statement is clear since accidents are in the realm of contingency (*al-imbkán*) and the necessarily [existent], praised be He, is pre-existent (*azal*) and is not in the realm of contingency ...

Shaykh Aḥmad goes on to give several possible meanings of Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum and demonstrates the falseness of each.¹¹

The Báb, in a few places, criticizes the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujúd* as it was generally understood among Sufis. He disapproved, in particular, of the concept that God could somehow be considered to be dispersed among created things. In the course of this criticism, He mentions the concept of *basít al-ḥaqíqa*. In His *Risála adh-Dhahabiyya*¹², the Báb states that:

Most of the Islamic philosophers, the peripatetic philosophers, the followers of Mulla Ṣadrá (aṣ-Ṣadrá'yyin), and the Theosophical philosophers (al-iláhiyyin) have erred in their explanations of this station. The signs of the effulgences (tajalliyát) of creation were mistaken by them for the countenance of

the Essence [of God]. Thus they went along with erroneous statements concerning the Eternal Archetypes (a`yan thábita) being in the Essence [of God] in order to establish His knowledge (praised be He)¹³; and with mention of the Uncompounded Reality in order to establish causality (‘illiyya) in the Essence [of God]; and with mention of the connection between the Essence [of God] and [His] actions and attributes; and with the mention of the oneness of Being (waḥdat al-wujúd) between the Creator (mújid) and the one who has gone astray (al-mafqúd). All of this is absolute heresy (shirk maḥḍ) in the estimation of the family of God, the Imáms of justice, for God has always been the All-Knowing without the existence of anything having form and shape (? – shay'un bi-mithl ma inna-hu kana shayyár). Just as He does not need for His being alive the existence of anything other than Him, He also does not need for His knowledge the existence of objects of knowledge. And the Essence [of God] continues to be connected to things. The causation (‘illiyya) of created things is His handiwork (san`ihi) and this is the [Primal] Will, which God has created through itself by itself without any fire from the Essence [of God] touching it. And God has created existent things through it and it continues. The All-High does not speak except through it; and the All-High does not give any indication of its essence (dhátiyyatihá). And God has not given any sign of His Essence in [the whole of] creation (al-imkán), for His Being (kaynúnátihi) sets beings apart from being known, and His Essence (dhatiyyatihi) prevents essences from being explained. Verily the relationship of the [Primal] Will to Him is like the relationship of a verse [of scripture] to God. It is a relationship that is conferred upon Creation not upon the Essence [of God], for It is sanctified from the mention of any indications or relationships or evidences or signs or stations or effulgences or breezes relating to It; and that being the case none can know It except Itself. And such expressions as Oneness of Being and the mention of the Uncompounded Reality is witness, in the estimation of the people of the

covenants (ahl al-'uhúd), to its falsity, for He is the one who there is no-one other than He with Him. How then is it possible to say any words concerning His Being. On the contrary, all signs in the world of Láhút, Jabarút, Malakút and Mulk are possibilities of the hearts and souls [of human beings] and what has occurred to their imaginations. All who describe God, except Himself, have lied and deceived for anything other than Him is not of Him and cannot speak on His level and cannot have existence with Him, even the purest expression of the Oneness of God. And I have set forth proofs in two thousand manuscripts (fi'l-nuskha al-alifayn) in explanation of the secret of the confusion (? - ilhá') of the errors of the words of these men. The beginning of the saying of such words is the passage from Muhyi ad-Dín, may God delay his punishment, such as what he has said in the Fuṣúṣ [al-Ḥikám]. And this is sheer idolatry (shirk) in the estimation of those who have inner knowledge (ahl al-buṭún).

And in a letter addressed to Mírzá Muḥammad Sa'íd of Zavárih¹⁴, the Báb states:

And with regard to the reply concerning the uncompounded reality, which the philosophers have mentioned in order to assert that there is Being between the Creator and the one who has gone astray, there is no doubt that this is erroneous in the estimation of one who possesses the musk-like fragrance of fair-mindedness.

Bahá'u'lláh takes a much milder and more accommodating attitude towards the monist ideas in Sufism. In the Baghdad period, He spent some time associating with Sufis in Sulaymaniyya. He also wrote several works in the Sufi style and idiom. Among these were the Seven Valleys (*Haft Vádí*), the Four Valleys (*Chahár Vádí*), and the poem *Qaṣída 'Izz Varqá'iyyih* (The Ode of the Dove) which was written in the style of the famous poem *at-Tá'iyya* of the Sufi poet Ibn al-Fárid. Although Bahá'u'lláh wrote less on overtly Sufi themes in later years, the Tablet which is the subject of this paper and

which was revealed in the Akka period is one of those in which He returns to some of these themes.

Given the fact that both Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ahsá'í and the Báb had written on the theme of *Basīṭ al-Ḥaḳíqa*, it was perhaps inevitable that someone among his followers would ask Bahá'u'lláh for His comments on the theme of Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum. It would appear from the text that one of Bahá'u'lláh's followers, named Ḥusayn, had been asked by someone who was a follower of Mullá Ṣadrá to ask for Bahá'u'lláh's comments on the question of *Basīṭ al-Ḥaḳíqa* and this Tablet was revealed in response to the question.

In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh again displays his benevolent attitude towards Sufi themes. He refrains from condemning Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum outright, and instead states that those who have condemned this approach have misunderstood it and have taken it too literally.

Bahá'u'lláh first explains the nature of the division among Muslims over Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum and the associated concepts. He brings forward verses from the Qur'an in support of both positions. For those who follow Mullá Ṣadrá's position, which He here calls *Tawḥíd-i-Wujúdi* (existential oneness), Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Qur'anic verse "All things perish save [His] face" (28:8, cf. 55:27) and interprets this to support the position of those who assert that the only reality is the Divine Reality. For those who opposed Mullá Ṣadrá's position, which He here calls *Tawḥíd-i-Shuhúdí* (oneness in appearance only), Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Qur'anic verse "We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves." (41:53) This He interprets as saying that any evidence of union between the Divinity and creation is only the result of the fact that the signs of God are apparent in all things.

Having defined the two sides of the conflict, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that those who have attacked Mullá Ṣadrá's position have looked only at the literal meaning of his words rather than the underlying meaning. He then goes on to give an interpretation of Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum in terms of the concept of the Manifestation of God. This is one of Bahá'u'lláh's most explicit statements of one of the most interesting and potentially controversial aspects of His doctrine: His assertion

that all of the statements that occur in the scriptures relating to God (including references to His names and attributes, and statements about His actions and commands) refer in reality to the Manifestation of God, since no statement can be made about the Essence of God, which is unknowable.

The Tablet then continues with Bahá'u'lláh's statement that there is no benefit to be gained from disputing such points. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that His appearance renders all such disputation secondary. Whichever side of the argument an individual is on, his status with God depends only on whether he accepts or rejects Bahá'u'lláh.

There is not much history available regarding this Tablet. It is from the Akka period and is evidently addressed to an individual named Ḥusayn, but there does not appear to be any information regarding the identity of this individual. In the Tablet the contemporary Iranian philosopher Ḥájí Mullá Hádí Sabzivári is referred to and condemned for failing to respond to the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The following material from the manuscript history of the Bahá'í Faith in Ashkhabad by Ustád `Alí Akbar Banná is of interest in relation to this. In the course of his account of one of the Iranian Bahá'í emigres in Ashkhabad, Ustád Aḥmad Kuláh-dúz Sabzivári, Ustád `Alí Akbar Banná writes:

Prior to his conversion [to the Bahá'í Faith], he kept company with the mystical philosophers (*urafá*). Despite his illiteracy, he sought to acquire the illumination of wisdom (*ḥikmat*) from being in the presence of Ḥájí Mullá Hádí, Ḥakím-i Sabzivári. After his acceptance of the Faith, he related: "I went to the afore-mentioned philosopher (*ḥakím*) and informed him about this matter. The philosopher fell silent and after a pause said:

'Whatsoever has been accepted by the emotions of the heart (*wujdán*) cannot be opposed by explanation

So keep your lips from moving in explanation of these three B of opinion (*dhaháb*), of gold (*dhahab*) and of your religion (*madhhab*)"

Ḥájí Muḥammad Riḍá the martyr (killed in Ashkhabad in 1889) stated: "One day I went to the door of the house of Ḥájí Mullá Hádí and gave him a copy of the Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality. I said to him: 'Study this tablet today and I will come tomorrow to take it back.' He took the tablet and I left. The next day I went and took the tablet back, He did not say a word about it."¹⁵

This historical account would mean that the Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality must be dated to before 1878, the date of the death of Sabzivari. Thus this Tablet dates from the first decade of time in Akka.

The text which is provisionally translated here¹⁶ is that published in the compilation *Alváḥ Mubarakih Ḥaḍrat Bahá'u'lláh: Iqtidárát wa chand lawḥ digár* (usually known as *Iqtidárát*, no date, no of publication, pp. 105-116), the facsimile of a manuscript in the hand-writing of Mishkín-Qalam, dated Rajab A.H. 1310/January 1893. The text of this Tablet has also been published in *Ma'idih Asmání* (vol. 7, pp. 140-7) and by Alexander (Aleksandr) G. Tumanski (d. 1920) in his translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, *Kitabe Akdes*, Zapiski Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk S. Petersburg, 8th series, vol. 3, no. 6, 1899, pp. 61-4. Manuscripts of this Tablet include one in the collection of manuscripts bought from Mr. Dunlop of the British Legation in Tehran by the University of Leiden (Manuscript Or. 4971, section 7, item 1).

NOTES

1. Sirhindi quoted in Burhan Ahmad Faruqi, *The Mujjaddid's Concept of Tawhid*, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, repr. 1970, p. 81.
2. In this paper the text for this work is taken from Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í's commentary on the work (see note 9), the translation is adapted from James Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
3. In this paper, use has been made of the Persian translation by Ahmad Ardikání (Tihran: Markaz Nashr Danishgáhi, 1362).

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- ⁴. The Arabic text used is that found in unnumbered pages at the back of the Persian translation by Ghulam-Husayn Áhangí (Tihran: Intishárát Mawla, 2nd printing 1361).
- ⁵. Qumm: Maktabat al-Mustawfi, 1378/1958, vol.1, p. 116-7
- ⁶. Morris, *Wisdom*, pp. 98-9. A similar argument can be found in *al-Mashá'ir*, *Mash'ar* 6 of *Manhaj* 1 (Persian translation, p. 63).
- ⁷. See for example, *al-Mabda*, pp. 52-3
- ⁸. Muḥammad Sharíf Al-Jurjání, for example, in his dictionary of religious terms, *Kitab al-Ta'rifát* (Beirut: Maktaba Lubnan, 1969) states that *al-basit* can be considered in three ways. The first of these is *al-ḥaqíqí*, which is "that which has no parts (or divisions, *juz*)" to it at all, such as the Creator, exalted be He." (p. 46).
- ⁹. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í *Sharh al-'Arshiyya* vol. 1 (Kirman: Sa'ádat, 1361), pp. 80-1
- ¹⁰. For details of these works and manuscript and published sources for them, see M. Momen, *The Works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í* (Bahá'í Studies Bulletin Monograph, no. 1, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1991, nos. 22, 25, and 39, pp. 52, 55-6, 64-5.
- ¹¹. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í, *Majmu'a ar-Rasá'il*, vol. 30, (Kirman: Matba'a al-Sa'ádat, second printing, n.d.), pp. 131-2
- ¹². Iranian National Bahá'í Manuscript Collection, vol. 86, pp. 95-6. I am grateful to Stephen Lambden for finding this and the next quotation in this paper.
- ¹³. This refers to the assertion that if Knowledge is an essential attribute of God, then the Eternal Archetypes of all created things must be within the Essence of God in order for there to be something that is the object of God's knowledge.
- ¹⁴. Iranian National Bahá'í Manuscript Collection, vol. 69, p. 422-3
- ¹⁵. Ustád 'Alí Akbar Banná, *Taríkh 'Ishqábád* (manuscript in Afnan Library), p. 314-5
- ¹⁶. I am grateful to Keven Locke for some suggested corrections to the translation and to Jack McLean for his suggestions for the improvement of the English text. Others who suggested improvements and corrections to my commentary include John Walbridge, Nima Hazini, and Bijan Masumian

Lawḥ Basīṭ al-Ḥaqíqa

Provisional Translation

He is God, exalted be He in Might and Greatness!

Concerning what the questioner has asked regarding the statement of the philosophers (*ḥukamá*) that “the uncompounded reality¹ is all things”, say: know that what is intended by “things” in this context (lit. station, *maqám*) is none other than being (*wujúd*) and the perfections (*kamalát*) of being in so far as they are existent [and not privative]²; and by “all” is meant the obtainer (*al-wájid*).³ This “all” contains no plurality and no parts. The meaning is that the uncompounded reality, insofar as it is uncompounded in all respects, is the obtainer and gatherer of all the infinite and endless perfections.⁴ As it has been said: “His works are limitless.”

In the Persian language, it may be said that what the philosopher means by the word “things” in the afore-mentioned expression is the perfections of being in so far as these are existent [and not privative]; and by the word “all”, is meant possession (*dárá’í*) that is to say obtaining – the gathering together of all of the limitless perfections, in an uncompounded manner. They have mentioned similar things throughout their discourse on the unity (*tawḥíd*), power (*quwwat*), and intensity (*shiddat*) of existence.

The meaning of the philosopher was not that the Necessarily Existent [God] has become dispersed among (resolved into, lit. dissolved into, *munḥal*) the innumerable existent things. No! Praised be He! Exalted is He above that! Even as the philosophers themselves have stated: “The uncompounded reality is all things, but is not any one thing.”

And viewed from another aspect, the lights of the uncompounded reality can be seen in all things. This however is dependent upon the vision of the seer and the discernment of the beholder. A penetrating vision (*abṣar-i ḥadīdih*) is able to

see the signs of the Primal Divine Unity in all things, since all things have been and are the places wherein the Divine Names are manifested. The Absolute Reality, however, has been and will continue unceasingly to be sanctified from ascent and descent, from limitations, connections and relationships, while “things” exist and appear in the condition of limitations. Thus it has been said: “The existence of the Necessarily [Existent] would not be in the full perfection of its power and intensity, were it possible for It to disperse Itself into the innumerable existent things, but such a dispersion is not possible.” There is much to be said about this statement and if one were to elaborate fully on the meaning of the philosophers, the matter would become lengthy.⁵[107] Because the hearts of the noble are perceived to be subtle and refined, the pen chooses to confine itself to brevity.

Two stations can be observed in the Divine Unity: Existential Oneness (*tawhíd-i wujúdí*), and this is that [station] wherein all things are negated with a “no” and only the Absolute Reality is affirmed. This means the existence of nothing is acknowledged except the Absolute Reality, in the sense that all things, when compared with Its manifestation and remembrance, have been and will continue to be absolute nothingness (*faná-yi maḥḍ*). “All things perish save the [Divine] Face”,⁶ which means that compared with Its existence, nothing else has the capacity for existence and so no mention of the existence of anything else should be made. It has been said “God was and there was nothing else beside Him. And He is now as He always has been.” And yet it can be seen that things exist and have existed. The meaning of these words is that, in His court, nothing has, or has ever had, existence. In the Existential Oneness, “all things” perish and are nothing and the [Divine] “Face⁷”, which is the Absolute Reality, is eternal and unceasing.

[The second station in Divine Unity,] Manifestational Oneness (*tawhíd-i shuhúdí*) is that [station] where the signs of the Primal Divine Unity, the manifestations of Eternity, and the effulgences of the light of Singleness can be observed in all things. Thus in the divine book it is revealed: “We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves.”⁸ [108] In this station the effulgences of the signs of the uncompounded reality can be observed and are apparent in all things. The

meaning of the philosopher was not that the Absolute Reality is dispersed among the innumerable existent things. Immeasurably exalted is It from being dispersed in any thing or from being constrained by any limits or from being associated with any other thing in creation. It is and continues to be sanctified from and exalted above all else except Itself. We bear witness that It is one in Its Essence and one in Its attributes. And all things are held in the grasp of the power of Him [God] Who is the sovereign Protector of all the worlds.

In one aspect, all that has been said or will be said refers back to the first assertion, that the glorified and exalted Absolute Reality is unknowable, unattainable, and invisible, and this station has been and will continued to be sanctified from all references and names, and freed from whatever the people of creation may understand of It. The path is barred and the quest denied. For whatever wondrous references and powerful descriptions have appeared from the tongue and pen refer to the sublime Word [of God], the most exalted Pen, the primal Summit, the true Homeland, and the Dawning-place of the manifestation of mercy. This is [109] the source of Divine Unity (*tawḥíd*) and the Manifestation of singleness and abstraction. In this station, all of the most beautiful Names [of God] and the most lofty [Divine] Attributes refer to Him (i.e. the manifestation of God), and do not refer to anything beyond Him, for, as has been stated, the Unseen Reality is sanctified from all reference. This locus of the light of Divine Unity, even though outwardly He is given a name and appears to be bound by limitations, is in His inner reality uncompounded (*baṣīṭ*), sanctified from limitations. This uncompounded state is relative and attributive (*iḍáfí wa nisbí*) and not uncompounded in an absolute sense (*min kull al-jihát*). In this station, the meaning is as follows: the Primal Word and the Dawning-place of the light of Primal Oneness is the educator of all things and the possessor of innumerable perfections. For this word in this station, there is an exposition, hidden in the treasures of purity (infallibility, *iṣmat*) and recorded in the guarded tablet, which it is not appropriate to mention now. Perchance God will produce it. He is the All-Knowing, the All-Informed.

And the objections that have been raised by some to the words of the philosopher are not based on evidence in that the meaning of his words has not been understood. Truly one cannot regard it as sufficient to look to the literal (external) meaning of a statement and then stir up malice. This is except in case of the words [110] of those who are notorious for their unbelief and idolatry. The words of such souls are not worthy of commentary.

The philosophers have been and are of various factions. Some have derived what they say from the books of the prophets. And the first who taught divine wisdom (*hikma*) was Idrís, on account of which he was given his name,⁹ and he is also called Hermes. He is called by a different name in each language. He has given thorough and convincing expositions in every arena of divine wisdom. And after him Balínús (Apollonius) derived some of the sciences from the Hermetic tablets. Most of the philosophers have derived their philosophical and scientific discoveries from his words and expositions.

Thus this exposition of the philosopher has been and is still capable of numerous praiseworthy and specific interpretations (*ta'wílát*). Some of those who have attained [the Divine Presence], wishing to protect the Cause of God, have outwardly refuted (the words of the philosopher). But this imprisoned servant does not mention anything but that which is good. Furthermore this day is not the day for human beings to occupy themselves with understanding such expositions, for such knowledge and its like has never been and will never be conducive to making human beings self-sufficient (able to do without, detached from all save God, *ghaní*). For example, the philosopher who spoke these words, [111] were he to be alive, and also both they who accepted what he said and those who opposed him over it, all of them would now be in one position: every single one of them who, after the raising of the call of the King of Names from the right hand of the luminous spot, affirmed his belief, is accepted and praiseworthy,¹⁰ and all others are rejected.

How many the souls who considered themselves as being at the highest pinnacle of reality and mystical knowledge to the extent that they considered that what issued forth from their mouths

was the balance by which [the truth of] human utterance should be weighed or the astrolabe with which the calendar of the beginning and the end should be fixed. Despite all this, in the days of the spring-time of the All-Merciful and the blowing of the winds of trials, we did not discover in them either acceptance or constancy. If a soul were today to be omniscient in all the sciences of the world and yet hesitate in affirming his belief (lit. speaking the word “yes”¹¹), he would not be mentioned in the Divine Presence and would be accounted among the most ignorant of people. The goal of the religious sciences is to attain knowledge of the Absolute Reality. Any soul who holds back from this most holy and most mighty adornment is recorded in the tablets as being of the dead.

O Husayn! This wronged one declares: words need deeds. Words without deeds are as bees without honey or as trees without fruit.

Consider the philosopher Sabzivári¹² [112]. Among his verses, there is a poem, which conveys the following meaning: “No Moses is alive to hear it, otherwise the chant of ‘I verily am God!’ exists in every tree [bush].” Such words as these has he spoken and his meaning is that the true knower of God rises to such a station that his eyes perceive the lights of the effulgences of the luminous Source of manifestation (*mujallí*) and his ears discern His call from all things. There is no objection to these words of the philosopher¹³, but, as we have already stated, this is the realm of words. In the realm of deeds, however, it can be seen that although the call of the divine lote-tree has been raised upon the highest spot in creation in clear and unambiguous (*min ghayr ta’wíl*) language and is inviting all beings through the loftiest of summonses, he has paid no heed whatsoever. For had he hearkened, he would have arisen to make mention of it. Either we must say that these were empty words which flowed from his mouth, or that, for fear for his reputation and love of his livelihood (lit. his bread), he remained deprived of this station (of belief) and of testifying to it. Either he understood and concealed [his belief] or he understood and denied [Bahá’u’lláh's claim].

Woe to those who waste [113] their whole lives in trying to establish the truth of their vain imaginings and yet, when the

lights of the Divine Presence are shining forth from the horizon of the name of the Self-Subsisting (*al-Qayyúm*), they remain deprived thereof. The Cause is in God's hands. He grants what He wishes to whomever He wishes, and withholds whatever He desires from whomever He desires. He is to be praised in His doings and obeyed in His judgements. No God is there but He, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.¹⁴

In these days, the following was revealed in a tablet: How many men, attired with a turban [i.e. learned], have held back and opposed and how many women wearing veils have recognized and accepted and have said "Praise be to Thee, O God of the Worlds!" Thus it is that we have made the most exalted among them to become the most abased, and the most abased to become the most exalted. Verily your Lord is Ruler over whatsoever He wishes.

O Ḥusayn! Say to the questioner: forsake this small pond when the most mighty ocean is before you. Draw near and drink from its waters in the name of your Lord, the Knowing, the All-Informed. By my life! It will cause you to reach a station wherein you will see in the whole world naught but the effulgences of the presence of the Ancient of Days and you will hearken unto the lote-tree which has been elevated upon the knowledge that there is no but He, the Powerful, the Mighty, the Omnipotent.

In this day, it is incumbent upon all souls, when they hear the call from the Dawning-Place of Creation, to leave behind [114] the people of the world and their opinions and arise and say: "Yes,¹⁵ O my Desire!" and then to say: "I obey! O Beloved of the Worlds."

Say: O questioner! Were the sweetness of the wine of the exposition of your Lord to seize you and were you to recognize the wisdom and illumination that is in it, you would forsake this contingent world and arise to assist this wronged exile and would proclaim: "Praise be to the one who has manifested the fluid [waters] as the solid [ice],¹⁶ and the uncompounded [reality] as a circumscribed [creation], and the hidden as the manifest; the one who, were one to behold him in his outward form, one would find him in the form of a man standing before the people of tyranny. Were one to contemplate his inner

reality, however, one would recognize him as lord over all who are in the heavens and earths.”

Listen to what the fire is proclaiming from the luminous lote-tree raised upon the crimson spot: “O People! Hasten with all of your hearts to the shore of the Beloved. Thus has the matter been decided and the decree has issued forth from He who is all-powerful and trustworthy.”

O questioner! Your words have been mentioned in the Divine Presence¹⁷ in this manifest prison. Thus has been revealed this tablet from the horizon of which shines forth the sun of the benevolence of your Lord the mighty, the all-praised. [115] Know its true worth and value it greatly. This would be best for you, if you are among those who have true knowledge. We ask of God that He confirm you in His Cause and make mention of you and decree for you that which will profit you in this world and the next. He verily answers the prayers of those who call upon Him and He is the most merciful of the merciful.

O servant! Were you to be attracted by the breezes of the utterances of the Lord of Names and were you to seek illumination from the lights of the [Divine] Face¹⁸, which shine forth from the Dawning-place of eternity, you would turn your face towards the all-highest Horizon.

Say: O Creator of the heavens and Lord of Names! I ask You by Your name through which You have opened the door of meeting with You to Your creatures and have caused the sun of Your bounty to shine forth upon those who are in Your kingdom, that You may cause me to be sincere in Your love, detached from all save You, arising for Your service, looking towards Your Face, and speaking in praise of You. O Lord! assist me in the days of the Manifestation of Your Self and the Dawning-place of Your Cause, such that I may burn away the clouds [that obscure You] by Your grace and favour and may consume the veils [that separate me from You] with the fire of Your love. O Lord! You are strong and I am weak; You are rich [116] and I am poor. I ask You, by the ocean of Your bounty, that You do not cause me to be deprived of Your grace and Your Love. All things bear witness to Your greatness, Your glory, Your power and Your might. Guide and assist me through (lit. take my hand

in the hand of) Your will and save me by Your sovereignty. Write down then for me what You have written down for Your confidants, those who have near access to You and are faithful to Your Covenant and Testament, who soar in the atmosphere of Your will and speak Your praise among Your creatures. Verily You are the Powerful, the Protector, the Lofty, the Mighty, the Generous.¹⁹

NOTES

- ¹. *Baṣīṭ al-Haqīqa*. *Baṣīṭ* is here translated as “uncompounded”. It has been translated by James Morris as “simple” (*The Wisdom of the Throne*, pp.). Although this is technically a correct translation in the philosophical sense of the word as something that is uncompounded, I felt that the word “simple” has too many other meanings in common use and would be confusing. The translator of the *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (p. 61) has translated the term as “elementary”. There is also the fact that this word is being used in a genitive construction and not adjectivally (i.e. the Arabic may be rendered literally as “the uncompounded of reality”). The root of the word *baṣīṭ* means “to spread out” or “to stretch out”, and in this sense of something spread out, I was tempted to translate the phrase as “the field of reality”. This would render the passage “the field of reality is all things” which has a striking resonance with modern physics in the sense that all physical reality is in modern physics considered to consist of electro-magnetic fields in which fluxes occur. This would however, apart from being anachronistic also be a departure from the sense in which the original author Mullá Sadrá intended this passage. His meaning was derived from the philosophical notion that all reality is compounded and that the only uncompounded reality is God.
- ². i.e. those perfections that are positive and existent, rather than those which are negative and privative.
- ³. This is a somewhat unusual use of the word *wájjid*, which derives from the root meaning “to get” or “obtain”. According to Sayyid Ja'far Sajjádí, (*Farhang-i Ma'árif-i Islámí*, Tehran, 1373, 3rd vol., p. 2090, citing *Sharḥ-i Kalamát-i Báábá Táhir*) *wájjid* is used by Báábá Táhir 'Uryán to refer to someone who has emptied himself of all vestige of self and has detached himself from all save God.
- ⁴. The basic language of the text changes from Arabic to Persian at this point, although there continue to be numerous Arabic phrases and passages in what follows.
- ⁵. These numbers refer to the page numbers in the original text in *Iqtidarát*.

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- ⁶. Qur'án 28:88; cf. its corollary 55:26-7. Also associated with this concept of the Face or Countenance of God is 2:115, which states that: Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. These verses are taken in the Islamic mystical and metaphysical tradition to mean that when one turns one's face towards (*tawajjuh* - derived from the same Arabic root as *wajh*) God, then everything else in Creation becomes as nothing.
- ⁷. Qur'án, see note 5
- ⁸. Qur'án 41:53
- ⁹. The name Idrís can be considered to derive from the root “d-r-s” which means “to teach”.
- ¹⁰. Lit. Attained to the word “*Balá*” (lit. “Yes”). A reference to Qur'án 7:172, where, in the pre-eternal Covenant, to God's question “Am I not your Lord?” The children of Adam are made to reply “Yes (*Balá*).” In other words, Bahá'u'lláh is saying that were Mullá Sadrá together with his supporters and opponents all to be alive in Bahá'u'lláh's day, they would all be in the position of having to face the challenge of Bahá'u'lláh's claim.
- ¹¹. See note 9
- ¹². Mullá Hádí Sabzivári (d. 1878) the most prominent of the Iranian philosophers of the nineteenth century. An English translation of one of his major works is available *The Metaphysics of Sabzavári* (trans. T. Izutsu and M. Mohaghegh, New York, 1977).
- ¹³. Indeed Bahá'u'lláh himself says much the same in one of the prayers for the fast: “...this Revelation - a Revelation the potency of which hath caused every tree to cry out what the Burning Bush had aforesaid proclaimed unto Moses, Who conversed with Thee” (*Prayers and Meditations*, no. 85, p. 144).
- ¹⁴. This paragraph is paraphrased and quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in the Words of Paradise (*Kalimát Firdawsiyyih*), *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 61
- ¹⁵. See note 9
- ¹⁶. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, no. 38, p. 49
- ¹⁷. lit. “before the Face”; a Qur'anic allusion, see note 5
- ¹⁸. Qur'anic reference, see note 5
- ¹⁹. This paper was originally completed 1 August 1995. It was edited on the basis of the suggestions made by the individuals named in note 16 and an additional paragraph drawn from the history of Ustád 'Alí Akbar Banná was added, 18 June 2000. Some slight further modifications were made preparatory to this publication in 2010.

Dashavatara and Progressive Revelation

A Comparative Study of Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith

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There is a unique commonality of the Eternal nature of Religion as the foundational principle of both the Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith which is to say the 'Sanatana Dharma'¹ and 'the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future' respectively. Thus it's no hazard that the Hindus are so receptive to the Message of the Bahá'í Faith.

Dashavatara are a series of ten most prominent Avatars or the Manifestations of God of Hinduism in Indian sub-continent.

This study is concerned with the correspondence of Dashavatara and the concept of Progressive Revelation from the Bahá'í Teachings. Both Hinduism in its practices and the Bahá'í Faith in its unifying expressions encourage within it a great diversity of life styles and aspirations contributing richly to the ennobling and advancement of the civilization.

Hinduism

Hinduism

- Evolved from the Vedic religion of ancient India.

- Principally, a grand conglomeration of diverse but essentially compatible set of philosophy, beliefs and religious practices.
- Carrier of the oldest known civilization, still practicing ancient habits.
- Real name “Sanatana Dharma,” meaning ‘The Eternal Law’
- Believes in Eternal Unknowable Creator ‘Brahman’ and His emanations of gods and goddesses and Avatars: The Manifestations.
- Spiritual Liberation, attaining of Moksha is the final aim of life.
- Avatars are sent to help humanity in this final aim whenever humanity slips from its divine course.
- Realization of this Greater Truth helps Hindus stay tolerant (appreciative of its diversity of beliefs and practices).
- World’s largest body of scriptures in comparison with Bahá’í literature belongs to Hinduism. Divided in two basic categories of Shruti and Smriti, literally “That which is Heard” and “Remembered” respectively akin to the Revelation and Tradition in Semitic Faiths.
- Shruti includes Vedas, Bhagavad-Gita and Smriti includes epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata and the scriptures such as Puranas and Upanishads².
- Study of Hinduism is important for the Bahá’ís, since they:
 - Form a very receptive group of people to Teach.
 - Number over a billion, the 3rd largest faith in the world.
 - Have traveled and migrated globally and are found in receptive large numbers as early inhabitants in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Indonesia,

Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, Fiji, Surinam, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago in addition to almost all the western countries especially in UK, US and Australia.

In this thesis, Dashavatara is represented by Sri Krishna and His Words principally through Bhagavad-Gita as the most representative source of teachings of Hinduism. Progressive Revelation is represented principally through the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

The concept of God in Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith

God is the objective of knowledge and devotion in the Bahá'í Faith and Hinduism. Bahá'u'lláh in His revealed daily prayer states:

*I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.*³

Sri Krishana in Bhagavad-Gita states:

And whoso thus discerneth Me in all, and all in Me, I never let him go ... because he knows and worships Me ...⁴

Looking at the nature of God expressed in both Hindu and the Bahá'í literature, Arjuna in Bhagavad-Gita addressing the Absolute Divine Reality of Sri Krishna declares:

Thou art Parabrahma! The High Abode! The Great Purification! Thou art God Eternal, All-creating, Holy, First, Without beginning! ... neither gods nor men Nor demons comprehend Thy mystery Made manifest, Divinest! Thou Thyself Thyself alone dost know, Maker Supreme! Master of all the living! Lord of Gods! King of the Universe!⁵

And as stated by Bahá'u'lláh:

*...no tongue, however deep its wisdom, can befittingly magnify Thy name, nor can the bird of the human heart, however great its longing, ever hope to ascend into the heaven of Thy majesty and knowledge.*⁶

Arjuna declaring his helplessness in knowing the Divine Reality wonders:

How shall I learn, Supreme Mystery! To know Thee,
though I muse continually?⁷

And Bahá'u'lláh states:

*He is, and hath ever been, veiled in the ancient eternity
of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality
everlastingly hidden from the sight of men.*⁸

Arjuna continues his wonderment stating:

Under what form of Thine unnumbered forms Mayst
Thou be grasped?⁹

And Bahá'u'lláh states:

*Far be it from His glory that human tongue should
adequately recount His praise, or that human heart
comprehend His fathomless mystery.*¹⁰

Thus, we can make out that the Hindu and the Bahá'í view of God is one and the same, indicating both of them having emanated from a Same Source, and as attested by Sri Krishna and Bahá'u'lláh, the God is the Source thereof.

But one needs to be convinced of the existence of God in order to believe firmly of the process of the Revelations.. which is, in my understanding is a bottom up approach, the only feasible possibility of the belief and knowing God, it's not the top down approach. We find the signs of God in the created things and find the greatest amplification of those signs in the Manifestations of God and so through His teachings believe in the existence of a Supreme One Who is the Source of the Revelations.

But as per 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for intuitive people there is no need of a rational proof or the arguments of the existence of God which is necessary sometimes in order to clarify the conception of God at human intellectual level.

The Foundation and the Center of progressive revelation is the God. It is God Who is revealed progressively in order that

human can know Him. All things in a Faith revolves around the concept of the God. But how approachable is the God? Bahá'u'lláh states that God is immensely exalted above any possible human conception and would remain so. Humans can't know Him but He is aware of everything. As said earlier by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that God, the Creator can essentially know the created and not vice-versa.

The Nature of Man in the Bahá'í Faith and Hinduism

The Revelation pertaining to human beings has to be according to its nature and concomitant need. Thus in order to investigate the Revelation from God, it is worthwhile to investigate human nature attuned to which the Divine Revelation is revealed in its objective evolutionary education.

'Abdu'l-Bahá states in Paris Talks:

*In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone.... If a man's Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint... But if, on the contrary, he rejects the things of God and allows his evil passions to conquer him, then he is no better than a mere animal." And it is the precise function of the Manifestations of God to encourage and evolve the Divine nature in human being.*¹¹

In Bhagavad-Gita, all beings, creatures, things, humans and human tendencies whether noble or wretched have arisen from God. Comprehending the "truth of truths" is to understand the 'mystic Majesty of God' which in the Words of Bahá'u'lláh is "...that the Seal the Kingdom is God's may be stamped upon the brow of all its people"¹². It means, in my understanding, that the people of the world need to understand and realize that everything is under God's power and His Rule. In other words, to realize the 'mystic Majesty of God' as stated by Sri Krishna:

Whatever Natures be to mortal men distributed, those natures spring from Me! Intellect, skill, enlightenment, endurance, self-control, truthfulness, equability, and

grief or joy of soul, and birth and death, and fearfulness, and fearlessness, and shame, and honour, and sweet harmlessness, and peace which is the same whate'er befalls, and mirth, and tears, and piety and thrift, and wish to give, and will to help, - all cometh of My gift! The Seven Chief Saints¹³, the Elders Four, the Lordly Manus¹⁴ set- Sharing My work- to rule the worlds, these too did I beget; And Rishis, Pitris, Manus, all, by one thought of My mind; Thence did arise, to fill this world, the races of mankind; Wherefrom who comprehends My Reign of mystic Majesty – That truth of truths – is thenceforth linked in faultless faith to Me:¹⁵

Again Sri Krishna states:

Sattwan, Rajas, and Tamas, so are named the qualities of Nature, “Soothfastness,” “Passion,” and “Ignorance.” These three bind down The changeless Spirit in the changeful flesh.¹⁶

Thus, Satva and Tamas, in agreement to the Bahá'í teachings, are the divine and animal nature of human beings respectively. It is the Rajas, the passions, the emotions which bind them to whatever they are focused upon whether they be noble things or lower things thus giving rise to happiness or unhappiness as a consequence of their attachment.

The nature of Soul

Man, the human, has a soul which is unknowable and indestructible. Humans have two tendencies: to incline towards the base and to rise upwards the lofty. Age to age this lift towards lofty is slowed and humans start to fall again. Then there comes another Force which empowers him in lifting himself towards the greater heights of knowledge and civilization. This is the view of the human nature according to Hindu thought. Soul in Bhagavad-Gita is indestructible and continues after human's physical death. The destined condition of the soul after death depends upon the merit of one's deeds before on this earth. Thus here, the Bahá'í Faith and Hinduism match their view and understanding of the life after

death. This is to be so since in both of them religion is eternal and the same truth spoken differently through different sages and prophets again and again in differing conditions of society progressively.

On deathless continuity of Spirit and physical death being just a change of condition, Lord Krishna states:

...when one layeth His worn-out robes away, and, taking new ones, sayeth, "These will I wear to-day!" So putteth by the spirit Lightly its garb of flesh, and passeth to inherit a residence afresh.¹⁷

Some of the qualities of the soul as stated by Sri Krishna:

I say to thee weapons reach not the Life; Flame burns it not, waters cannot o'erwhelm, nor dry winds wither it. Impenetrable, unentered, unassailed, unharmed, untouched, Immortal, all-arriving, stable, sure, Invisible, ineffable, by word and thought uncompassed, ever all itself, Thus is the Soul declared!¹⁸

Thus in other words understandably, physical bodies do not last for ever. After a span of few years, physical bodies disintegrate and the soul associated with this physical body passes to the New World and gets possessed of "new bodies". This is not to say that it's the physical reincarnation¹⁹ but a new form of existence for the soul, a new condition by which the soul stays in the higher realm and continues to live in an higher plane of existence and performs the function it is assigned. This new condition is a condition of indescribable joy which is an inherent outcome of this existence of higher understanding and consciousness. Here too there is a function as on the earth that the soul is subject to. Bahá'u'lláh states this function and the condition in which this function can be assigned to a soul.

Know thou, of a truth, that if the soul of man hath walked in the ways of God, it will, assuredly, return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved. By the righteousness of God! It shall attain a station such as no pen can depict, or tongue describe. The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his

*ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him.*²⁰

Soul is made of elements which are not physical. If it would be physical it would be manifesting physical properties of being touched, being disintegrable, visible or measurable. But since it has none of these properties, it is not earthly. It is untouched, stable and eternal, and cannot be measured by thoughts and words. Some ideas of Invisible, ineffable, by word and thought uncompassed, ever all itself, Thus is the Soul declared! are expressed by Bahá'u'lláh some five thousand years later establishing the essential oneness of the revealed Word of Avatars or the Manifestations of God, saying..

*Know, verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel. It is the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, the first to recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration before Him.*²¹

Soul being the sign of God, all its declarations about himself are in reality the declarations of the excellence of its Creator. In words of Sri Krishna the soul declared its attributes and in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh this declaration is accomplished with its objective in declaring the 'excellence of its Creator'.

Soul is that pristine entity which proclaims in loudest terms the existence of God, reveals His attributes and manifests the sublime nature of His creation. But as Bahá'u'lláh, according to Himself, is the most recent of Avatars or Manifestations of God, He has brought an added spiritual knowledge according to the forthcoming maturity of humans today. But, are people mature enough to understand the nature of the Soul? Has Bahá'u'lláh, therefore, revealed in full measure the nature of soul and its condition after physical death of human? And again as stated by Bahá'u'lláh:

Verily I say, the human soul is, in its essence, one of the signs of God, a mystery among His mysteries. It is one of the mighty signs of the Almighty, the harbinger that

*proclaimeth the reality of all the worlds of God. Within it lieth concealed that which the world is now utterly incapable of apprehending....*²²

Then He continues stating...

*Verily I say, the human soul is exalted above all egress and regress. It is still, and yet it soareth; it moveth, and yet it is still. It is, in itself, a testimony that beareth witness to the existence of a world that is contingent, as well as to the reality of a world that hath neither beginning nor end.*²³

Soul declares the contingency of earthly realm but at the same time demonstrates through its attributes the reality of an absolute existence: a world that has neither beginning nor end. Each human is a soul and possesses a body and according to both the Hindu and the Bahá'í beliefs, the condition of the soul after physical death depends upon the human actions before on this earthly plane. But as different humans have got different states of existence on earth, there is going to be differing states of soul's existence after. And if it's so, then after the physical death do souls enter an absolute realm? Stating on this crucial theme, Bahá'u'lláh says:

*When the soul attaineth the Presence of God, it will assume the form that best befitteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation. Such an existence is a contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as the former is preceded by a cause, whilst the latter is independent thereof. Absolute existence is strictly confined to God, exalted be His glory. Well is it with them that apprehend this truth.*²⁴

This also clarifies what Bahá'u'lláh says it will assume the form that best befitteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation; what Sri Krishna says that So putteth by the spirit Lightly its garb of flesh, and passeth to inherit a residence afresh.

Thus, the Celestial habitation has a form.. as the spirit putteth its garb of flesh, and passest to inherit a residence afresh.

Thus absolute existence is not for the soul and its journey towards God, but only for God.

And the form which the soul takes after the physical death depends upon its condition on this earth before the physical death, thus is preceded by a cause and so it is not an absolute existence. And on the theme of assuming of form, exactly same idea and concept of the condition and forms the soul attains after its separation of body is narrated by Lord Krishna revealing...

...And, at the hour of death, he that hath meditated Me alone, in putting off his flesh, comes forth to Me, enters into My Being- doubt thou not! But, if he meditated otherwise at hour of death, in putting off the flesh, he goes to what he looked for, Kunti's Son!²⁵ Because the Soul is fashioned to its like.²⁶

Sri Krishna states: the Soul is fashioned to its like. And Bahá'u'lláh states: *"it will assume the form that best befitteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation."*

Dashavatara

The term Dashavatara is made of two words Dash and Avatara. In Sanskrit, Dash signifies the numerical value of ten, and Avatara, a noun from infinitive Avataran, meaning the one who descends i.e. the descent of Divinity. Thus the term Dashavatara, the ten divine descents, are generally referred in Hinduism as the descent of Vishnu. Vishnu descends in ten (or more) different forms for the maintenance of the Universe i.e. the protection of virtuous and destruction of the evil; thus establishing the realm of Dharma i.e. righteousness. This group of sequential descents of the divinity, each descent having a different form as conceptualized in Hinduism is known as Avatara.

The Blessed Lord²⁷ said...

Yadhaa yadhaa hi Dharmasya Glaanir bhavathi
Bhaaratha/

Abhyuthaanam Adharmasya Tad Aatmaanam
 srujaamyaham//
 Paritranaaya Saadhoonaam Vinaasaaya cha
 Dushkritaam/
 Dharma Samsthapanaarthaayaya Sambhavami yugE
 yugE//

Meaning...

When Righteousness declines, O Bharata!²⁸ when wickedness is strong, I rise, from age to age, and take visible shape, and move a man with men, succouring the good, thrusting the evil back, And setting Virtue on her seat again.²⁹

This verse from Bhagavad-Gita emphatically states the fact that from age to age God manifests Himself. These are the Words of Sri Krishna stating the inevitable rise of the Avatara in every age. Dashavatara are the ten Manifestations of Vishnu. They are the most important manifestations of these Avataras. The list of ten Avataras is found in Garuda Purana. There are other lists like that of 25 Avataras of Bhagavat Purana, but these 10 Dashavatara are most famous and are the greatest Avataras who had the maximum influence. Out of the 10, the 9 Avataras so far are:

- Matsya (fish)
- Kurma (tortoise)
- Varaha (boar)
- Narasimha (half-man, half-lion)
- Vamana (dwarf man)
- Parashurama (Rama with an axe)
- Rama (the embodiment of Righteousness)
- Krishna (the supreme Teacher)
- Gautama Buddha (the enlightened One)...respectively.

And ...

- Kalki (time, the Eternal or the destroyer of foulness, quarrel)

As per the common Hindu thought, the tenth Avatara Kalki is yet to manifest Himself.

Dashavatara, the ten Avataras of Lord Vishnu, are meant for establishing 'Dharma'³⁰, whenever 'adharmā'³¹ occurs. The scientific facts behind Dashavatara are now under research, as it seems that these ten Avataras represent the evolution of mankind.

Counseling a wise man to meditate upon, Garuda Purana³² mentions the ten Avataras in the context of treatment of a sick person by the relatives:

Relatives, coming near the diseased, should not mourn. My holy name should be remembered and meditated upon repeatedly. The Fish, the Tortoise, the Boar, the Man-lion, the Dwarf, Paraśurâma, Râma, Krishna, Buddha, and also Kalki³³. These ten names should always be meditated upon by the wise. Those who recite them near the diseased are called relatives.³⁴

Dashavatara explains and elaborates the Hindu Avataras and gives the sense of evolutionary stages of humanity in which each of the Avataras have a form in conformity to that stage of mankind's physical, intellectual and spiritual condition.

4 Yuga³⁵ and Avataras in each one of these Yugas:

The following are the 10 principle Avataras of Lord Vishnu in 4 Yugas:

- 4 Avataras in Krita Yuga (Matsya, Kurma, Varaha and Narasimha)
- 3 Avataras in Treta Yuga (Vamana, Parasurama and Sri Rama)
- 2 Avataras in Dwaapara Yuga (Krishna and Buddha)
- 1 Avatara in Kali Yuga (the Kalki, yet to be)

To rephrase, these are the Dashavatara who in my opinion represent the continuum of human evolution on the planet. They represent the manifestation of the monotheistic God on earth among people from age to age. Thus Hinduism is essentially a monotheism recognizing the Supremacy of Brahman, the Eternal and all the gods and beings and everything else is lower to that. And these Ten are the most prominent representative ones out of the innumerable one which are sent as the divine educators of humanity from the time immemorial. The several mythological stories and anecdotes are later additions and it's but an effort to conceptualize their presence to the then masses on Indian Sub-Continent. Even though Avataras would be innumerable, these ten representatives, the most prominent ones, the never ending eternal process of the descent of divinity shall continue as it has been so. This is seen by the Avatara coming among the humanity as 'one among themselves', their physical form and characteristics represent the physical form and the characteristics of then humanity in general. Since they are the self same Spirit and not the body. (That's perhaps one of the reasons why as Bahá'ís we don't portray the physical form of a Manifestation.) And as most evident in evolutionary science which says that the human life began most probably in the sea as that of the Fish leading to amphibian life as that of a Tortoise or Turtle thereby to the life of the land, then being a mammal as that of the Wild Boar evolving into an Animal Man as that of The Lion Man, half man and half animal. This then leading to the early man of short stature The Dwarf and then to the savage man of Rama with Axe further leading to the complete man being the Rama with a Bow thereby again manifesting as a sophisticated supreme Teacher in form of Krishna evolving into the gentle and compassionate enlightened souls that of Buddha which seems to complete one cycle of human evolution finally leading to the Kalki. Thus we see that all of these Avataras were always sent in their form conducive to the state of mankind then, which in an approximation represents the state of mankind then under evolution which is further prophesized ending with Kalki ushering an era of peace and righteousness.

The Progressive Revelation

Progressive Revelation means the nature of God being progressively revealed to humanity so that humanity as individuals and as a whole is able gradually to identify itself with that Great Divine Being. And this identification happens by the example of the Manifestation of God. Bahá'u'lláh says:

O Salman! The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself. Whoso turneth away from them, hath turned away from God, and whoso disbelieveth in them, hath disbelieved in God. Every one of them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of His Truth unto every one in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. They are the Manifestations of God amidst men, the evidences of His Truth, and the signs of His glory.³⁶

He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of men can never be known except through His Manifestation, and His Manifestation can adduce no greater proof of the truth of His Mission than the proof of His own Person.³⁷

They only differ in the intensity of their revelation, and the comparative potency of their light. Even as He hath revealed: "Some of the Apostles We have caused to excel the others."³⁸

*Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity.*³⁹

The seeming difference in the Divine Message and customs, traditions often leads to gradations of the different prophets and ranking of their Message by the adherents of the respective religions thinking their Faith to be superior or better Revelation of Truth than the other. And also that the revelation of these Manifestations differ because they are sent for people of differing capacities adapted to differing conditions. Upon this, Bahá'u'lláh states:

*That a certain attribute of God hath not been outwardly manifested by these Essences of Detachment doth in no wise imply that they who are the Day Springs of God's attributes and the Treasuries of His holy names did not actually possess it. Therefore, these illuminated Souls, these beauteous Countenances have, each and every one of them, been endowed with all the attributes of God, such as sovereignty, dominion, and the like, even though to outward seeming they be shorn of all earthly majesty....*⁴⁰

So, there is no point in considering one Manifestation being superior in worldly terms to others, because as per Bahá'u'lláh each one of Them are endowed with all the attributes of God whether manifest or not.

Often the people of various religions do not actively anticipate a new divine educator amongst themselves and they say that their prophet or the Messenger of God of their parents and forefathers is the final one and that there is no Revelation after theirs. The Bahá'í Faith claims that the Revelations are a seamless everlasting process and would continue to be in the form of new revelations for the education of mankind. Upon this, Bahá'u'lláh states:

Thou art surely aware of their idle contention, that all Revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the day springs of eternal holiness no Sun shall rise again, that the Ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the

*Tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest.*⁴¹

This seems true within the dispensation of a Manifestation but also for the whole Eternal Progression of the Revelation indicating:

*In like manner, if the Sun of Truth were suddenly to reveal, at the earliest stages of its manifestation, the full measure of the potencies which the providence of the Almighty hath bestowed upon it, the earth of human understanding would waste away and be consumed; for men's hearts would neither sustain the intensity of its revelation, nor be able to mirror forth the radiance of its light.*⁴²

But Prophets of God have always been sent in all times, places and under all conditions, perhaps even to the worlds unknown to us perhaps in distant parts of the universe, the spiritual worlds including those after human physical life and many more. Here Bahá'u'lláh states:

*Through His potency the Trees of Divine Revelation have yielded their fruits, every one of which hath been sent down in the form of a Prophet, bearing a Message to God's creatures in each of the worlds whose number God, alone, in His all-encompassing Knowledge, can reckon.*⁴³

Synthesis of Dashavatara and the Progressive Revelation

In Bhagavad-Gita, in spite of several teachings and counsels, Arjuna is reluctant to go to the war for justice and is not able to recognize the Lordship of Sri Krishna. Then as a final resort, Lord Krishna shows His Viraat Vishwaswarupa Darshan (the Great Magnificent Universal Form)⁴⁴ to Arjuna. Thereupon being shaken from His core, Arjuna recognizes the Truth of God and thus requests Sri Krishna to come back to His ordinary human form since the Great Magnificent Universal Form is difficult to bear. (Such stories narrated from the life

stories of many of the Manifestation including that of Sri Krishna and Bahá'u'lláh.)

For not being able to bear longer than a few moments, Arjuna states:

In gentleness on me!
 Good is it I did see
 This unknown marvel of Thy Form! But fear
 Mingles with joy! Retake,
 Dear Lord! for pity's sake
 Thine earthly shape, which earthly eyes may bear!

Be merciful, and show
 The visage that I know;
 Let me regard Thee, as of yore, arrayed
 With disc and forehead-gem,⁴⁵
 With mace and anadem⁴⁶,
 Thou that sustainest all things! Undismayed

Let me once more behold
 The form I loved of old,
 Thou of the thousand arms and countless eyes!
 This frightened heart is fain
 To see restored again
 My Charioteer, in Krishna's kind disguise.⁴⁷

Each one of this Dashavataras have been made to come down on earth in the form that the people could bear and which would resemble the known form existing among them. Going further perhaps in speculation that thus possibly during the time when man was mostly an inhabitant of jungle and forests in prehistoric savage form, the form of Parashuram (Rama with Axe) came forth. Even perhaps when man was in the physical form of a sea creature that an Avatara had come to teach them something in onward way of progress. So, during the

thousands of years from now, we would not have been able to imagine that state and so stories and mythologies with contemporary contexts have been build around the Matsya Avatara of Vishnu, around Kurma Avatara (the Turtle), around Varaha Avatara (the Wild Boar) and so on. Even the companions of Rama Avatara, who were said to be the monkeys, in the war with Ravana, could be another species of humans perhaps like Neanderthals and who later got extinct, and they are described as gentle monkeys. Or they would just be another group of humans unknown to the former and are not termed humans, even though just a few centuries ago that dark skinned from Africa were not considered human by some white skinned colonial rulers and slave traders. Or it could be other human group with somewhat different physical features. For scientists have put forward the theories of coming together of Homo Sapiens and the other species of humans not very long ago. But coming back to our discussion, Bahá'u'lláh states that the Prophets and the Messengers of God have come to humanity from its inception. That man exists from his origin and foundation as man, and that his species has existed from all eternity...⁴⁸ perhaps even before the existence of the earth.

And what was the objective of the coming of these 'Day Springs of eternal holiness' and how mankind has benefited from their appearance, and what have we learnt since they have come to us from the very beginning of existence?

Bahá'u'lláh states one vital role of the Manifestations of God in educating humans:

For were it not for those effulgent Lights that shine above the horizon of His Essence, the people would know not their left hand from their right, how much less could they scale the heights of the inner realities or probe the depths of their subtleties!⁴⁹

In Hindu line of Avataras, there itself is the progressive revelation. For each of these Avatara has come bringing an additional necessity from that which was the past. Providing the necessary spiritual nourishment and its social application in the form of laws and practices according to the needs of the time they manifest. Most Hindus believe in Krishna but they do also in Rama. For they know inherently that it is the same

Message with two versions. Rama taught the obedience in spite of prevailing injustice. And in seeming opposition, Krishna taught to fight for justice in spite of seeming disobedience. And this verifying and in conformity with the teaching of Bahá'í Faith that each Manifestation of God of the age reveals the teachings in conformity with that age and since situations and times change, these laws are either abrogated or new ones are created by Him.

As repeated by Bahá'u'lláh:

*Were He to decree as lawful the thing which from time immemorial had been forbidden, and forbid that which had, at all times, been regarded as lawful, to none is given the right to question His authority.*⁵⁰

The theme of repeated timeless coming of the Avatara is also pronounced in Hinduism. Evidently in Bhagavad-Gita when Sri Krishna having said that He is unborn and taught the knowledge of Yoga, the Union with the Divine, to Vivaswata, the son of the Sun god, who preceded time itself till present, perplexed Arjuna asks:

Thy birth, dear Lord, was in these later days. And bright Vivaswata's preceded time! How shall I comprehend this thing thou sayest, "From the beginning it was I who taught?"⁵¹

Thereupon Sri Krishna makes the reply as an Eternal Manifestation of God, the Sanatana Avatara comparable to defining Progressive Revelation saying:

Manifold the renewals of my birth have been, Arjuna! and of thy births, too! But mine I know, and thine thou knowest not, O Slayer of thy Foes! Albeit I be Unborn, undying, indestructible, the Lord of all things living; not the less- by Maya, by my magic which I stamp on floating Nature-forms, the primal vast- I come, and go, and come. When Righteousness Declines, O Bharata! when wickedness is strong, I rise, from age to age, and take visible shape, and move a man with men, Succouring the good, thrusting the evil back, And setting Virtue on her seat again.⁵²

As mentioned before by Bahá'u'lláh, many of the memories and records of the earlier Manifestations of God are lost in the dust of time and as repeated by Sri Krishna saying:

Manifold the renewals of my birth have been, Arjuna!
and of thy births, too! But mine I know, and thine thou
knowest not.

And also that the process of coming and going of the Avatara is eternal. Whenever there is a spiritual decadence in the world and the loss of moral and ethics, that the spirit of God is born in the form of an Avatara to guide humanity on the path of righteousness. But how often it happens that the people who have sought the coming of the Avatara have themselves turned against Him when He comes fulfilling the prophecies and anticipation in order to reestablish the reign of Virtue. Bahá'u'lláh states:

*Behold, how the divers peoples and kindreds of the earth have been waiting for the coming of the Promised One. No sooner had He, Who is the Sun of Truth, been made manifest, than, lo, all turned away from Him, except them whom God was pleased to guide... That hour is now come. The world is illumined with the effulgent glory of His countenance. And yet, behold how far its peoples have strayed from His path! None have believed in Him except them who, through the power of the Lord of Names, have shattered the idols of their vain imaginings and corrupt desires and entered the city of certitude.*⁵³

As repeated by Sri Krishna:

The minds untaught mistake Me, veiled in form;-
naught see they of My secret Presence, nought of My
hid Nature, ruling all which lives. vain hopes pursuing,
vain deeds doing; fed on vainest knowledge, senselessly
they seek an evil way, the way of brutes and fiends. But
My Mahatmas, those of noble soul who tread the path
celestial, worship Me with hearts unwandering,-
knowing Me the Source, the Eternal Source, of Life.⁵⁴

The Avatara has a dual nature as visible from the above quote from the Bhagavad-Gita, one is Divine which is one with

God and the other is the human which is like anybody else. That is the reason why Sri Krishna says that people mistake Him to be only a human being and do not recognize His Divine Nature. Adib Taherzadeh in *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, volume 1 p. 58, speaks that in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh there are many statements concerning the dual station of the Manifestations of God and His Chosen Ones. In relation to God, these Holy Souls appear as utter nothingness, but in relation to the world of creation They are endowed with all the attributes of God and are closely identified with Him. As Bahá'u'lláh has stated in one of His prayers:

*When I contemplate, O my God, the relationship that bindeth me to Thee, I am moved to proclaim to all created things 'verily I am God!'; and when I consider my own self, lo, I find it coarser than clay!*⁵⁵

Similar statements have also been made in Islam. The following tradition attributed to Prophet Muhammad clearly indicates the dual nature of the Messengers of God.

*Manifold are Our relationships with God. At one time, We are He Himself, and He is We Ourselves. At another He is that He is, and We are that We are.*⁵⁶

Thus, we are able to understand the universal nature of Divine Unity in which all the Avatars or the Manifestations of God from different religions have a dual nature. This proves the inner essential unity and oneness of different religions and they having come from the same Source speaking of the same Knowledge. This is evident from the above examples of Sri Krishna, Prophet Mohammad and Bahá'u'lláh.

But this dual nature is the cause of much confusion and difficulty among the followers and also the outsiders of a particular religion. The followers mainly take only the divine form of their Avatars and while outsiders take mostly the human form, of the Avatars of the other religion. This is one of the fundamental reasons while they do not respect the Manifestation of God from the other religions as much as their own. And they give a lower rank to the Manifestations of God from other religions whereas often they go to the height of fanaticism for their own Avatars by replacing Him with God

Himself. An example in trinity⁵⁷ in Christianity and who do not believe in divine reality of Mohammad.

Every Manifestation of God validates and confirms the truth of the earlier Manifestation. Even as Moses had confirmed Abraham, Jesus had confirmed and validated the truth of Moses and His laws and Mohammad Jesus. This is one of the proofs in the Holy Books on the validity and truth of each new coming Manifestation of God that He shall confirm and validate the truth of the earlier One. Thus confirming the soundness of history.

Even as Bahá'u'lláh confirms the truth of Mohammad stating:

*Behold how the sovereignty of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, is today apparent and manifest amongst the people.*⁵⁸

Sri Krishna in Bhagavad-Gita has confirmed Rama Avatara while speaking in the voice of God comparing Himself to be the Best and Center of all things in the universe. Among things and beings of the world, Sri Krishna says,

Time's self I am; of woodland-beasts – buffaloes, deers, and bears – the lordly-painted tiger; of birds the vast Garud, the whirlwind 'mid the winds; *'mid chiefs Rama with blood imbrued*, Makar 'mid fishes of the sea, and Ganges 'mid the streams; Yea! First, and Last, and Centre of all which is or seems I am, Arjuna! Wisdom Supreme of what is wise, words on the uttering lips I am, and eyesight of the eyes. And “A” of written characters, Dwandwa⁵⁹ of knitted speech, and Endless Life, and boundless Love, whose power sustaineth each...⁶⁰

Influence of Hindu and the Bahá'í Revelations

Hinduism is the third largest community of religion in the world numbering almost a billion just after Christianity and Islam. What has kept the Hindu people together in cherishing the ideals of their common heritage in spite of consistent long assaults of corrupt practices like casteism and maltreatment of

women like many great religions of the world. Hinduism has not only influence on itself but on the wider world beyond the religious and spiritual ideas. Ancient astronomy, chemistry, medicine and especially mathematics show the indelible impact of Hinduism. Discovery and creation of decimal system and creative imagination of zero. From last three thousand years, hundreds of millions of Hindus have turned themselves to the healing spiritual message of epics like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, scriptures like Bhagavad-Gita, Vedas and Upanishads. The philosophy of life and ideals present in these Books have given rise to a culture which is still continuing from its emergence of at least ten thousand years, which until now is unparallel in the history of world civilizations. Yoga with its similar ancient origin has its influence worldwide. Striving for justice and abiding by one's righteous duties in the face of challenges of one's passions and others' opposition is an eternal and universal Hindu principle of the foundation of peaceful and enduring social order. It has been a regular life-time habit of Indian masses to listen to and participate in the singing of devotional and moral characters of Mahabharata, Puranas, Ramayana and Bhagavad-Gita. Worship and altruism were the paramount values of individual and community life for thousands of years. This has given rise to spiritualizing of hundreds of millions and its effect upon the whole world. In spite of nearly two hundred years of western colonization, and the present waves of technology, diverse and differing modes of living, Hinduism is sustained in its vigour in giving a peaceful order to the people of India who are emerging as world leaders in modern technology and spiritual ways of life as Yoga.

The Bahá'í Faith in parallel even though being the most recent Divine Revelation in the religious history, has its first impact in Iranian society where it is conceived. It is the Bahá'ís who have established the first school for the girls in conformity to their teaching on the equality of man and woman, in Iran where girls were not considered fit to attend schools and acquire higher learning as the boys. Coming in majority from the illiterate and farming and lower social classes, Bahá'ís had established themselves as the most educated, progressive and prosperous community in Iran owing to their adherence to lofty spiritual guidance and values given by Bahá'u'lláh and later by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House

of Justice, the international governing Council of the Bahá'ís. Out of Iran in more than one hundred and eighty countries and independent territories, Bahá'ís have established their national communities and institutions. They are engaged in teaching the pacifying and unifying teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and also are doing disinterested service to the people world over through humanitarian enterprises such as schools, non-governmental organizations in addressing social issues like health, value education, tribal development and other socio-economic development actions. Bahá'í International Community has a consultative status with United Nations and thus Bahá'í teachings have their influence on world affairs. But first and foremost is the transformation which some six million people in the world have experienced and have dedicated their lives in dissemination of the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh and selfless and indiscriminate service to the human society. Thus while thinking globally and acting locally, Bahá'ís are assisting in bringing the immemorial vision of world unity in reality.

Conclusion

When Righteousness declines, O Bharata! when wickedness is strong, I rise, from age to age, and take visible shape, and move a man with men, succouring the good, thrusting the evil back, And setting Virtue on her seat again.⁶¹

The concept of God and His nature is defined identically in the teachings of Sri Krishna from Hinduism and the Bahá'í teachings. He is mentioned to be the Creator of everything that exists and He Himself is uncreated and self-subsisting, independent and unknowable. And that to let Himself be known, He cannot come in His Essential Form to people because people do not have the capacity to bear a full Revelation of God, so it is giving little by little age after age through each Avatara or the Manifestation. He sends His chosen Avataras or Manifestations and gives them authority and power from His own in order to educate people to gradually recognize His true nature and go away from the man made Vice and progress on the path of Virtue, thus, creating a new greater civilization each time of His appearance as an

Avatara amidst the people. Thus this phenomenon justifies in being called a Progressive Revelation. And this unchanging purpose of divine revelation is aptly named Sanatana Dharma, the Eternal Law.

Human nature, using a different language in Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith, is both spiritual and material.

The divine revelations are the successive stages in the Divine Plan as mentioned in both Hindu and the Bahá'í scriptures for greater recognition of God by humans. As seen in progressive nature of Dashavatara, the message was heroic in case of Matsya and Kurma and Varaha and Narasimha. Then Rama and Krishna brought the teachings of an exemplary way of life. Then it is Buddha who has brought the lessons of renunciation and relieving sufferings thereby living an enlightened unattached life. And it is Kalki who shall bring the union of differing people of the planet thereby culminating a major stage in the spiritualization of mankind.

This is the Indian line of Avatars and there are such lines in all the continents and the regions of the world ... which converge today into one universal convergence and union into the Universal Manifestation of the Glory of God, the Bhargodevasya the Maitreya Amitabha and so on...

Each of the Avatars have brought humanity to a stage further according to its contextual needs. And so each further progress enhances the receiving capacity of people. And as stated by Bahá'u'lláh, the divine revelations are revealed according to the conditions and receiving capacity of humanity at each successive stage of its evolution and promoting an ever advancing civilization. This is clearly evident in the phenomena of Dashavatara and amply justified in the concept of Progressive Revelation.

The soul in both Hindu and the Bahá'í views is uncreated and is eternal. But unlike certain interpretations of some groups of Hinduism if not all, the concept of reincarnation is not found in the Bahá'í teachings. But in the author's point of view, the soul having taken many forms as mentioned in Bhagavad-Gita does not mean many earthly forms, but rather several celestial forms or successive passing of the soul through different and

innumerable realms of God till eternity until it merges in union with her Creator. In other words, as the life in the human temple is the first stage of the life of the soul – as the child in the womb of the mother – it has the journey which begins on this earthly realm and there will be many other lives in the spiritual worlds.

The other meaning of Lord Krishna having been born several times and Arjuna too are the several successive revelations on earth by Avatars wherein the self-same spirit of an Avatara was present and self-same spirit of a sincere seeker, a devotee was present too thereby embodying the same divine grace and human receptivity at each stage of cosmic manifestation of Avatara.

In the author's finding, the spiritual message and even the details of the spiritual teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and Sri Krishna, for example the elements like the nature of man, concept of God, the purpose of human life, nature of soul and many others are similar to an astonishing degree. This leads the author to conclude the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and Sri Krishna to be two different versions of the same Reality, the reality of the same Religion of God, the same Revelation spoken in two different times by two different Persons, however in two different social, geographical and cultural context and perhaps with two different scopes of application. This gave rise to two different looks over the time to these Faiths, specially for Hinduism. Any casual observer who observes mostly the social form and cultural aspect shall find them different whereas a careful study of scriptures may compel us to see it to be the application of these two identical spiritual teachings spoken in two different languages, in two different times, in two vastly different human contexts and perhaps in two different geographical scopes.

Teachings of Bhagavad-Gita was limited to Indian sub-Continent for most of its life up to now fundamentally perhaps since means of communication and transport were limited up to very recent till a little over one and half century ago. Bahá'í teachings spread internationally from its birth in 1844 and much more globally from last half a century perhaps again owing to the improved means of communication and

transport in addition to it being an attractive, radiant and pertinent divine Message as per the need of humanity today. 24th May 1844, the first day of the birth of the Bahá'í dispensation is marked by the start of the communication revolution of sending of first telegraphic message in the world by Mr. Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor of the telegraph from Washington to Baltimore, a message chosen from the Bible, from the Book of Numbers read: "What hath God wrought?"⁶²

Thus, these two different scopes of expansion from the very beginning of Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith led to the social applications which gave rise to two different external looks of these Faiths whereas analyzing their spiritual teachings, its adherents share a one common faith in the core of their spiritual beliefs. Having said so, but for the Bahá'í Faith, owing to its recent origin, a reasonable conclusive statement as to its social form cannot be made since it is on its course of speedy evolution and some more years need to pass with at least a significantly comparable Bahá'í population to Hindus in order to speak conclusively of any resultant crystallized difference between the Bahá'í Faith and Hinduism in the social aspect or cultural elements of its practice.

Hinduism was mainly adhered by a large number, almost a billion, of Indians and Bahá'í Faith by a very small comparative numbers of a few millions of scattered people but living practically on every land of the Earth. Thus, over the time as a larger number of people accept Bahá'í Faith, the social reflection of its spiritual application would be more conclusive and of course different from the Hindu social reflection, even though spiritually or cosmically they may have identical form which we find in Bhagavad-Gita and the spiritual teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Thus, these two identical teachings in two different social applications would give rise to different social forms due to the difference in worldly conditions of its receiving people.

One of the reasons is also that Hinduism has an ecclesiastical class whereas the Bahá'í Faith has an institutional administration. Enormous differences as these in my opinion would lead Hindu Faith and the Bahá'í Faith very different socially even though both of them live in and share this present

technological world together. But keeping a clarity of vision unclouded by these contextual differences the author, based on the teachings of Bhagavad-Gita and Bahá'u'lláh, concludes these two Faiths respectively to be spiritually identical but socially different.

Dashavatara being the most core phenomenon of Hinduism around which Sanatana Dharma is intertwined, a typical expression of it is taken by the author in Bhagavad-Gita which characterizes in clearest terms the elements of a revelation in Hindu flow. Various writings of Bahá'u'lláh slightly supplemented by some authoritative interpretive writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are taken as full representation of the Bahá'í revelation. Thus giving a balanced comparative counterparts in both Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith. And then these two revelations in their spiritual and social elements are compared.

Due to the fundamental position of Dashavatara within Hinduism named as the Eternal Law or Sanatana Dharma, future researchers may like to explore in depth each of the cases of the Avataras and bring to light the scientific or logical reasoning behind the allegorical narration of the Life story of each of the Avataras. This may throw greater light upon the phenomenon of Divine Revelation as the educational process of mankind, its objective and tools.

Author has demonstrably discovered a remarkable resemblance of the messages of Bhagavad-Gita and the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. This then becomes a very promising field of comparative study in different themes of the Words and Writings of Sri Krishna and Bahá'u'lláh. Such a study would help in finding out the nature of Their Revelations and the nature of the audiences to which their respective revelations are addressed and also noting the progression, when and if any, in the themes of such messages.

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NOTES

- ¹ The Sanskrit phrase meaning "the eternal law" indicating timeless nature of the Religion.
- ² Major Hindu scriptures constituting core teachings of Vedanta-spiritual traditions concerned with self-realisation
- ³ Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 313
- ⁴ Bhagavad Gita : Chapter 5, Verses 30,31
- ⁵ Bhagavad Gita : Chapter 11, verses 12-18
- ⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p.3
- ⁷ Bhagavad Gita : Chapter 11, verses 12-18
- ⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitab-i-Iqan, p. 97
- ⁹ Bhagavad Gita : Chapter 11, verses 12-18
- ¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitab-i-Iqan, p. 97
- ¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris talks p. 60
- ¹² Bahá'u'lláh, The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 112, from the tablet of The Great Announcement to Mankind.
- ¹³ Originally unnamed seven Saintly Patriarchs of the ancient Vedic Religion known as Saptarshi
- ¹⁴ Righteous kings, a principal executor, which occur each eon carrying out the divine plan of God.
- ¹⁵ Bhagavad Gita : Chapter 10, verses 4 -7
- ¹⁶ Bhagavad Gita : Chapter 14, verse 5
- ¹⁷ Bhagavad-Gita : Chapter 2, verse 22
- ¹⁸ Bhagavad-Gita : Chapter 2, verses 23,24,25
- ¹⁹ Reincarnation, literally "to be made flesh again", is a doctrine or metaphysical belief that some essential part of a living being (in some variations only human beings), often referred as the spirit or soul survives death to be reborn in a new body. Punarjanma, to be born again, is the word used in Sanskrit which has both indications to be

born again in physical birth in a flesh and in a material form or as a spiritual birth before or after the human physical death.

- ²⁰ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 161
- ²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 158
- ²² Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 160
- ²³ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 161
- ²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 157
- ²⁵ Kountey in Sanskrit means Kunti's son. Here Krishana addresses Arjuna as Kountey. Arjuna is the son of Kunti and king Pandu and one of the five Pandava brothers mentioned in Indian epic Mahabharata. Kountey is one of the names of Arjuna. He is the compatriate and dearest disciple to Krishna. The dialogue between Arjuna and Krishana is Bhagavad-Gita narrated over the battlefield of Kurukshetra as mentioned in Mahabharata.
- ²⁶ Bhagavad-Gita : Chapter 8, verse 6
- ²⁷ Krishna, as referred in Bhagavad-Gita
- ²⁸ One of the names of Arjun, as addressed by Krishna, being the prince of Bharat dynasty in the epic of Mahabharat
- ²⁹ Bhagvad Gita, chapter 4, verses 7-8
- ³⁰ Meaning righteousness, the Law, the Divine order.
- ³¹ Antonym of 'Dharma' meaning unrightousness, lawlessness and the disorder against the divine pleasure.
- ³² Garuda Purana is one of the Puranas which are part of the Hindu body of texts known as Smriti. Garuda Purana is in the form of instructions by Vishnu to his carrier, Garuda (The King of Birds – a vimana of Lord Vishnu). This Purana deals with astronomy, medicine, grammar, and gemstone structure and qualities.
- ³³ Mentioned in Garuda Purana, the ten avataras, descents or incarnations of Vishnu, which appeared in archaic and ancient times, except Kalki, who is still to come.
- ³⁴ Garuda Purana, Chapter 8, verses 9-11
- ³⁵ The name of an 'epoch' or 'era' within a cycle of four ages in Hindu philosophy.
- ³⁶ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh p. 49
- ³⁷ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh p.49
- ³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Iqan, page 103
- ³⁹ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh p. 87
- ⁴⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 48
- ⁴¹ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 23
- ⁴² Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh p. 88
- ⁴³ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh p. 104

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- ⁴⁴ To demonstrate His divine nature to reluctant Arjuna who is completely confused in performing his divine duty, Krishna grants Arjuna the boon of cosmic vision (albeit temporary) and allows the prince to see His 'Universal Form'. Thus relieving Arjuna of all dilemmas and helping him attain a certitude of Faith.
- ⁴⁵ The crown with moving disc of halo.
- ⁴⁶ Anadem, Sudarshana Chakra in Sanskrit, is a spinning disc like weapon with very sharp edge, which serves as an attribute of Vishnu. Krishna being the Avatara of Vishnu is also manifested with Sudarshan Chakra. Lord Vishnu, also called Narayana and like him, Krishna is often portrayed with four hands, holding a Shankha (a conch shell), the Sudarshana, a Gada (mace) and a Padma (lotus).
- ⁴⁷ Bhagavad Gita Chapter 11, Verses 45, 46, Vishwarupadarshan
- ⁴⁸ Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 194
- ⁴⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, Gems of Divine Mysteries, p. 14
- ⁵⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 86
- ⁵¹ Bhagavad-Gita : chapter 4, verse 4
- ⁵² Bhagavad-Gita: chapter 9, verses 5-8
- ⁵³ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 9 and p. 12
- ⁵⁴ Bhagavad-Gita: chapter 9, verses 12, 13
- ⁵⁵ Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p.234
- ⁵⁶ A Muslim tradition cited by Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 43
- ⁵⁷ In Christian doctrine, the Trinity is the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons in one Godhead. Each of the *persons* is understood as having the one identical essence or nature, not merely similar natures. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church describes the Trinity as "the central dogma of Christian theology".
- ⁵⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 24
- ⁵⁹ A duel.
- ⁶⁰ Bhagavad-Gita, Chapter 10, verses 30-33
- ⁶¹ Bhagavad Gita, chapter 4, verses 7-8
- ⁶² King James Bible, Numbers 23:23

Towards a Contextualization of Bahá'u'lláh's Lawḥ-i qiná'

Sholeh A. Quinn

Some time between 1868-1871, while exiled in Akka, Palestine, Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í religion, composed a treatise entitled the Lawḥ-i qiná', or "Tablet of the Veil." Addressed to the Shaykhí leader Karím Khán Kirmání (1810-1871), the text forms the final communication in a series of direct and indirect correspondence between the two.¹ The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of Bahá'u'lláh's Lawḥ-i qiná' in order to illuminate the process through which Bahá'u'lláh engaged in dialogue – in this case with a religious rival of the Báb – in multiple texts. In order to narrow our analysis, we shall focus on the following three themes that are central to the Tablet: gender and the use of the word *qiná'*, The Báb's grammar, and the Qur'án.

In terms of secondary scholarship, The Lawḥ-i qiná' has not yet been translated into English, nor has it been extensively discussed in the scholarly or academic European-language literature. The Lawḥ-i qiná' has, however, been discussed in Persian language scholarship. References to the text and its context appear in the scholarship of Fázil Mázandarání and Ishráq Khávarí. More recently, Vahid Rafati has written an important article on this Tablet, published in an *Irfan Colloquia* volume.² We are only at the beginning of making sense of the complex issues relating to the historical contextualization of Bahá'í scripture. These include questions of audience, authorial intent, dating of the texts, and numerous other literary and historiographical matters. Therefore, in order to begin contextualizing the Lawḥ-i qiná',

we begin with a brief overview of the Tablet's addressee: Karím Khán Kirmání.

Karím Khán Kirmání

Karím Khán Kirmání was born in 1810 and died in 1871. He came from the Persian city of Kirmán, and was the son of a Qájár prince. Kirmání's father was Ibrahím Khán Záhír al-Dawlih, and Kirmání had nineteen brothers and twenty-one sisters. This Ibrahím Khán was an admirer of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá'i, founder of the Shaykhí movement, which contributed markedly to the establishment of the Bábí religion. Ibrahím Khán founded a religious college named after himself, the Ibráhímiyyih. When Karím Khán went to Karbala, soon after his father's death, he met Sayyid Kázim Rashtí, successor to Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá'i and leader of the Shaykhí movement at the time. Karím Khán Kirmání became a disciple of Sayyid Kázim Rashtí and eventually went back to Kirmán, where we planned apparently to "teach and guide the faithful" there.³

Kirmání was an extremely learned and highly prolific individual who wrote a great deal on a wide variety of subjects. He was perhaps best known for his elaborations on the "fourth pillar" (*rukṅ al-rábi'*).⁴ Kirmání wrote a number of passages and tracts elaborating on his understandings of this fourth pillar. Other subjects he wrote on included optics, alchemy, hadith, color mysticism, prophetology, and many others. As time passed, because of the sorts of ideas he was teaching to his students, he ran into conflicts with various individuals and groups in Kirmán. Among those individuals was his brother-in-law, Sayyid Áqá Javád Shírází.⁵ These two quarreled over control of the Ibráhímiyyih, with Karím Khán trying to have Shaykhism taught there. When Sayyid Kázim Rashtí died in 1844, Karím Khán proclaimed himself the new leader of the Shaykhí school, continued to spread the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad and Sayyid Kázim and expanded Shaykhí thought in various ways.

In addition to clashes with the religious orthodoxy, and other Shaykhis, Karím Khán also denounced the Báb, and in fact viciously attacked Him and His claims in a number of essays and books (at least eight). His earliest work against the

Báb was entitled the Izḥáq al-bátíl, a text which has been analyzed by William McCants.⁶ Karím Khán Kirmání spent his last years in privacy on his estate in Langar, outside of Kirman city. Mangol Bayat states that “his ideas remained unrealized, his ambition unfulfilled,” and the radical transformation of Shaykhí ideas into a concrete program of action was instead undertaken by someone else – namely the Báb.⁷

Bahá'u'lláh first discusses Kirmání's writings in a passage of the *Kitáb-i Íqán*, where He comments on something that Kirmání had written in a book entitled the *Irshád al-a'vám*. In the *Irshád al-a'vám*, Kirmání states that in order to understand the *mi'ráj*, or the night journey of the prophet Muḥammad, one must be well versed in a vast range of sciences, including everything from alchemy to physics. Bahá'u'lláh disagrees with this, stating that ones spiritual qualities were what mattered. This section serves as the immediate introduction to the famous “true seeker” section of the *Kitáb-i Íqán*.⁸

The Treatise of Mullá Jamál “the Bábí”

Some five years (7 Sha‘bán 1283/15 December 1866) after the composition of the *Kitáb-i Íqán*, Kirmání composed a treatise known as the “Risálih dar javáb-i su‘álát-i Mullá Jamál-i Bábí” (The Treatise in Response to the Questions of Mullá Jamál the Bábí).⁹ Kirmání states that a certain individual sent him a number of questions via another individual, asking that Kirmání answer them. Kirmání's treatise reproduces the questions and provides answers for them. This treatise is the key document for contextualizing the Lawḥ-i qiná‘. It numbers approximately 50 pages and was copied out and printed in the 1960s as part of the Shaykhí collection of books held in Kirmán. Kirmání's preface to the treatise is in Arabic and the rest is in Persian. He tells us in the introduction that, while he was in Tehran in the company of a certain Sulaymán Khán, someone sent Sulaymán Khán a number of questions and asked them to be relayed to Karím Khán. This individual also requested that Karím Khán provide answers to the questions. Karím Khán tells us that since this request came via Sulaymán Khán, and Suleyman Khán had great respect among Muslims, it was necessary for him to reply. However, he continues, for various

reasons he did not want to reveal the name of the questioner, and so he decided that he would write the questioner's words phrase by phrase and then write whatever came to mind in way of response to each phrase.¹⁰ This Suleyman Khán was in all likelihood Suleyman Khán Afshár (d. 1309/1891).¹¹ Suleyman Khán was not a Bábí, but a Shaykhí, and the leader of the Afshár tribe. An extremely wealthy man, he gave money to support Shaykhí publications and was in charge of Sa'in fortress. He fought against the Bábís in the battle at Shaykh Tabarsí.

As for the identity of who sent the questions to Kirmání, the situation is complicated by the fact that his name actually does not appear anywhere in the treatise itself, and it is possible that the title of the treatise was added later by the Kirmání Shaykhís and their bibliographers, such as the individual (Shaykh Abú al-Qásim Kirmání d. 1969) who prepared the *Fihrist*, or index, to the Shaykhí collection.¹² Fázil Mázandarání, in his *Asrár al-áthár*, has identified the writer of the questions to Kirmání as Áqá Muḥammad Rizá Qannád Shirází, but unfortunately he does not state where he obtained this information.¹³ Regardless of this, Mázandarání does not appear to have seen the treatise itself or been familiar with its title. I have suggested another possibility regarding the identity of this person: if the individual who gave the questions to Karím Khán Karím Khán Kirmání is indeed named "Mullá Jamál," then Mullá Jamál would almost certainly be Mullá Jamál Burújirdí, an early convert to the Bahá'í religion who later rebelled against the authority of 'Abdu'l Bahá.¹⁴

After the introduction to his treatise, Kirmání proceeds to deconstruct the questioner's opening phrases, breaking down the Arabic in each one, and pointing out what he seems to consider the many grammatical errors in each phrase. The most prevalent type of criticism he makes is comments on various forms of Arabic verbs and other words. This sort of analysis of the introductory portion of the questioner's letter goes on for four pages in the printed edition, as Kirmání breaks it down into fifteen sections, with his commentary on each phrase numbering anything between just a few words or a few sentences. After this, Kirmání starts addressing Mullá Jamál's specific questions. At this point, the answers start getting

longer and the questioner's language turns from Arabic to Persian.

In an unpublished study, Stephen Lambden has translated one of the questions and answers in Kirmání's treatise, and noticed that some of the queries of the questioner seem to refer to his reading of passages in the *Kitáb-i Íqán*, particularly certain biblical passages cited therein. In this instance, the question has to do with the Gospel of Matthew and certain prophecies in that book regarding the "sign of the manifestation of the countenance of the Promised One, Muhammad." Kirmání's dense reply to this question is fairly standard, in that he points out that the Four Gospels were composed by the disciples of Jesus. He then states that the prophecy or sign referred to in the biblical quotation has nothing to do with the Prophet Muhammad, but is referring to Jesus, and goes on to interpret the biblical passage referred to in the question.¹⁵ In other words, he is contesting Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation of the prediction in Matthew chapter 24. Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation focuses on the verse's fulfillment in Muḥammad.

The Lawḥ-i qiná' in Context

Karím Khán Kirmání did not have the last word on any of these matters, however. In His own "introduction" to the Lawḥ-i qiná' (the portion preceding the *Basmala*), Bahá'u'lláh Himself provides a context for His Tablet, stating that one of the "divine lovers" had sent a letter to Kirmání, and Kirmání had objected to the usages (language) in that letter, and for that reason, had turned away from the truth. Bahá'u'lláh then explains that He only saw or heard of one part of Kirmání's response to the letter that was sent to him, and His Tablet was revealed in response to that one portion. In order to dispel any doubt about what that was, He states it in the preface to the Tablet.¹⁶ The passage in question first appears in Kirmání's treatise, and here Kirmání quotes "Mullá Jamál-i Bábi" as stating the following: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate; Praise be to God who lifts (*arfa'a*) the veil from the eyes of the saints."¹⁷ Kirmání then responds to this statement, stating "The word *arfa'a* is wrong and is not

Arabic. They say “*rafa‘a*” and “*rafa‘a*” itself is (a) transitive/causal (verb). And the word “*qiná‘*” is also wrong here, because a *qiná‘* is a head scarf (*chahárqad*) that women put on their head, and a *qiná‘* does not cover one’s eye; that which covers the face and the eye(s) is a *burqa‘*.¹⁸

In the introduction to the Lawḥ-i *qiná‘*, Bahá’u’lláh reproduces, with one slight difference, this sentence in Kirmání’s treatise: “Praise be to God who lifts the veil from the face of the saints.” He then describes and criticizes Kirmání’s objections to this phrase: “*The above-mentioned Khán has objected, saying ‘this phrase is a mistake, and the possessor of this letter, you would say, has not attained a single letter of knowledge and idioms/forms of speech of the people, for the qiná‘ is specifically for the heads of women. He has been occupied with objecting to (grammatical) usages and is unaware that he is devoid of both knowledge and understanding.*”¹⁹ Echoing the portion of the *Kitáb-i Íqán* addressed (indirectly) to Kirmání, He then states that the purpose of knowledge is to guide people to the truth. Finally, Bahá’u’lláh ends the introduction by noting that He did not see Kirmání’s other objections, He only heard and saw the one passage and this Tablet was revealed so that perhaps the people would not be deprived.²⁰

After the introduction, the Tablet directly addresses Kirmání: “*O thou who hast a reputation for knowledge but standeth upon the brink of the pit of ignorance. We heard that you have turned away from the Truth (ḥaqq) and rejected one of its lovers who sent you a sublime treatise to guide you to God, your lord and the lord of all the worlds.*”²¹ Here the “lover” refers to “Mulla Jamal the Bábi” and the “sublime treatise” refers to the questions that he sent to Kirmání.

Gender and the Lawḥ-i *qiná‘*

Having established the context for the Lawḥ-i *qiná‘*, Bahá’u’lláh then starts addressing specific issues. One major component of Kirmání’s critique of the sentence we have been discussing relates to the issue of gender and the word *qiná‘*. The context for this is the opening section of the *Risalah*, where

Kirmání chastises Mullá Jamál for using the word *qiná'*, stating, as mentioned above, that his usage of this word is a mistake because a *qiná'* is a headscarf or *chahār-qadī* that women wear on their heads, and therefore a *qiná'* is not something that someone would place over their eyes. What is placed over the eyes, he says, is a *burqa'*.²²

Bahá'u'lláh addresses Kirmání's criticism of usage in relation to the word *qiná'*, stating, "Verily, if you had journeyed the paths of the people of literary learning, you would not have objected to the usage of the [word] veil (*al-qiná'*), and you would not have been among the disputers. Furthermore, you rejected the words of God in this sublime theophany."²³

Bahá'u'lláh then makes reference to a pre-Islamic poet called *al-Muqanna'*, asking Kirmání, "have you not heard mention of *al-Muqanna'*, who is known as *al-Muqanna' al-Kindí*, and he is *Muḥammad ibn Ḥafar ibn 'Umayr ibn Fir'án ibn Qays ibn Aswad*?"²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh goes on to say "If we desired to make mention of his forefathers one by one until they terminated at the very first origin, we would indeed demonstrate the like of that which my lord hath taught me of the ancients and the moderns. This despite the fact that we have not read your sciences, and God is an all-knowing witness to this."²⁵ He explains how *al-Muqanna'* was supposed to have had the most beautiful face and he veiled his *face* because he was afraid of getting the evil eye from others. Ultimately, he became an analogy or an example of beauty.²⁶ Vahid Rafati has shown that for this second part on *al-Muqanna'*, Bahá'u'lláh quotes almost verbatim from Abú al-Faraj al-Iṣfahání's (d. 356/957) *Kitáb al-aghání*.²⁷ Bahá'u'lláh then gives other examples of pre-Islamic and early Islamic figures who came to be associated with a particular virtue or attribute, and continues to encourage Kirmání to "peruse the books of the people so that you will know about this and be among the knowledgeable people."²⁸

Interestingly, Bahá'u'lláh does not mention the other *al-Muqanna'*, the so-called "Veiled prophet of Khorasan" who launched a rebellion against the Abbasid caliph *al-Mahdi* (d.169/785), but this may be due to the fact that this al-

Muqanna‘ claimed divinity for himself and seems to have held other *ghuluww* (exaggerated) beliefs.²⁹

Bahá‘u’lláh concludes His comments here on gender and the word *qiná‘* by repeating His earlier point about the *qiná‘* being applicable to men and women, and then offers examples of other words from Arabic and Turkish for veil or head covering: *“Be certain that the learned ones in literature use the word qiná‘ for men as we have mentioned to you in a clear and apparent explanation. Know further that the qiná‘ is specifically [used] for women and they put it on their heads, but it is used for men and the face [and] it is admissible, if thou wert among those who were knowledgeable.”*³⁰ Later in the text, Bahá‘u’lláh writes in Persian and makes the same point about the *qiná‘*: *“As for the qiná‘ and miqna‘, they are two kinds of clothing with which women cover their heads. And it is specifically for women’s heads. But it is also permissible [to use it] for men and for the face. And similarly, lisám is what women cover their mouth with [and is what] the people of Fars and Turks call a yashmaq, as has been mentioned in books of literature.”*³¹

Kirmání and the Báb’s Grammar

Another of the central themes in the *Lawḥ-i qiná‘* is that of grammar and grammatical rules. Although Bahá‘u’lláh did not see the portion of Kirmání’s treatise that addresses grammar, He was doubtless aware of the debates surrounding the Báb’s grammar and Kirmání’s earlier criticisms of it. Much discussion has surrounded the issue of the Báb’s grammar: whether it was correct or not, why He used the grammar that he used, and other related questions.³² Bahá‘u’lláh uses the opportunity of the *Lawḥ-i qiná‘* to elaborate on this issue, addressing not just Kirmání but others who held similar views. He does this through echoing the words of the Báb and stating that human beings and human grammatical standards should not judge God and divine grammatical standards:

Besides this, you have rejected and are rejecting the words of the lovers of God [i.e. the Bahá’ís]. In ignorance, you have reached such a level that you have also rejected the words of the Primal Point, ..and you have written books against God and his lovers...You

and the likes of you have said that the words of the most great Báb and the Most Complete Remembrance [i.e. the Báb] are in error, and are contrary to people's rules of grammar. Have you still not comprehended that the divine revealed words are the standard of everything? Each grammatical rule that is contrary to the divine verses, that rule loses its credibility.³³

Kirmání and the Qur'án

In His earlier Kitáb-i Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh alludes to Kirmání having been mentioned in the Qur'án, and cites two Qur'anic passages that He says refer to Kirmání:

And as to this man's [Kirmání's] attainments, his ignorance, understanding and belief, behold what the Book which embraceth all things hath revealed; 'Verily, the tree of Zaqqum shall be the food of the Athím.' (Q. 44:43-44) And then follow certain verses, until He saith: 'Taste this, for thou forsooth art the mighty Karím!' (Q. 44:49) Consider how clearly and explicitly he hath been described in God's incorruptible Book! This man, moreover, feigning humility, hath in his own book referred to himself as the 'athím servant': 'Athím' in the Book of God, mighty among the common herd, 'Karím' in name!³⁴

Towards the end of the Lawḥ-i qiná‘, Bahá'u'lláh again picks up on this theme, this time drawing an analogy between Kirmání's rejection of the Báb's grammar and early rejections of Qur'anic grammar during the time of Muḥammad:

Reflect upon the days when the Qur'án was revealed from the heaven of the will of the all-merciful. To what an extent have the people of sedition rejected [it]. It seems that it has vanished from your sight. For this reason, it was necessary to mention some [Quranic passages] so perchance you would recognize yourself, and to what extent you turned away during the time of the rising of the Muḥammadan sun from the horizon of eternal glory. The purpose is this, that during those days you had another name, for if you were not of

*those souls, you would never have turned away during this theophany from the truth.*³⁵

The idea that Kirmání existed at the time of Muḥammad with another name has been discussed by Stephen Lambden in a paper entitled “The Bahai Interpretation of the Antichrist-Dajjal Traditions.” Here, Lambden suggests that the early Bábís singled out Kirmání as one of the latter day anti-Christ figures. In his analysis of this section of the *Lawḥ-i qiná'*, Lambden tentatively hypothesizes that this is an allusion to the notion of the “eschatological return” (*raj`a*) of the one-eyed Dajjál.³⁶

Bahá'u'lláh continues elaborating on this theme by reminding Kirmání of seven Qur'anic passages which were rejected in the early Islamic period and briefly states why objections were made about them. Five of these verses were rejected for grammatical reasons: 3:84, 40:3, 12:29, 3:45, and 74:35 and two due to conflicts with other verses: 2:29, 7:11.³⁷ The full verses are as follows:

“We do not make any distinction between any of them.” (The Family of Imran 3:84)

“He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth, and He directed Himself to the heaven, so He made them complete seven heavens.” (The Cow 2:29)

“And certainly We created you, then We fashioned you, then We said to the angels: Make obeisance to Adam.” (The Elevated 7:11)

“The Forgiver of the faults and the Acceptor of repentance, Severe to punish...” (The Believer 40:3)

“...ask forgiveness for your fault, surely you are one of the wrong-doers.” (Yusuf 12:29)

“...a Word from Him (of one) whose name is the Messiah...” (Imran 3:45)

“Lo! this is one of the greatest (portents).” (Muddathir 74:35)

After providing these examples and explaining the historical objections to them, Bahá'u'lláh adds that there were nearly three hundred places in the Qur'án which the clerics of that

period and after cited in order to reject Muḥammad. They accused Muḥammad, He said, of insanity and corruption, and most people followed the clerics away from God and towards hell. Some thought that Muḥammad had stolen verses from Amr al-Qays, the famous pre-Islamic poet, and preferred the poems known as the “mu‘allaqát” to the verses of God. Some, however, did not pay any attention to these objections and turned towards Muḥammad. It was, Bahá'u'lláh said, when the “command of the sword” came down that a lot of people entered the religion of God (voluntarily and involuntarily). The verse of the sword, Bahá'u'lláh said, negated the verse of ignorance.³⁸

The entire purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's comments here is to point out to Kirmání that early in the history of Islam the same accusations were leveled against the Qur'án that Kirmání was leveling against the Báb's writings. Using arguments such as this to confront Kirmání's prejudices, Bahá'u'lláh again and again urges Kirmání to peruse literary works and to educate himself on the topics about which he claims to be so knowledgeable. Throughout the Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes Kirmání's ignorance, criticizing his lack of knowledge in not just spiritual truths, but in basic aspects of Islamic history and theology.

Through the analysis presented here, we have established the series of texts that form the immediate and not-so-immediate background for the Lawḥ-i qiná'. These are, in order, the Irshád al-a'vám, the Kitáb-i Íqán, and the Risálih-yi Mullá Jamál-i Bábí. Although by no means constituting a direct correspondence, through these texts, Karím Khán Kirmání and Bahá'u'lláh each address issues raised by the other, the result being a fairly wide-ranging (and long-ranging) discussion. The themes involved include the notion of knowledge (*ilm*) and its role in understanding the night journey of the Prophet (Irshád al-a'vám and Kitáb-i Íqán), the notion of Karím Khán being mentioned in the Qur'án (Kitáb-i Íqán and Lawḥ-i qiná'), the grammar of the Báb, and the meaning of the word qiná'. This study may also tell us something about how ideas were exchanged and discussed in written form in the Shi'i and emergent post-Shi'i universe of religious discourse of 19th century Qajar Iran.

NOTES

Author's Note: I am grateful to Dr. Stephen N. Lambden and Dr. Moojan Momen for their valuable assistance in preparing this paper. I take full responsibility for all errors.

¹ See Bahá'u'lláh, "Lawḥ-i qiná'," in *Alvaḥ-i mubárákih-yi ḥadrat-i Bahá Alláh* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publish Trust, 1978), 66-87. Hereafter cited as *LQ*.

² See, for instance, Vahid Rafati, "Nazarí bih Lawḥ-i qiná'," in *Safinih-yi Irfán*, (Darmstadt, 'Asr-i jadíd, 2001), 170-191.

³ For more information on Karím Khán Kirmání, see Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 86. Information on Kirmani's biography can also be found in "shaykhiyya," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, by Denis MacEoin.

⁴ Shaykh Ahmad had already condensed the traditional "five pillars" of Shi'i Islam--(1) divine unity, (2) prophethood, (3) resurrection, (4) divine justice, and (5) the imamate--into three pillars: (1) knowledge of God, (2) prophethood, (3) the imamate. The early Shaykhí leaders added a fourth pillar: (4) the Shi'i community or someone within that community who would offer guidance. (Sayyid Kazim saw this as an individual figure, and it was understood messianically by the Báb). Kirmání seems to have modified that fourth pillar to refer to (4) "knowledge of friends and enemies of the Imams." See Stephen N. Lambden, "Some Aspects of Isrā'iliyyāt and the Emergence of the Bābī-Bahā'ī Interpretation of the Bible," PhD dissertation, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2001.

⁵ He was a son-in-law of Ibráhím Khán Zāhir al-Dawlih and therefore Karím Khán's brother-in-law.

⁶ He composed it approximately a year or so after the Báb made his claims to Mulla Husayn, and in it he not only divined the fact that the Báb was making a great claim, but thought fit to reject it and condemn it through a close analysis of the *Qayyúm al-asmá'*. He also attacked the notion of a "new prophet," and vowed that he would destroy the Báb. See Dr. Will McCants, unpublished paper, presented at the Irfan Colloquium at Louhelen Conference Center in October, 2003, (http://irfancolloquia.org/51/mccants_shaykhi).

⁷ Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*, 86.

⁸ See Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i Íqán*, translated by Shoghi Effendi as *The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), 186-187. Hereafter cited as *KI*.

- ⁹ Karím Khán Kirmání, “Risálih dar javáb-i su’álát-i Mullá Jamál-i Bábí,” in *Majma‘ al-risá’il-i fársí*, 2 (Kirmán: Chápkhānih-yi Sa’ádat-i Kirmán), n.d., hereafter cited as “Risálih.”
- ¹⁰ Kirmání, “Risálih,” 210-11.
- ¹¹ I am grateful to Moojan Momen for assistance in identifying this individual.
- ¹² Shaykh Abú'l Qásim Kirmání, *Fihrist*, 3rd ed. (Kirmán: Chápkhānih-yi Sa’ádat, n.d).
- ¹³ Asadu’lláh Fázil Mázandarání, *Asrár al-áthár* vol. 3 (Tehran: Mu’assasih-yi Millí-i Maṭbú‘át-i Amrí, 124/1968), 519.
- ¹⁴ For more information on Mullá Jamál Burújirdí, see Asadu’lláh Fádil Mázandarání, *Tarikh-i zuhúr al-ḥaqq*, vol. 3 (Tehran: n.p., 1944), 300-310.
- ¹⁵ Stephen N. Lambden, “Some Observations on Karím Khán’s Critique of Bahá Alláh’s interpretation of the New Testament in the *Kitáb-i íqán* in Karím Khán Kirmání’s ‘Risálih dar javáb-i su’álát-i Mullá Jamál-i Bábí,’” unpublished paper.
- ¹⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 66. This and all subsequent translations into English from the *LQ* are provisional, and done by Sholeh A. Quinn.
- ¹⁷ Kirmání, *Risálih*, 211.
- ¹⁸ Kirmání, *Risálih*, 211.
- ¹⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 66.
- ²⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 66.
- ²¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 67.
- ²² Kirmání, *Risálih*, 211.
- ²³ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 68.
- ²⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 68.
- ²⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 68.
- ²⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 68.
- ²⁷ See Vahid Rafati, “Nazari bih Lawḥ-i qiná‘,” 174, 190.
- ²⁸ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 68
- ²⁹ For more information on this individual, see *EI2*, “al-Mukanna.”
- ³⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 69.
- ³¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *LQ*, 76.
- ³² In an important study published in the on-line journal *Syzygy*, available at Stephen Lambden’s website, Dr. Will McCants has discussed a treatise of the Báb on grammar where he addresses many of these topics. See <http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/SYZYGY/syzygy-03-yes/Grammar%20of%20the%20Divine%20-6.htm>.

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- ³³ In one of the most poignant portions of the *Lawḥ-i qiná'*, Bahá'u'lláh explains that if sorrows that had been inflicted and physical illnesses had not prevented him, "Tablets on the divine sciences would be written, and you would bear witness that the divine laws would encompass earthly laws." Bahá'u'lláh, *LQ*, 78.
- ³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-íqán*, 190.
- ³⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *LQ*, 79.
- ³⁶ Stephen N. Lambden, "The Bahai Interpretation of the Antichrist-Dajjal Traditions," *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 1/3 (1982): 3-44.
- ³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *LQ*, 79-81.
- ³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *LQ*, 81-82.

The Indispensibility of Consultation for Ordering Human Affairs¹

Ian Semple

It is sometimes difficult for the world at large to understand why we Bahá'ís place so much emphasis on the subject of consultation, because at first glimpse, it may seem to be just another word for discussion, with which all people think they are very familiar. The same illusion can also affect Bahá'ís and prevent them from using consultation as it should be used. We must realize that consultation is not just a technique to be learned, but requires a development of the character of the individuals who are involved in it. This is a striking metaphor used by C.S. Lewis. He says that it may seem very difficult for an egg to change into a bird, but it would be still more difficult for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg!

If one considers what Bahá'u'lláh says about consultation, one can see that it is infinitely more far-reaching than just an up-to-date method of discussion. He says:

No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation. (HDW p. 3)

This series of lectures and discussions is centered on the Universal House of Justice's statement "The Promise of World Peace", from which the title of this talk is a quotation. But in considering consultation I feel it will be helpful to proceed from the more familiar aspect to the less familiar ones. I proposed, therefore, to refer to three uses:

1. In Bahá'í Administration
2. In the individual life
3. In the non-Bahá'í world.

In Bahá'í Administration

The use of consultation in Bahá'í administrative work is the one with which we are all most familiar, but I believe we think we are more familiar with true consultation than we really are. Let us read that well-known passage from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the requisites of true consultation. (You can find it in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #45)

The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. The second condition is that the members of the assembly should unitedly elect a chairman and lay down guidelines and by-laws for their meetings and discussions. The chairman should have charge of such rules and regulations and protect and enforce them; the other members should be submissive, and refrain from conversing on superfluous and extraneous matters. They must, when coming together, turn their faces to the Kingdom on high and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honoured members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority.

It is salutary, I think, to extract from that passage certain qualities that the individual consultants must evince:

- purity of motive
- radiance of spirit
- detachment from all save God
- attraction to His Divine Fragrance
- humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones
- patience and long-suffering in difficulties
- servitude to His exalted Threshold

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that the members of an Assembly must consult in such a way that “*no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise*” and that this can be attained if:

- every member expresses his opinion and sets forth his argument with “absolute freedom” and
- does not allow himself to feel hurt if anyone opposes.

He also says that each member should express his views with the utmost:

- devotion
- courtesy
- dignity
- care and
- moderation
- In every matter the members must search out the truth and not insist on their own opinions,
- and it is forbidden to belittle the thought of another.

In every case where an Assembly or group of Bahá’ís is facing problems of disunity or unfruitful consultation one can point to one or more of the above requisites which are not being followed.

The essence of consultation is that it is a key to the reconciliation of opposites, and this is a characteristic of the Cause of God. In the words of the beloved Guardian:

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, nor arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candour, and courage on the other. (PBA, p. 43)

This passage reads like a catalogue of the problems that have beset human philosophy throughout the ages, and it gives us the key to answering those opponents of the Faith who accuse us of aiming to set-up a world-wide totalitarian state with the Universal House of Justice at its head. There are, of course, many other elements which should go into the answer to this challenge, but that is not our subject at the moment. It is, however, important for us to remember the degree to which the beloved Guardian stressed the function of consultation outside the ranks of Assembly members. For example:

Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the Friends whom they represent. (PBA, p. 43)

and the following very familiar passage:

They must, at all times, avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the Friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel. (PBA, p. 44)

We should continually read and re-read these passages because sometimes one finds that an Assembly is reluctant to share its real problems with the friends for fear of losing face or undermining the believers' confidence in the Assembly. And yet we can see that it is the very Assemblies who follow the Guardian's advice which most earn the love and respect of their communities.

In the Individual Life

The impact of consultation on the lives of individual Bahá'ís is manifold. It involves them intimately in the functioning of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, whether or not they are members of institutions. It is also, as Bahá'u'lláh makes absolutely clear, a method to which they should continually resort in the conduct of their private lives, consulting, as need be, with members of their families, with friends, with people for whose opinions they have regard. Together with study of the Writings, meditation and prayer it is the primary means for solving problems and for smoothing the interrelationships between people.

It is, however, more even than this. It has a direct effect on the development of the individual's soul. It is shot through and through with the development of individual characteristics which should suffuse one's whole life and behaviour. It is a school of personal development as, in a similar way, is the institution of marriage and of the family, in which consultation plays a special part.

Let us consider again the qualities which 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls for. Which one of these would we not apply in every aspect of our individual lives? If the members of Spiritual Assemblies, whom Bahá'u'lláh has referred to as the "Trustees of the Merciful" and even as the "Deputies of God" must evince these characteristics in the performance of their duties as "rulers" of mankind, how should they not characterise the daily life of every believer:

- purity of motive
- radiance of spirit

- detachment from all save God
- attractive to His Divine Fragrance
- humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones
- patience and long-suffering in difficulties
- servitude to His exalted Threshold
- absolute freedom in expressing one's opinion
- not feeling hurt if one's views are opposed
- devotion
- courtesy
- dignity
- care and moderation in expressing one's ideas
- refraining from belittling the views of others

There is an age-old controversy as to whether one needs a perfect society in order to breed perfect individuals or whether one must first train perfect individuals before one can have a perfect society. This is resolved in the Bahá'í Faith by the proposition that the fostering of the spiritual growth of individuals and that of society must go hand in hand and are mutually supportive processes. This is specially apparent in the area of consultation, since it promotes harmony and moderation.

It is a great problem in individual spiritual growth for the aspiring follower of the Way to distinguish between moderation and mediocrity. We are called to heights of perfection higher than we can comprehend, but are exhorted to moderation in all things. How can this be?

It is, I believe, but one aspect of the need for the individual to promote in himself the growth of all virtues and capacities, but in due balance one with another. When they get out of balance, a distortion of character is produced.

The problems caused by inadequacy are obvious to us all: carelessness in carrying out important work; lack of attention

to detail; laziness or excessive diffidence that allow golden opportunities to pass us by; lack of dignity in the presentation of the Faith; permitting a Bahá'í centre to fall into a state of disrepair and dirtiness which shames the Faith in the eyes of the public. Sometimes such problems arise because the believers concerned are just not conscious of the standards that they should uphold; they may have had in their upbringing no training in good taste, cleanliness or hard work. Consultation can draw out these aspects and help the community as a whole to overcome them. Consultation, in other words, can bring home to the individual the importance of excellence in all things and the need for continued improvement. To return to C.S. Lewis's egg metaphor; he points out that the whole purpose of an egg is for it to become a bird. It cannot just remain for ever a nice, decent, wholesome egg – it must either hatch, or go bad!

The problems caused by inordinately high standards are not easy to see. Sometimes the cause of disunity is simply the position of pride and lack of forbearance on the part of a believer whose skills and accomplishments have turned his head; if so, the situation may be a painful one but it is comparatively easy to detect and to cope with, for every Bahá'í knows that pride is a sin and forbearance a virtue.

We all know from experience, however, that it is sometimes a devoted, self-sacrificing pioneer, or one of the most active believers with the highest standards, who becomes the centre of disunity and disruption in a community, without any element of pride distorting his nature. The reason may simply be the ardour of the believer for nothing less than the best to be accomplished for the Cause of God. Having such high standards himself he finds it excruciatingly difficult to submit to consultative decisions which thinks are less than the best, or to leave the newer believers to fumblingly carrying out actions that he himself can execute with far greater despatch and efficiency.

I think one of the most salutary teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that, for the creature, perfection is an unattainable goal. This, properly understood, should not cause us to despair, but should give us the enthralling prospect that, however far we develop our capacities, there is still greater progress ahead;

however great the joy we attain, greater joy is in store. There is no stagnation in the Bahá'í concept of heaven. It should also cause us to accept the imperfection of our own characters and understanding. We must recognize that what we may see as the perfect answer to a problem must, by definition, be imperfect, because it is we who see it. It can, at most, be a step on the way towards perfection and, if we could see the whole of the journey, we might see that it would be the wrong step at that time, even if correct in itself.

This recognition of permanent imperfection should have two results. It should prevent us from ever being satisfied with our progress. It should also free us from the crippling effects of that "perfectionism" which has been a blight on many puritanical societies. By this I don't mean a person's determination to do the very best he can in every task – which is admirable – but the extreme condition wherein a person comes to believe that he must perform every task with 100% perfection or be disgraced in his own eyes and the eyes of others. This is a far from uncommon disability in western society and produces the very opposite of what the individual aims at. It is, I think, a condition against which all Bahá'ís must be alert, because the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh hold before us such high standards. It is a largely subconscious condition and not at all easy to overcome.

Firstly, since it is absolutely impossible for any person to do everything perfectly all the time, or even most of the time, this compulsion is doomed to failure from the outset. Such a person, therefore, subconsciously knows this, avoids failure by refusing to undertake tasks or, if he does undertake them, often unconsciously programs himself to fail, so that he will have a good excuse for not succeeding. Remember that in this context "failure" is anything less than 100%, so that such a person may, in the eyes of his friends, be achieving all sorts of excellent work, but in his own eyes each one is a failure. Encouragement helps little, because it is just not believed. Since it is intolerable for a soul to accept that he is so much of a failure, this compulsion also causes him subconsciously to seek for reasons for his failures in the actions of other people, and breeds in him a tendency to criticize all around for everything they do. This, alas, produces the reaction that they then get back at him by

criticizing him unduly, which feeds his original fear that he is an utter failure and exacerbated the paralysis and depression that he feels.

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings enable us to strive for the highest goals, confident in His confirming help, but being uncrushed by our frequent fallings-short, because we know that it is in the nature of the creature to fall short. We can, I think, apply to the whole of our life the encouraging words that the beloved Guardian wrote for the members of Spiritual Assemblies:

If we turn our gaze to the high qualifications of the members of Bahá'í Assemblies ... we are filled with feelings of unworthiness and dismay, and would feel truly disheartened but for the comforting thought that if we rise to play nobly our part every deficiency in our lives will be more than compensated by the all-conquering spirit of His grace and power. (BA, p. 88)

This is where consultation comes in, not merely in helping us to make a balanced decision in a particular instance, but in daily demonstrating to a perceptive person the limitations of his or her own understanding, the fallibility of his or her own opinions. If approached in the proper spirit, consultation can be a liberating and educating process for the individual in his own life, apart altogether from being a guide to conduct.

If I may inject a personal note, I should say that one of the most enriching experiences I have enjoyed as a member of the Universal House of Justice has been in relation to those decisions of which, at the time I could see neither the reason nor the sense. I have known instances where, to my mind, a certain course of action seemed to be both obvious and essential, but the House of Justice has decided differently. In every instance, of course, it has become apparent in time how right the decision of the House of Justice was; and coming to see this as events unfold is a thrilling and illuminating process.

Of course, one can understand this happening in relation to a body which is divinely guided in its decisions, but, one may ask, can one be sure that the consultative decisions of spiritual Assemblies and committees will, likewise, produce true moderation and balanced wisdom, and not merely that

mediocrity which is the lowest common denominator of a collection of private opinions. You are no doubt aware of the crack that a camel is a horse designed by a committee.

There is in the Faith, of course, ample scope for private initiative and thought and action. It is a vital element not only in the life of the individual but in the administration of the community and must never be underestimated. In itself it could be the subject for a lecture, but today we are concerned not with individual action but with consultation and its indispensability. History is full of evidence of both the benefits and drawbacks of individual action; our experience with truly consultative action on a worldwide scale is only just beginning; it is a characteristic of the stage of human development which we have now reached. Bahá'u'lláh has brought mankind to a new leap forward in its evolution, and consultation is an integral part of this advance. It can help us sometimes, I think, if we look at such matters from the point of view and in the words of a non-Bahá'í philosopher who has perceived the same truth. I want to read to you two extracts from the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The first is from pages 243 to 244 of *The Phenomenon of Man*:

But why should there be unification in the world and what purpose does it serve?

To see the answer to this ultimate question, we have only to put side by side the two equations which have been gradually formulating themselves from the moment we began trying to situate the phenomenon of man in the world.

Evolution = Rise of consciousness

Rise of consciousness = Effect of union.

The general gathering together in which, by correlated actions of the without and the within of the earth, the totality of thinking units and thinking forces are engaged — the aggregation in a single block of a mankind whose fragments weld together and interpenetrate before our eyes in spite of ((indeed in proportion to) their efforts to separate — all this becomes intelligible from top to bottom as soon as we perceive the natural culmination of a cosmic process of organisation

which has never varied since those remote ages when our planet was young.

First the molecules of carbon compounds with their thousands of atoms symmetrically grouped; next the cell which, at the very smallest, contains thousands of molecules linked in a complicated system; then the metazoa in which the cell is no more than an almost infinitesimal element; and later the manifold attempts made by the metazoa to enter into symbiosis and raise themselves to a higher biological condition.

And now, as a germination of planetary dimensions, comes the thinking layer which to its full extent develops and intertwines its fibres, not to confuse and neutralise them but to reinforce them in the living unity of a single tissue.

Really I can see no coherent, and therefore scientific, way of grouping this immense succession of facts but as a gigantic psycho-biological operation, a sort of mega-synthesis, the 'super-arrangement' to which all the thinking elements of the earth find themselves today individually and collective subject.

You see what he is saying: that the theme of evolution is the rise of consciousness, and that this is produced as a result of ever more complex unions of elements. At the present stage in evolution it is we individual human beings who are the elements, and by our combination into one united mankind, we produce, the next level of evolved complexity which gives birth to a higher level of consciousness. He develops this point on page 251 of the same book:

We are faced with a harmonised collectivity of consciousness equivalent to a sort of super-consciousness. The idea is that of the earth not only becoming covered by myriads of grains of thought, but becoming enclosed in a single thinking envelope so as to form, functionally, no more than a single vast grain of thought on the sidereal scale, the plurality of individual reflections grouping themselves together and reinforcing one another in the act of a single unanimous reflection.

Does this not give us new insights into Bahá'u'lláh's tremendous statement: *"For everything there is and will*

continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation."

Far from being a process of obscuring understanding or reducing individual insights to a level of mediocrity, consultation makes manifest the "maturity of the gift of understanding." Through it the puny mind of each of us is linked with the minds of our fellows and, through the institutions of the Administrative Order with all Bahá'ís on earth. Should we wonder that it is through the Assemblies, the House of Justice, that Bahá'u'lláh has ordained the government of the world?

Consultation is a tremendously exciting process. It links us all to one-another and to God in one vast organism that enables us to rise above ourselves while, at the same time, developing our own individual natures to their fullest capacities.

In the non-Bahá'í World

This brings us to the third use of consultation, in the non-Bahá'í world. Clearly, if it is a basic element of the next stage in human evolution it should be a fundamental tool to assist all human beings to resolve their problems. Even though, since they do not accept Bahá'u'lláh, non-Bahá'ís will lack certain vital elements of the spiritual attitudes which should characterize true consultation, they can well accept and practice most of its principles to great advantage. Indeed, by what other method are they to resolve their disagreements and find answers to the problems facing a disordered world?

There are many schemes for a perfect world around, and have been for centuries. There are many people nowadays who see essential goals that mankind must achieve. The stumbling block is what we are to do to attain them.

I recall in this connection a story that may be familiar to many of you, but it's rather striking here.

A man on a hiking holiday one day found himself lost in a country lane, and coming upon a countryman asked him how to get to Gloucester. The man thought for a while and then

said: "Well, you could go down this lane, turn left by the pub and then right – no, that wouldn't do it. I tell you, go across this field by the footpath through yon wood until you come to Baker's farm – no, that wouldn't help either. No, you have to go back the way you came to the main road and catch the next bus to Plumpington – no, that wouldn't help you either. I tell 'ee, if I wanted to get to Gloucester I wouldn't start from here!"

That's a bit like the problem of those who want world peace now. It would be so much easier if we didn't have to start from here!

This is where the twin principles of consultation and the independent investigation of truth show us the way out.

Let us inflict upon you one more quotation from Teilhard de Chardin. This time from pages 74-75 of *The Future of Man*:

Gloriously situated by life at this critical point in the evolution of Mankind, what ought we to do? We hold Earth's future in our hands. What shall we decide?

In my view, the road to be followed is clearly revealed by the teaching of all the past.

We can progress only by uniting: this, as we have seen, is the law of life. But unification, through coercion leads only to a superficial pseudo-unity. It may establish a mechanism, but it does not achieve any fundamental synthesis; and in consequence it engenders no growth of consciousness. It materializes, in short, instead of spiritualising. Only unification through unanimity is biologically valid. This alone can work the miracle of causing heightened personality to emerge from the forces of collectivity. It alone represents a genuine extension of the psychogenesis that gave us birth.

Therefore it is inwardly that we must come together, and in entire freedom.

But this brings us to the last question of all. To create this unanimity, we need the bond, as I said, the cement of a favouring influence. Where shall we look for it; how shall we

conceive of this principle of togetherness, this soul of the Earth?

Is it to be in the development of a common vision, that is to say, the establishment of a universally accepted body of knowledge, in which all intelligences will join in knowing the same facts interpreted the same way?

Or will it rather be in common action, in the determination of an Objective universally recognised as being so desirable that all activity will naturally converge towards it under the impulse of a common fear and a common ambition?

These two kinds of unanimity are undoubtedly real, and will, I believe, have their place in our future progress. But they need to be complemented by something else if they are not to remain precarious, insufficient, and incomplete. A common body of knowledge brings together nothing but the geometrical point of intelligences. A common aspiration, no matter how ardent, can only touch individuals indirectly and in an impersonal way that is depersonalising in itself.

It is not a tête-à-tête or corps-à-corps that we need; it is a heart-to-heart.

This being so, the more I consider the fundamental question of the future of the earth, the more it appears to me that the generative principle of its unification is finally to be sought, not in the sole contemplation of a single Truth or in the sole desire for a single Thing, but in the common attraction exercised by a single Being. For on the one hand, if the synthesis of the Spirit is to be brought about in its entirety (and this is the only possible definition of progress) it can only be done, in the last resort, through the meeting, centre to centre, of human units, such as can only be realised in a universal, mutual love. And on the other hand there is but one possible way in which human elements, innumerable diverse by nature, can love one another; it is by knowing themselves all to be centered upon a single 'super-centre' common to all, to which they can only attain, each at the extreme of himself, through their unity.

I am sure that everyone of us can immediately see that in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh we have the God-given requirements of a common vision, a united course of action and, above all

that Being Who is the mainspring and central point of attraction of all.

In our collaboration with our fellow human beings it is above all in the fields of common action that we shall be able to impart to them the common vision and thence to lead them to the knowledge of the Being of Bahá'u'lláh.

We cannot just say that Communism, Racialism, Nationalism and all the other manmade ideologies should go away, any more than we can wish away the centuries-old structures raised by mankind on the bases of the ancient Revelations of God. But, in view of the great and terrible perils which can no longer be ignored, we shall find more and more people of all views and opinions who are willing to sit down and consult upon specific actions to be taken to overcome specific problems. As this process advances, as they learn through experience the benefits of consultation, as they see the Bahá'í teachings in operation, problem after problem will be overcome and mankind will have started on the road to the total restructuring of human society.

Consultation, therefore, is indispensable for the ordering of human affairs in three areas.

It is the most vital technique that Bahá'ís must learn for the efficient and Bahá'í-like running of Bahá'í communities, which together form the nucleus and pattern of the new World Order; it is one of the most potent means for the learning of those virtues which are essential for the spiritual development of individual human beings and their harmonious inter-relationship; and it is one of the most strikingly beneficial of the Bahá'í teachings to which we can introduce our non-Bahá'í friends and fellow-workers in every field. It is a tool that they can use to solve problems at every level, it is an avenue by which they can come to appreciate the truth of the Bahá'í way of life, and it is the only way by which minds raised in different traditions can find a common meeting-place.

As we began with a quotation from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, I would like to finish by reading three, for in these three short passages alone is inspiration for whole courses of study:

The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.

Say: no man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation.

Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.

NOTES

¹ A talk given by Ian Semple on 1985.12.20 and 1986.01.03 at Seminars held in the multipurpose room of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice)

Elucidations

Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice

(Translated from Persian)

18 February 2008

Transmitted by email

The Friends in Iran

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

We have received a letter from a believer in Iran with questions about the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice. We appreciate that firmness in the Covenant is among the distinctive characteristics of the believers in that land, who are informed of the principles and essential facts pertaining to the succession of authority in the Cause. Nevertheless, none among them should hesitate to seek clarification of matters about which they have questions, for the enemies of the Faith are tireless in their attempts to sow seeds of confusion and doubt. Moreover, it is beneficial, in view of the beloved Master's exhortations to us all to be ever-vigilant concerning matters of protection, for the friends to review the relevant essentials from time to time. We have therefore decided to provide you with the following comments. In this connection, you are also encouraged to reacquaint yourselves with the document "Mason Remey and Those Who Followed Him", a statement prepared at our instruction by an ad hoc committee. A translation of the statement is enclosed.

Questions concerning the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice can be resolved through careful study of the

writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and the elucidations of the House of Justice, which, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, will "*deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide,*" He assures the friends, "*has the same effect as the Text itself.*"

Prior to the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, the provisions He had put in place in His Will and Testament to safeguard the Faith and ensure its steady advancement into the future were generally unknown. The believers anticipated a day when the Universal House of Justice would be established since it had been specifically mentioned in the Sacred Texts. There was, however, no definite understanding that there would be a Guardian. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi later indicated that he had no foreknowledge of the position to which he would be called. At most, he had reportedly thought the Will and Testament might charge him, as the eldest grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with responsibility for arranging for the election of the House of Justice. Only after the reading of the Will did the institution of the Guardianship become widely known, and the Bahá'í community worldwide acknowledged Shoghi Effendi as the Head of the Faith to whom all must turn.

An attentive reading of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will makes it clear that He did not indicate a predestined outcome but did provide for a number of circumstances which, depending on future conditions, might eventually confront the Faith. The second section of the Will, for instance, which refers only to the Universal House of Justice, with no mention of the Guardianship, was written at a time when His own life was in imminent danger and Shoghi Effendi was but a small boy. During that same period, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had made arrangements for the election of the Universal House of Justice to take place immediately, should the threat on His life materialize. Through the grace of God, the crisis passed, and it was ultimately left to Shoghi Effendi many years later, as Guardian and Head of the Faith, to determine the timing of the formation of the House of Justice. Early on he considered the possibility of holding the election soon after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in which case the House of Justice and the Guardian would have functioned simultaneously. He determined, of course, that the

foundations of the Administrative Order needed first to be firmly laid at the local and national levels, and it eventually transpired that the House of Justice was established several years after his own passing. That the transition from the ministry of the Guardian to the election of the Universal House of Justice occurred with such relative ease can, itself, be attributed to the way certain provisions in the Will were formulated.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament clearly allows for the possibility of a successor to Shoghi Effendi, and in this light, we find statements written by him or on his behalf over the course of his thirty-six-year ministry that envision future Guardians. However, there are no assurances in the Writings that the line of Guardians would continue throughout the Dispensation; rather, the possibility is envisaged that such a line would come to an end. In this respect, Bahá’u’lláh states in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

Endowments dedicated to charity revert to God, the Revealer of Signs. None hath the right to dispose of them without leave from Him Who is the Dawning-place of Revelation. After Him, this authority shall pass to the Aghṣán, and after them to the House of Justice – should it be established in the world by then – that they may use these endowments for the benefit of the Places which have been exalted in this Cause, and for whatsoever hath been enjoined upon them by Him Who is the God of might and power. Otherwise, the endowments shall revert to the people of Bahá who speak not except by His leave and judge not save in accordance with what God hath decreed in this Tablet – lo, they are the champions of victory betwixt heaven and earth – that they may use them in the manner that hath been laid down in the Book by God, the Mighty, the Bountiful.

The passing of Shoghi Effendi precipitated the situation described, in which the authority vested in the Aghṣán – first in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and then in Shoghi Effendi – ended before the House of Justice was established.

In His Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá specifies in the clearest terms the conditions according to which Shoghi Effendi was to have named his successor as Guardian:

O ye beloved of the Lord! It is incumbent upon the guardian of the Cause of God to appoint in his own life-time him that shall become his successor, that differences may not arise after his passing. He that is appointed must manifest in himself detachment from all worldly things, must be the essence of purity, must show in himself the fear of God, knowledge, wisdom and learning. Thus, should the first-born of the guardian of the Cause of God not manifest in himself the truth of the words: — "The child is the secret essence of its sire," that is, should he not inherit of the spiritual within him (the guardian of the Cause of God) and his glorious lineage not be matched with a goodly character, then must he, (the guardian of the Cause of God) choose another branch to succeed him.

The Hands of the Cause of God must elect from their own number nine persons that shall at all times be occupied in the important services in the work of the guardian of the Cause of God. The election of these nine must be carried either unanimously or by majority from the company of the Hands of the Cause of God and these, whether unanimously or by a majority vote, must give their assent to the choice of the one whom the guardian of the Cause of God hath chosen as his successor. This assent must be given in such wise as the assenting and dissenting voices may not be distinguished (i.e., secret ballot).

The personal views of any individual regarding the above statement, no matter how learned, cannot compare with the Guardian's infallible understanding of the passage. Shoghi Effendi, who faithfully adhered to the wishes of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá throughout his ministry, would never have been careless in a matter so essential to the integrity of the Faith as the question of the appointment of his successor. It is unthinkable that he would appoint someone to succeed him who did not possess the qualifications laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will. It is equally untenable to suggest that he

would do so in a manner which deviated from the explicit requirements in that same document, which included the affirmation of his choice by nine designated Hands of the Cause of God, so that “differences” would “not arise after his passing.” How perverse the suggestion of the violators of the Covenant that Shoghi Effendi would ignore the Master’s instructions and make a veiled and indirect appointment of his successor! Rather should the fact that Shoghi Effendi did not name a successor be seen as a sign of his meticulous adherence to every word of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and an indication of his conclusion that there was no qualified individual whom he could appoint.

Therefore, it should be clear to every steadfast follower of Bahá’u’lláh that the end of the line of Guardians was not the result of any decision or action taken by the Hands of the Cause of God following the sudden passing of Shoghi Effendi. The line was brought to a close when, compelled by existing circumstances and the strict provisions of the Will, Shoghi Effendi did not name a successor. To entertain the possibility that it may one day be re-established is futile. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote that *“ere the expiration of a thousand years, no one has the right to utter a single word, even to claim the station of Guardianship.”* And in the same passage He exhorted the friends, *“Should there be differences of opinion, the Supreme House of Justice would immediately resolve the problems.”* The Universal House of Justice, soon after its formation, stated that it “finds that there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi.”

While the line of Guardians has ended, the Covenant is preserved. The vast body of interpretations of Shoghi Effendi informs the decisions of the Universal House of Justice as the Faith continues its onward march. The unity of the Faith is safeguarded, and the realization of Bahá’u’lláh’s great purpose for humanity assured. *“The Hand of Omnipotence hath established His Revelation upon an unassailable, an enduring foundation,”* Bahá’u’lláh has stated. *“Storms of human strife are powerless to undermine its basis, nor will men’s fanciful theories succeed in damaging its structure.”*

* * *

With reference to the specific questions raised in the letter we have received, one concerns the meaning of the designation “Aghṣán”, as found in the Writings. While in some cases, as affirmed by the Guardian, the term applies specifically to Bahá'u'lláh's sons, at other times it is used more broadly to include His male descendants. For example, in His Will and Testament 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to Shoghi Effendi as “the chosen branch” (Ghuṣn-i-Mumtáz). The reference to Shoghi Effendi as Ghuṣn here – the singular form of Aghṣán – follows the usage of Bahá'u'lláh in relation to the titles He gave His sons, that is, the Most Great Branch, the Greater Branch, and the Purest Branch. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi explains that the word Aghṣán “refers to Bahá'u'lláh's descendants”; another describes Hussein Rabbani, the Guardian's brother, as “the grandchild of the Master, an Afnán and Aghṣán mentioned in the Will and Testament of the Master.” It is evident, then, that the designation Aghṣán, or Ghuṣn, includes Shoghi Effendi and the other male descendants of Bahá'u'lláh.

If, at any time, male descendants of Bahá'u'lláh appear who are faithful to the Covenant, it would nevertheless not be possible for any of them to occupy the office of Guardian, for, as already explained, in the absence of appointment by Shoghi Effendi, they cannot claim the station of Guardianship and there is no way for one to be named to it by an act of the House of Justice.

* * *

Another query concerns the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. Specifically, the question has been asked whether the functioning of an “officially recognized” International Bahá'í Court in the Holy Land, mentioned by Shoghi Effendi, was an essential preliminary step in the evolution of the Universal House of Justice.

As you are no doubt aware, Shoghi Effendi explained that “'Abdu'l-Bahá, Himself, in one of His earliest Tablets, contemplated the possibility of the formation of the Universal House of Justice in His own lifetime.” The Master described

the requirements necessary for its formation, which did not include the establishment of a religious court:

The Supreme House of Justice should be elected according to the system followed in the election of the parliaments of Europe. And when the countries would be guided the Houses of Justice of the various countries would elect the Supreme House of Justice.

At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme House of Justice.

The establishment of that House is not dependent upon the conversion of all the nations of the world. For example, if conditions were favourable and no disturbances would be caused, the friends in Persia would elect their representatives, and likewise the friends in America, in India, and other areas would also elect their representatives, and these would elect a House of Justice. That House of Justice would be the Supreme House of Justice. That is all.

Over the thirty-six years of his ministry, as he guided the Bahá'í world, striving to lay the foundations of the Administrative Order, Shoghi Effendi outlined specific developmental steps to be taken, which were intended to lead to the eventual establishment of the Universal House of Justice. The accomplishment of some depended largely on the exertions of the believers themselves – an increase in the number of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, the appointment of the International Bahá'í Council and its evolution into an elected body. Others, however, were subject to the forces operating in society and, no matter what the efforts made by the Bahá'í community, could not be accomplished.

In 1929, for instance, the Guardian stated, “given favorable circumstances, under which the Bahá'ís of Persia and of the adjoining countries under Soviet rule may be enabled to elect their national representatives ... the only remaining obstacle in the way of the definite formation of the International House

of Justice will have been removed.” Later, following the expulsion of Bahá’ís from Russia by the authorities, a letter written on his behalf explained, “At the time he referred to Russia there were Bahá’ís there, now the Community has practically ceased to exist; therefore the formation of the International House of Justice cannot depend on a Russian National Spiritual Assembly.”

In the same way, goals were specified by Shoghi Effendi for the establishment of Bahá’í courts, including national courts in certain countries in Asia and, as a step in the development of the International Bahá’í Council, the precursor to the Universal House of Justice, a court in the Holy Land. Recognition by the Egyptian government of the National Spiritual Assembly as an independent Bahá’í court was sought as far back as 1929. Over time, changing conditions rendered the formation of such religious courts impossible. As the Hands of the Cause of God commented in 1959 in calling for the election of the International Bahá’í Council and the eventual establishment of the House of Justice,

We wish to assure the believers that every effort will be made to establish a Bahá’í Court in the Holy Land prior to the date set for this election. We should however bear in mind that the Guardian himself clearly indicated this goal, due to the strong trend towards the secularization of Religious Courts in this part of the world, might not be achieved.

* * *

Yet another question that has been raised concerns the discharge by the Universal House of Justice of certain functions previously performed by the Guardian. With regard to Ḥuqúqu’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained that “Disposition of the Ḥuqúq, wholly or partly, is permissible, but this should be done by permission of the authority in the Cause to whom all must turn.” Likewise, the expulsion of Covenant-breakers is an obligation exercised by the Head of the Faith in the context of the duty to protect the Cause from those who would seek to undermine its unity. Shoghi Effendi, it is well known, was obliged to expel Covenant-breakers from the Faith at different points throughout his ministry, both before and after the

appointment of the Hands of the Cause of God. This responsibility now falls on the Universal House of Justice, as the centre of authority to whom all must turn. The current procedures followed in this respect are outlined in the statement "The Institution of the Counsellors".

In this connection it should be noted that after the passing of Shoghi Effendi, although overwhelmed with grief, the Bahá'í world maintained its unity during the tenuous period between his ministry and the election of the Universal House of Justice. The sole challenge to its integrity appeared some two years after his death when Charles Mason Remey, who was at that time one of the Hands of the Cause, laid claim to the Guardianship. As you are aware, Remey asserted that his appointment in 1951 as president of the nascent International Bahá'í Council meant that he should automatically assume the position of head of the Universal House of Justice and was, therefore, the second Guardian.

The absurdity of Remey's claim is obvious and requires little elaboration. In 1957, he was among the Hands of the Cause who gathered in the Holy Land to consider what course of action should be taken following the unexpected passing of the Guardian. He personally affirmed that Shoghi Effendi had appointed no successor, signing a document issued unanimously by the Hands to this effect. As signatory to yet another such document, he agreed that the entire body of the Hands of the Cause would determine when and how the evolution of the International Bahá'í Council would culminate in the election of the House of Justice. For two years, as one of the nine Hands designated to serve in the Holy Land, he participated in the consultations that guided the development of the Bahá'í community. Then, without notice or discussion with his fellow Hands, he claimed the station of Guardianship, lacking explicit appointment by Shoghi Effendi as specified in the Will and Testament and in direct violation of the command of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that no one could make such a claim. Exercising the authority conferred on them in accordance with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, the Hands of the Cause expelled him from the Faith as a Covenant-breaker.

* * *

In matters related to the Covenant, the friends must be firm and steadfast; they should be wary, lest the arguments put forward by those who sow seeds of doubt become the cause for confusion or lead to disputation and disunity. Should questions arise that cannot be resolved, they should be placed immediately before the Universal House of Justice. The friends must be especially careful to avoid being enticed by the whisperings of the remnants of the Covenant-breakers and their supporters, who seek to shake the believers' faith. Whereas in the past the violators of the Covenant sought to undermine the authority of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, today they challenge the Universal House of Justice. Of particular concern are those who, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns, "assert their firmness and steadfastness in the Covenant but when they come across responsive ears they secretly sow the seeds of suspicion."

Remey's small band of associates, bedevilled by half a century of infighting among competing factions, have had negligible effect on the progress of the Faith. The flurry caused by their actions does nothing more than shake a few lifeless twigs and leaves from the tree of the Cause. Those who are naïve, those who are not deepened in the Teachings or not firm in the Covenant, those who are controlled by their egos and lust for leadership can be misled and fall away. The friends are urged to protect themselves and their community by adhering strictly to the emphatic exhortations repeated throughout the Sacred Texts. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant. By this House is meant that Universal House of Justice which is to be elected from all countries, that is from those parts in the East and West where the loved ones are to be found, after the manner of the customary elections in Western countries such as those of England....

And now, one of the greatest and most fundamental principles of the Cause of God is to shun and avoid entirely the Covenant-breakers, for they will utterly destroy the Cause of God, exterminate His Law and render of no account all efforts exerted in the past. O friends! It behooveth you to call to mind with tenderness the trials of His Holiness, the Exalted One, and show your fidelity to the Ever-Blest Beauty. The utmost endeavour must be exerted lest all these woes, trials and afflictions, all this pure and sacred blood that hath been shed so profusely in the Path of God, may prove to be in vain....

O ye beloved of the Lord! Strive with all your heart to shield the Cause of God from the onslaught of the insincere, for souls such as these cause the straight to become crooked and all benevolent efforts to produce contrary results.

The believers in the Cradle of the Faith, who have withstood for more than a century the onslaught of government and clergy, who triumphed over the perils posed by the rebellions of Azal and Muḥammad 'Alí, who severed themselves from those who opposed Shoghi Effendi, will easily discount the spurious and ridiculous arguments of those few individuals who vie among themselves to exploit Remey's deviation as a pretext for attracting a handful of personal followers. Be assured of our supplications at the Holy Threshold on behalf of the beloved friends everywhere in that sacred land.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Infallibility of the Universal House of Justice

(Translation from Persian)

Extract from a letter dated 20 May 2007 to the Friends in Iran from the Department of the Secretariat

Your letter dated 15 January 2007, containing two questions, one regarding the correspondence received from the Bahá'í World Centre and the other concerning the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice, has been received and submitted to the House of Justice. We have been asked to convey the following.

As to whether there is a distinction between correspondence from the World Centre that has been signed "The Universal House of Justice" and that signed on behalf of the Department of the Secretariat, in brief, the manner in which each of these letters is prepared depends upon the contents of the letter. On some occasions the Universal House of Justice communicates directly over its own signature. It generally communicates with the institutions of the Faith and the believers through its Secretariat on the basis of decisions and policies determined in its consultations. Hence, communications conveyed over the signature of the Department of the Secretariat are authorized by the House of Justice.

You have stated that believers have asked, "Are the decisions of the Universal House of Justice free from error even if incorrect information has been provided to it?" The infallibility of the House of Justice, like that of the Guardian, is "conferred", as distinct from the infallibility of the Manifestation of God, which is "innate". The House of Justice, like the Guardian, is not omniscient; when called upon to make a decision, it wants to receive information and facts and at times consults experts on the subject. Like him, it may well change its decision when new facts emerge or in light of changed conditions.

In the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on this matter, there is no reference to the nature and extent of the information to which the House of Justice should have access when making its decisions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit.

Again, He says:

Whatever will be its decision, by majority vote, shall be the real truth, inasmuch as that House is under the protection, unerring guidance, and care of the one true Lord. He shall guard it from error and will protect it under the wing of His sanctity and infallibility.

Bahá'ís, of course, may seek the views of the House of Justice about its decisions if they feel they have new information or that conditions have changed but in doing so should avoid the temptation to use this as an excuse to evade their obligation to obey and thus deprive themselves of the bounty of full obedience.

7 April 2008

Transmitted by email

The Friends in Iran

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Further to the letter to you of 18 February 2008 concerning the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, we have been requested to provide the comments below on a related matter. It seems that questions have arisen regarding the infallibility of the House of Justice, in light of the presentation of the topic by Dr. Udo Schaefer, a well-known Bahá'í in Germany, whose publications have been translated and circulated in Iran.

In his book "Making the Crooked Straight" and in other publications, Dr. Schaefer offers his personal views on infallibility as it pertains to the Universal House of Justice. In an effort to defend the Faith and explain the concept in a manner acceptable to a sceptical world, he suggests that the infallibility of the House of Justice is confined to the sphere of legislation. He argues further that, as far as he can discern, the House of Justice has legislated only a small number of times, in each case, according to him, on an issue of "universal relevance" through a decision-making process that did not need to draw on any information obtained from fallible sources. Unfortunately, some have taken his conclusions another step, suggesting that believers are obliged to obey the House of Justice only in matters that fall within the narrow range of such enactments.

In general, the House of Justice wishes to preserve the widest possible latitude for the friends to explore the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to share their individual understanding of the Teachings. Yet it must be remembered that, with regard to deductions drawn from the Texts, the Master clearly states:

...the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsements of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá'í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith of God would be shaken.

The Universal House of Justice does not intend at this time to elaborate further on previous explanations given of its duties and powers. That the House of Justice itself does not find it necessary to do so should alert the friends as to the unwisdom of their attempting to define so precisely its sphere of action. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that, while

there are explicit passages in the authoritative texts that make reference to the infallibility of the House of Justice in the enactment of legislation, the argument that it is free from error only in this respect is untenable. Surely, the many emphatic statements found in the Writings, such as the following excerpt from the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, should suffice to dismiss any claims of this kind:

The sacred and youthful branch, the guardian of the Cause of God as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness, the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God....

Apart from the question of infallibility, there is the matter of authority. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states: “It is not for individual believers to limit the sphere of the Guardian’s authority, or to judge when they have to obey the Guardian and when they are free to reject his judgement. Such an attitude would evidently lead to confusion and to schism.” In regard to the Universal House of Justice, the same understanding applies.

Infallibility is a profound spiritual concept inherent in the Bahá’í Writings. In meditating upon the relevant passages, the believers will naturally reach their own understanding of the subject. Individual opinions, however, should not be imposed on others, nor so promoted as to crystallize into doctrines not found in the explicit Text. When exchanging views about the Universal House of Justice—the body to which all things must be referred—the friends should exercise care lest they go to extremes, by either diminishing its station or assigning to it exaggerated attributes. What better admonition to heed in a matter of this nature than that given by the beloved Master, when some believers fell into disagreement about His own station:

These discussions will yield no result or benefit: we must set all such debates and controversies entirely aside—nay, we must consign them to oblivion and arise to accomplish that which is enjoined and required in this Day. These debates are mere words bereft of inner meaning; they are mere illusions and not reality.

That which is true and real is this: that we become united and agreed in our purpose and arise to flood this darksome world with light, to banish enmity and foreignness from among the children of men, to perfume and revive the world with the sanctified breezes of the character and conduct of the Abhá Beauty, to cast the light of divine guidance upon East and West, to raise the tabernacle of the love of God and gather all people under its sheltering shadow, to confer peace and composure upon every soul beneath the shade of the blessed Tree, to show forth such love as to astonish the enemy, to turn ravenous and bloodthirsty wolves into the gazelles of the meadows of the love of God, to cause the oppressor to taste the sweet savour of meekness, to teach them that kill the submission and acquiescence of those that suffer themselves to be killed, to spread abroad the verses of the one true God, to extol the virtues and perfections of the all-glorious Lord, to raise to the highest heaven the cry of “O Thou the Glory of Glories!”, and to cause the call of

“The earth will shine with the light of her Lord!”¹ to reach the ears of the denizens of His Kingdom.

The House of Justice appeals to the friends not to become embroiled in the kind of fruitless theological discussions that caused conflict and contention in past dispensations, lest they lose sight of their responsibility to promulgate the oneness of humanity and of the role of the Covenant established by Bahá'u'lláh in uniting minds, hearts, and souls.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: International Teaching Centre
Counsellor Jabbar Eidelkhani

¹ Qur'án 39:69.

Appendices

Bibliography of the Bahá'í Writings and Their abbreviations used in this book*

DGE	Hans Küng, <i>Declaration Towards a Global Ethic</i>
ESW	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Epistle to the Son of the Wolf</i>
FWU	'Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>Foundations of World Unity</i>
GPB	Shoghi Effendi. <i>God Passes By</i>
GWB	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh</i>
HW	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Hidden Words</i>
KA	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Kitáb-i-Aqdas</i>
KI	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Kitáb-i-Íqán</i>
LQ	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Lawḥ-i qiná'</i>
PB	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh</i>
PBA	Compilation, <i>Principles of Bahá'í Administration</i>
Q	Qur'án
SAQ	'Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>Some Answered Questions</i>
SLH	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Summons of the Lord of Hosts</i>
SV	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys</i>
SWAB	'Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá</i>
SWB	Báb, The. <i>Selections from the Writings of the Báb</i>
TAB	'Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>Tablets of Abdul-Bahá Abbas</i> , volumes 1-3
TB	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas</i>
WOB	Shoghi Effendi. <i>World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters</i>

* See a complete list of abbreviations at <http://bahai-library.com/?file=abbreviations>

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