

The 'Irfán Colloquia, started in 1993, have since been held annually in North America and Europe and conducted in English, Persian and German. The aim and purpose of the 'Irfán activities are to foster systematic studies of the scriptures and theology of the world religions from a Bahá'í perspective and to promote scholarly studies in the sacred writings, verities, and fundamental principles of the belief system of the Bahá'í Faith.

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LIGHTS OF 'IRFÁN

Book Thirteen



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Papers Presented at the 'Irfán  
Colloquia and Seminars

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Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs



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Colloquia and Seminars

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

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*O* My servants! Through the' might of God and His power, and out of the' treasury of His knowledge' and wisdom, I have' brought forth and revealed unto you the' pearls that lay concealed in the' depths of His everlasting ocean. I have' summoned the' Maids of Heaven to emerge from behind the' veil of concealment, and have' clothed them with these' words of Mine'—words of consummate' power and wisdom. I have', moreover, with the' hand of divine' power, unsealed the' choice' wine' of My Revelation, and have' wafted its holy, its hidden, and musk-laden fragrance' upon all created things. Who else' but yourselves is to be blamed if ye' choose' to remain unendowed with so great an outpouring of God's transcendent and all-encompassing grace; with so bright a revelation of His resplendent mercy?...

— Baha'u'llah

Gleanings from the Writings of  
Bahá'u'lláh, p.327–8

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## Preface

The main purpose of the annual sessions of the 'Irfán Colloquium and the publication of its proceedings in the Lights of 'Irfán series is the promotion of deep and systematic studies in the Writings of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith and the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í belief system embodied in those Writings. Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, referring to such scholarly undertaking, has proclaimed, "*Whoso hath searched the depths of the oceans that lie hid within these exalted words, and fathomed their import, can be said to have discovered a glimmer of the unspeakable glory with which this mighty, this sublime, and most holy Revelation hath been endowed.*"(GWB 9)

Publication of the present volume of *Lights of 'Irfán* coincides with the centenary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's extensive, history-making visit to North America. Four of the articles in this volume are devoted to that visit and the discussion of the teachings promoted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during that sojourn. *'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America* is a preliminary analysis of the recorded accounts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the United States and Canada. *The Choice of the West for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Epoch-making Trip* explores the reasons for choosing Western Europe and North America, particularly the United States, and discusses the tremendous results achieved by this visit. *'Abdu'l-Bahá's Encounter with Modernity During His Western Travels* presents a picture of the developments in material civilization in Europe and America in the early days of the 20th century, and how many people were living in relative prosperity and comfort in those democracies but still had not cast off their racist and sexist beliefs and philosophies. The article chronicles many situations encountered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His travels that would have been entirely new to His experience and how He responded to them.. *The Fragility of Goodness: Hexis and Práxis in the Historical Figure of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* seeks to examine, through

the lessons presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá' in His travels to the West, how the internal goodness of character or the soul may be preserved despite interference from the material world and how that character may survive the sobering perspective of moral failure.

*Interpretation and Elucidation* provides clear and succinct explanations for these two important concepts as they are used in the Bahá'í Teachings and explores their significance for the unity of the Faith. While individual Bahá'ís are free to have their own personal understandings and 'interpretation' of the scripture, their personal views are considered informal and not binding for other individuals. This is an essential and protective feature of the Covenant to preserve unity in the Bahá'í community and protect it from schism. Without this Covenant, it would be impossible to realize the pivotal principle of the Bahá'í teachings that calls for unity and fellowship amongst all the peoples of the world.

Several articles in this volume are related to the interface of the Bahá'í paradigm with global challenges and philosophical issues. *Kant's "Perpetual Peace" and the Bahá'í Writings* is a comparative study of Immanuel Kant's philosophical essay entitled *Perpetual Peace* and Bahá'u'lláh's proposal for the establishment of world unity and peace.

*Apocalyptic Thinking and Process Thinking: Bahá'u'lláh's Contribution to Religious Thought* invites new ways of thinking. The author aims at contrasting the views of classical religious apocalyptic thinking, in which the affairs of the world are viewed as static until they are suddenly moved from one state to another by supernatural intervention, with a new conceptualization of change initiated by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Under this new paradigm, religious change is understood as a continuous process, not a sudden jump from one state to another. Furthermore, changes in the world are to be brought about through human effort and not by sudden acts of external divine intervention. This concept of change is examined in



relation to 20th century expectations of many Bahá'ís concerning the establishment of the Lesser Peace, about which there was a great deal of apocalyptic thinking in the years prior to 2000.

The accelerating effects of secularism and atheism are examined in two articles: *I Know Not How to Sing Thy Praise* is a commentary on a prayer of Bahá'u'lláh that explores a basic question of theology regarding “God” in this day and age, when practical and theoretical atheism and irreligion has captured the minds and shaped the belief systems of a large and ever-increasing number of people. The article seeks to present an answer to the question of “how to believe in God today,” through a commentary on the four modes of Revelation described by the Báb, which are used to understand the theological locus of the many prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh.

*The New Atheism—A Bahá'í Perspective* examines the writings of four writers (Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris and Dennett) at the forefront of a movement to advance an aggressively anti-religious position that has gathered much popular attention in recent years. The article carefully analyzes the foundational principles of the “new atheism” both in light of the Bahá'í Writings and on grounds of philosophical and scientific rationality, exploring a number of areas in which the Bahá'í teachings and the new atheists agree, as well as those areas where they dramatically diverge.

Two thoughtful and scholarly studies in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, are presented in this volume, both of which concentrate on poems revealed by Bahá'u'lláh.

*Bahá'u'lláh's Persian poems written before 1863* provides a provisional list of Bahá'u'lláh's Persian poems written before the public declaration of His mission. These poems can be seen as the early fruit of the mystical experiences Bahá'u'lláh had when He was jailed in the *Siyáh-Chál* (Black Pit) in Tehran in October 1852. This meticulously

annotated article contains brief descriptions of 16 poems written in Persian by Bahá'u'lláh together with one additional poem, *Qaṣídiy-i-Varqá'íyyih*, which is in Arabic. Please note that translations of Bahá'u'lláh's poetry used in this article are temporary and informal. They are not authorized translations. They are made only for presentation at the 'Irfán Colloquium. These translations should not be quoted, published or distributed in any form or through any media.

From time to time, *Lights of 'Irfán* contains articles related to studies in the Bahá'í Writings written by non-Bahá'í scholars. In this volume, we are pleased to welcome another such contribution. ***Clouds and the Hiding God: Observations on the Origins of Some Terms in the Early Writings of Bahá'u'lláh***, explores the imagery of clouds, starting with three early mystical Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, the Persian poem *Rashḥ-i-'Amá*, together with *Lawḥ-i-Kull aṭ-Ṭá'ám*, and *Qaṣídiy-i-Varqá'íyyih*, in Arabic. The article explores different ways in which the imagery of the cloud is used in these and other writings of Bahá'u'lláh. The most common is the cloud as “the hiding place of the Divine Being”, with related references to clouds as veils. Other instances include the use of clouds as a vehicle of conveyance such as a chariot and the imagery of rain clouds which water the earth and convey God's bounties and blessings. The article also illustrates the continuity of this imagery throughout the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions and suggests there is evidence for a broader, more universal character to this symbolism in the religious lexicon of humanity.

The section entitled “**Elucidations**” is aimed at clarifying particular issues and topics of interest in Bahá'í studies and includes four items:

The first is the letter of 7 April 2008 from the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice on the clarification of the ***Authority and Centrality of the Universal House of Justice***. This letter deals with specific questions that had arisen regarding the infallibility of the House

of Justice, following publication of the book, “*Making the Crooked Straight*” as well as other publications by the same author. This is the English version of a letter that was written in Persian on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Friends in Iran. It replaces the courtesy translation that was published in the Elucidations section of the *Lights of ‘Irfán*, Book Eleven.

The second item, *Whether the Apostle Paul was a “False Teacher,”* is a memorandum of the Research Department of the Bahá’í World Centre written in response to a question asked by an individual Bahá’í. It contains references in the Bahá’í Writings to two prominent figures in early Christianity, St. Peter and St. Paul.

Third, is a memorandum dated 2 April 2012 from the Research Department at the Bahá’í World Centre containing information gleaned from its study of questions regarding two subjects. The first concerns the ancient religion of the **Sabaeans**, considered to be the ancestral religion of Abraham. The memorandum also addresses questions about **African-based religions** that have taken root in the Americas including Yoruba, Santeria and Brazilian Candomblé.

The final item in this section, **Supreme Tribunal (*Mahkamiy-i-Kubra*)**, is the response to a question asking for clarification of the nature and purpose of the institutions of the Bahá’í Courts and the Supreme Tribunal mentioned in the writings of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith.

Appendix I in this volume is a tribute to the memory of Mr. Ian Semple (1928 –2011), who for five decades served as an elected member, first of the International Bahá’í Council and subsequently of the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the Bahá’í community. He was a sincere supporter of the ‘Irfán Colloquium and a valuable contributor to the *Lights of ‘Irfán*.

## Lights of 'Irfán Book Thirteen

Appendix II contains the bibliography of Bahá'í Writings and their abbreviations that are used in the text of the papers for referencing the sources of the quoted passages.

Appendix III provides a complete list of the contents of previous volumes of the *Lights of 'Irfán*. It also shows the range, types, scope and methodological approaches of the papers that have been presented and are welcome to be presented at future 'Irfán Colloquia. In addition to the papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia, authors of research papers related to the main goals of the 'Irfán Colloquium are welcome to directly submit their work for publication in the *Lights of 'Irfán*.

Starting with Book Six we made two changes to the style guide for *Lights of 'Irfán*. All “authoritative” publications are cited by an abbreviation (see Appendix II for the current list of these works with their standard abbreviations). 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. Their 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 April 2012

# The Fragility of Goodness: Hexis and Práxis in the Historical Figure of `Abdu'l-Bahá

Shabaz Fatheazam

This paper seeks to understand how internal goodness of character or soul may be preserved from interference from the world and how character (*hexis*) and activity (*práxis*) may survive the sobering perspective of immense moral failure on the part of a considerable portion of humankind and of its leadership. Such apparent betrayal or dismissal of poetic action as of any practical value is examined through literature and the lessons of `Abdu'l-Bahá' in His travels to the West. The conclusion drawn from these sources will attempt to show that good character engaged in social action is of sufficient serious practical importance so as to be able to withstand the strikes made at the root of goodness itself despite the fact that character and activity are intimately connected and therefore vulnerable.

## Prelude

My generation, born in the 50s, is part of this very important centenary celebration. This century is part of us; we belong to this era as the era belongs to us. This is because our own lifetime coincides with half of the 100 years that have transpired since `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the West and this, my fortuitous and convenient chronological insertion, thankfully, absolves me from pretending to be a scholar as I have accumulated views and prejudices of events as a contemporary rather than as a scholar and my information, understanding or even patent contradiction between personal experience and the facts of

this period may be considered what social anthropologists label as that of a 'participant observer'. I hope to communicate something of what I have learned from watching and listening but these thoughts, in the end, form the opinion of a mortal and the opinion of mortals, as the ancients would advise us, is not to be trusted.<sup>1</sup>

Shoghi Effendi referred to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels to the West as "missionary journeys"<sup>2</sup> and this "triumphal progress through the chief cities of the United States"<sup>3</sup> brought unprecedented animus and combative urgency to our era and to America. Then, as indeed now, there exists the tension between two divergent conceptions of this nation: does America mean commitment to a national experiment or consecration of a national destiny. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reinforced the latter. Even Crèvecoeur, the French correspondent, still astonishes by the contemporaneity of his eighteenth century answer to his own famous question: "What then is the American, this new man?"<sup>4</sup> Every epoch is "immediate to God" but the Founding Fathers were apprehensive as the history of antiquity had taught them that republics perish, that glory is transient, and just as man is vulnerable through his propensity to sin, republics are vulnerable through their propensity to corruption.

This warfare between realism and messianism<sup>5</sup>, between experiment and destiny, continues to this day. As Bahá'ís in America, we form a new integration of the social body and a special pivot responsible for the movements of the historical evolution of this nation. Special because as Bahá'ís, we have a naturally acute sense of direction and this can be seen not just in getting the facts right, but in each of us having a clear judgment as to the ultimate nature of our long-term vision over the past and over the future.

This is not a responsibility to take lightly and is a telling engagement of the complexities we must deal with. But it is not just Bahá'ís who are history conscious. Our generation, and the one before, is history

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conscious. "This age more than other age is that of a greater historical consciousness" to quote a notable British historian writing in the early 1960s.<sup>6</sup> This is important to mention because when conscious of our own situation, we are also more capable of transcending it and more capable of appreciating the essential nature of the differences between our own society and that we wish to usher in. "Man's capacity to rise above his social and historical situation seems to be conditioned by the sensitivity with which he recognizes the extent of his involvement in it."<sup>7</sup> The timing of the arrival of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on American soil amid such a pregnant mood of soul searching was nothing short of providential and made his missionary journeys particularly revered as they mirrored the very components of creed and reality which represented the powerful motive in the American quest. But as auspicious as was the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in America pre-wartime the circumstances surrounding His visit were anything but propitious. This was a period of history when the world was irreverently described by a contemporary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "...a practical joke of God"<sup>8</sup>, such the extent of disbelief and generalized meaninglessness of the age. Change was no longer viewed as achievement, as opportunity or progress but as an object of fear, displacement, inciting an acute sense of angst. How was one to stab away at the gelatinous mass of popular indifference, sentimentality, and complacency? To cut through the vast pervasive resistance of the psyche and of society to forsake manmade shibboleths in favor of the millennial expectation, "a new heaven and a new earth"? Hope was thin and the sleep of reason was producing monsters.<sup>9</sup> Such was the climate that greeted the Master as he sailed "on the steamship Cedric, on March 25, 1912, sailing via Naples direct to New York where He arrived on April 11"<sup>10</sup> a crusade made more difficult by the fact, as mentioned earlier, that American soil was fertile but with no corresponding drops of concession from the gathering clouds above. And yet, this historical figure, this 'Oriental' in "an outburst of activity", "brought the universal divine principles to bear on the exigencies of the age." This Hegelian notion that "The great man of his time is

he who expresses the will and the meaning of that time, and then brings it to completion; he acts according to the inner spirit and essence of his time, which he realizes.”<sup>11</sup>—is one of the many factors which makes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the historical figure He is, aside from the overarching, eugenic and superhuman factor of His lasting capacity to inspire and mobilize the masses. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s profound love for humanity and his quintessential goodness made His leadership “a public transaction with history”, exemplifying, in consummate fashion, the proposition that good individuals can and do make a positive difference to history which brings us more closely to the subject-matter of today.

## Human Nature

Nothing is more fiercely contested than the topic of human nature, with man resting, on the one hand, on “*the apex of creation*” and yet, on the other, precariously lodged lower than angels—an innate, God-given bi-formity the characterization of which manifests itself as much for the good as for the bad, depending on which horse is commanding our chariot, the horse of spirit or appetite.<sup>12</sup> Goodness is fragile and, therefore, precious precisely because of the kind of creatures we human beings are and the fact does remain that we may be incapable of sympathy, unmoved by pain, uncaring of freedom, and—no less significant—unable to reason, argue, disagree or concur. This does not really help the cause of goodness in any way nor build a very strong case for the altruistic, selfless man. It also indicates our vulnerability in a life that is “nasty, brutish and short”,<sup>13</sup> to cite the memorable observation of Hobbes in *The Leviathan*. Yet preferable it is to face this disturbing adversity (“The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart’ Albert Camus from his short essay on *The Myth of Sisyphus*)<sup>14</sup> and contribute powerfully to understanding and responding to the challenge than escape to a life of isolation and eliminate the quality of human life



altogether. And yet skepticism about humanity is chillingly rooted and gives us enough reason to worry especially on occasions such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the West at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where many appropriate moments such as civil unrest, poverty, genocide<sup>15</sup> and other atrocities gave us cause to engage in critical, not to say pessimistic, examinations of what was happening and what needed to be done.<sup>16</sup> Is it through the pursuit of reason, *ráhi `aql*, the way to preserve goodness? Can critical scrutiny and the determining influence of intellect rather than goodwill prevent catastrophes? Is a smarter person a better person? (Such a question ignores the serious possibility that some people are easily over-convinced by their own reasoning and ignore counter-arguments that may yield opposite conclusions). Or like Hume, take the emotions to be both important and influential and argue that our first perception of right and wrong cannot be the object of reason, but of immediate sense and feeling. Or be conciliatory in asserting that both reason and sentiment concur in almost all moral determinations and conclusions, such as the case of blatant injustice to the Bahá'ís in Iran, where we are drawn by both indignation and argument. Frustration and ire motivate us and yet ultimately we have to rely, for both public sympathy, assessment and effectiveness, on reasoned argument to obtain plausible and sustaining understanding of the underlying cause even though what feeds the injustice in Iran is implausible, voluble and crude. Or is not there the danger that centering discussion of moral rectitude on the dichotomy of thought versus feeling ignores the importance of social processes. We may do the right thing and yet we may not succeed or, conversely, a good result may come about not because we aimed at it, but for some other, perhaps even an accidental, reason and we were deceived into thinking that we were behaving correctly.<sup>17</sup> What, in the end, is the ultimate arbitrator of ethical beliefs? Is there, behind human practices, some higher tribunal to which we have recourse such as, say, shamefulness, learnt punitively by the rod of God's displeasure? But we are told by Bahá'u'lláh, in His last major work, that such a sense of shame, is not a universal human attribute. "*Indeed,*

*there existeth in man a faculty which deterreth him from, and guardeth him against, whatever is unworthy and unseemly, and which is known as his sense of shame. This, however, is confined to but a few; all have not possessed, and do not possess, it.*<sup>18</sup> Or then is it motivation? That we find meaning not in anything objective, but in something internal to ourselves, that it is our desires that determine whether what we do is worthwhile. Anything is meaningful if we want to do it, independently of whether it is reasonable or not to do so.

While such questions clearly illustrate the complexity and range of discussion regarding human nature and the difficulty in capturing it in precise axiomatic terms yet the need for explicitness, to the extent that can be achieved, even in looser terms, must have dialogic merit. We cannot seek the same answer to two rather different questions: what would be good or rational for a person to do? and what would the person actually do? Are we not asking too much from people who may fail to understand adequately the nature of the uncertainty that may be involved in deciding on what to expect in any specific case based on the evidence available? Are we not asking too much from people with 'weakness of will'<sup>19</sup> or with incorrigible and innate selfishness?

An impressive start to lifting this cloud of bewilderment may well be the remark of Augustine in his book *Of True Religion*: "Refuse to go outside...Return to yourself. Truth dwells within."<sup>20</sup> We shall look, then, deeper within ourselves, pause and think, and ask very quickly: is there a biological case for human selfishness? Humans, together with other apes and primates, are social mammals and among social mammals it is relatively easy to find examples of animal behavior that are anything but selfish.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most famous is the way in which dolphins help its injured members to survive. If a dolphin is so badly wounded that it cannot come to the surface of the water to breathe, other dolphins will group themselves around their wounded companion, pushing it upward to the air. Wolves and wild dogs bring meat back to members of the pack who were not in

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on the kill. Chimpanzees lead each other to trees that have ripe fruit. When hawks fly overhead, blackbirds and thrushes give warning calls, helping other members of the flock to escape, but perhaps at some risk of attracting the hawk to themselves. And still many other examples. But we humans may also be proud to display even higher altruism than our furry friends, beginning with the family. The readiness of parents to put the interests of their children ahead of their own interests is a striking counter-example to the general thesis that people are selfish. John Stuart Mill described the family 'as a school of... loving forgetfulness of self'.<sup>22</sup> The duties of benevolence to our kin—brothers, sisters and more distant relatives—is also widely accepted in every society and prominent not to mention caring for others.<sup>23</sup> In brief, human beings often are selfish—altruism it is said, is really self-interest on disguise—but our biology does not force us to be so. Recently, and ever-more increasingly, we come across research that is giving us a different side to the story. These tell us about sympathy, empathy, cooperation, and collaboration, written by scientists, evolutionary psychologists, neuroscientists and others. One such author argues that in pursuing our self-interested goals we often have an incentive to repay kindness with kindness so others will do the same when we are in need. We have an incentive to establish a reputation for niceness so that people would want to work with us. We have an incentive to work in teams because cohesive groups thrive and egocentrism does not. Cooperation is as central to evolution as mutation and selection.<sup>24</sup> In short, we must avoid a miniaturized view of human nature and not allow reasoned ground for behavior, alone, to be our focus. If we are to make properly considered ultimate choices, we must become aware of, and feel for, the ethical ramifications of the way we live. Only then is it possible to make human goodness a more conscious and coherent part of everyday life. Is there a model, a cosmos of human goodness, to which we may turn for absolute moral wisdom which allows our limited human intellect to frame a perfect ideal of rational conduct not foredoomed to inevitable failure or is every agent actuated only by self-interest, that

the contemporary human being is 'for the most part an impure egoist, a mixed utilitarian'?<sup>25</sup>

## Images of Perfection

In the figure of 'Abdu'l-Bahá we can look to the world outside and follow a living, historical, 'perfect Exemplar', this "...most perfect bounty... sent...down in the form of a human temple."<sup>26</sup> Images of perfection distilled in one man. We can observe and marvel at this '*Orb of the beauty of the great*'. 'Abdu'l-Bahá embodied, in both content and style, a unique conception of human excellence. While not free from the vulnerability of human lives to fortune, while not protected from the mutability of circumstance, while never distant from the existence of opposition and conflict in His commitments, while consistently challenged by the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation, His was a human story which, while sufficiently distant from our experience, counts as a shared extension of all of humanity's experience. His life was rooted firmly in the divine, and as such God-loved, and thusly, immortal as ever a human being can be. We turn to the wise not in despair, grappling as we are with the widespread loss of religious faith, but to try and be as they were, to follow what they preached, to look to what they saw, and as such, gain insight into our own intuitions about living the life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá led His life in a way for us to learn and study the morally salient, that hunting and trapping are inappropriate aims of a human life, that human excellence in its nature is other-related and social and that the true value of our rationality lies in openness, receptivity and wonder. As interpreters of His life, we must respond emotionally. He would like to see that our cognitive activity, as we explore the True Exemplar, centrally involves emotional response. That we discover what we think about Him partly by noticing how we feel about Him. In other words, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the compass which is to guide our personal

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investigation into our own emotional geography as a major part of our search for self-knowledge. But His sympathy, generosity, and public spirit<sup>27</sup> did not inhibit 'Abdu'l-Bahá from pressing for social improvement through systematic reasoning. His works continue to remain unexhausted, subject to perennial reassessment. His translucent art of writing was purified from non-intellectual appeals and His talks clear and recognizable with a philosophical style at once content-neutral, at once speculative, and mostly practical. He was uniquely able to display opposed conceptions of human reason, ranging from abstract contemplation to a versatile and resourceful type of intelligence that concerns itself with mutable objects in a world of concrete particulars.

'Abdu'l-Bahá is a meticulously crafted working-through of a unique human story, **'abundant**, spacious, and **immeasurable**<sup>28</sup> designed to bring certain themes and questions to our attention. His story advances our conversation so we may complete those life projects necessary to complete His. He did not teach us to seek the solitary good life but the good life with friends, loved ones, and community. He did not teach us to consider the intellect as pure sunlight, but as flowing water, given and received. He did not teach us leadership as statecraft but as service; it is the servant leader, with his humility, that shows the way, sets the patterns and holds society together and when these patterns disappear so too does society, slowly. Progress stands or falls on the quality of servant leadership.<sup>29</sup> Without servant leadership movement in history is short-lived. Humility, the willingness to lead and encourage from behind, was what generated such strong emotions of respect and esteem for 'Abdu'l-Bahá and which form part of Aristotelean *philia*, loving the whole of another person for that person's own sake. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's humility and self-effacement generates a strong desire to be more like him. This principle works powerfully in society, where shared public models of excellence play an important motivating role, and *philia* has greater motivational power through emulation that cannot be replaced by

a more general social modeling. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example excels all other models of goodness precisely because of the strength of emulation and aspiration that is generated by the presence of this uniquely loved person who never failed to endorse the value of the virtue humility. "...under no circumstances, whatsoever,' He says 'should we assume any attitude except that of gentleness and humility."<sup>30</sup>

We are giving this perception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, both cognitive and affective, to encourage a reflective look at this model of goodness and to enhance understanding of our own character and aspirations, improving self-criticism and sharpening judgment. We are not here endorsing Carlyle's 'Great Man Theory'<sup>31</sup> nor the cult of personality—a malady of modern times—but strongly believing, through the evidence of personal accounts, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, while never a political figure in the usual sense of the word, nor just an outstanding social and intellectual leader, was the perfect representative of a creator of social forces which change the shape of the world and the thoughts of men. This is the meaning of the being called genius, where both the intellectual and the generative component co-exist<sup>32</sup>. The notion of genius is best begun with St. Augustine's statement: "Quid est genius? [What is genius?] "Deus qui praepositus est ac vim habet omnium rerum gignendarum..."[God hath purposed it to be He who regenerates all things]<sup>33</sup> This reminds us of Bahá'u'lláh's own words on the regenerating power of His Son: "*Render thanks unto God, O people, for His appearance; for verily He is the most great Favour unto you, the most perfect bounty upon you; and through Him every mouldering bone is quickened. Whoso turneth towards Him hath turned towards God, and whoso turneth away from Him hath turned away from My Beauty, hath repudiated My Proof, and transgressed against Me. He is the Trust of God amongst you, His charge within you, His manifestation unto you and His appearance among His favoured servants . . . We have sent Him down in the form of a human temple. Blest and sanctified be God Who createth whatsoever He willeth through His inviolable His infallible decree. They who deprive themselves of the shadow of the Branch,*

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*are lost in the wilderness of error are consumed by the heat of worldly desires, and are of those who will assuredly perish.*<sup>34</sup>

### The Ultimate Criterion of Goodness

There is this common fault of minds for which the vision of life becomes an obsession to group things either into a larger mystery or into a larger library where everything is diligently, but separately, catalogued and labeled rather than brought into a unified whole. The historical figure of 'Abdu'l-Bahá avoids either extreme because He is truth in the appearance—His perfection dismisses the objectionable dilemma of us having to adopt a standpoint of perfection which purports to survey all lives neutrally and coolly from a viewpoint outside our own particular life which will immediately stand accused of failure of reference, for in removing ourselves from all worldly experience we are also removing ourselves from the bases of discourse about the world. With 'Abdu'l-Bahá we do not need to take up a stand outside of the conditions of our normal human life but base our judgment on His long and broad and deep experience of practical and spiritual wisdom. In this sense, our ultimate criterion of goodness cannot be theoretical but practical. But is it practical? This is a legitimate question if the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not attainable with our capabilities. The life of a divine being might be ever so admirable but the study of his life, insofar as it lies beyond our capabilities, is not pertinent to the practical claims of ethics. Our humble response is this: make goodness, at the very minimum, to be an acceptable life that we can live. Use the historical figure of 'Abdu'l-Bahá both as a predictive device (trying to guess what He would likely do in a given situation) and as a criterion of goodness (assessing what norms must be followed for our choice to be seen as good). In brief, deliberately maximize behavior, that which you are trying to promote in terms of human excellence, and actually do it. As Aristotle would say: "Excellence is a state of character (*hexis*) concerned with choice...determined by a person of practical

wisdom.”<sup>35</sup> In his view, the person of practical wisdom is a person of good character. There is a statement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá akin to this. “... *the happiness and greatness, the rank and station, the pleasure and peace, of an individual have never consisted in his personal wealth, but rather in his excellent character, his high resolve, the breadth of his learning, and his ability to solve difficult problems.*”<sup>36</sup>

But as mentioned earlier, rational choice of what to do is not a predictor of what is actually chosen. The faculty of will has to be considered. Free will makes moral responsibility possible and, consequently, makes it as important as the faculty of discrimination or perception, the most valuable manifestation of our practical rationality. We may be intellectually ready to follow ‘Abdu’l-Bahá but our will is not willing. Not just the going but the arriving also requires nothing other than the willingness to go. Our will cannot be split in two. What is necessary, paraphrasing Augustine, is willing strongly and wholly, not the turning and twisting one way and another of a will half-wounded, struggling with one part—the beast—rising up while the other part—the angel—falls down. The beast in this case being the rational appetite (*affectio commodi*) to will for one’s own advantage and the angel in us, our inclination for justice (*affectio justitiae*). The first explains our inclination toward what is good for ourselves, that which most contributes to our own happiness; the second is to do good regardless of whether it has any connection to ourselves, the inclination for justice which resists pure self-interest. It is the latter that must be developed as it grounds our crucial capacity to love God and for His own sake rather for our own reward.

How is our will trained? Our will is shaped by habitual decisions. Acquiring the right sort of habit from an early age is very important, indeed all-important. All the human virtues, in the final analysis, are dispositions of the will so human goodness requires that the will be infused with virtue. A will that has been badly habituated from a



young age can find itself in the iron grip of necessity making it very difficult for us to transform on our own. The importance of habit may be summarized by Aristotle's expression of the point: "the Law has no power towards obedience but that of habit".<sup>37</sup> People have a natural capacity for good character, and this capacity is developed through practice. A capacity does not come first (*i.e.*, it does not precede an action)—it is developed through practice. Habits are developed through acting; a person's character is the structure of habits and is formed by what that person does. Once brought up in good habits, ethical values are in us: they form the internal structure of our nature, making us psychologically stable against any events that the world can devise. Thusly, human virtue becomes incorruptible. Taking action inconsistent with core values is irresponsible and undisciplined.

In the Bahá'í teachings, however, there is an added dimension to habit formation and that is the power of divine assistance and grace. "The labor is beyond me', Augustine cried, 'until you open the way."<sup>38</sup> This role of grace in perfecting virtue is central to Bahá'í teachings hence the importance of prayer and fasting, in particular, and our spiritualization in general. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says "*that prayer is indispensable and obligatory, and man under no pretext whatever is excused therefrom unless he be mentally unsound or an insurmountable obstacle prevent him.*"<sup>39</sup> As to observing the fast Bahá'u'lláh tells us that it purifies our souls and rids us of all attachment to anyone but God. This is supremely important if we wish to acquire divine grace. Consequently, we, as Bahá'ís, do not believe in failure of will but in a flawed disposition of will which makes it impossible for us to be efficacious as moral human beings. To live in a state of grace we need spiritual receptivity and volition. We have to be as talented in our spiritual architecture as engineers are clever in their design. The colossal gossamer tracery of iron called the Eiffel Tower, at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Paris, the world's tallest structure at 1,050 feet, weighs at more than 10,000 tons and yet it exerts a pressure of only 57 pounds per square

inch upon the ground!<sup>40</sup> A titanic grace amidst sinuating, intricate, testing and opposing metallic knots and bolts. Similarly the principles of magnetism, constructive interaction and testing are central to our process of spiritualization.<sup>41</sup> Action (práxis) carried out in a spirit of devotion and consecration attracts a great spiritual force just as in the mundane world certain arrangements of atoms attract the force of magnetism. "Today, as never before, the magnet which attracts blessings from on high is teaching the Faith of God."<sup>42</sup> In another place, the Guardian says, "*consecration to the glorious task of spreading the Faith and living the Bahá'í life ... creates the magnet for the Holy Spirit.*"<sup>43</sup> Constructive interaction, the second principle, is persisting with the efforts despite the tidal wave of lethargy and apathy. One has only to begin. "Abdu'l-Bahá reportedly said "*Make a start, make a beginning. You will attract spiritual powers. This will reinforce your endeavors. You will do even more, attract even greater spiritual powers...*"<sup>44</sup> By making an effort we attract even more power, which enables us to bear more weight and responsibility and so it builds up from there, to fight irrespective of the consequences:

*"And do not think of the fruit of action.*

*Fare forward.*

...

*Not fare well,*

*But fare forward, voyagers.*

T.S. Eliot 'Four Quartets'—The Dry Salvages Part III.

The third principle is that of testing and this is inevitable. "We are tested to see if we really have the fortitude, the strength, the determination to persist in the face of adversity, in the face of distraction, in the face of ridicule, in the face of the desire to relax, to avoid the hardship and the effort that is involved."<sup>45</sup> To emerge from all this whole, good and strong willed requires the mind of an architect, the creativity of the engineer and the strength and perseverance of the construction worker.

## Closing Remarks

The Bahá'í Faith spans just two lifetimes; it is too green a plant. It has yet to be nurtured, to grow, to mature, to become a "model for study". Can its destiny of ever flourishing to be the spiritual commonwealth of the globe be challenged at any time? Religion has bestowed human safety and human beneficence but it also has shocked for its repellent violence, crudity, dangerous lies and spectacle of decline. Religious decline is largely self-inflicted and the answer to the question of whether the Bahá'í Faith shall emerge as the global religion lies in us. Why else would the Báb mention in the Bayán "...that every religion of the past was fit to become universal. The only reason why they failed to attain that mark was the incompetence of their followers."<sup>46</sup> Bad soil, receiving opportunities from God, may yield a good crop. Good soil, however, if it fails to get what it needs, will give a bad crop. We must tend to our garden and preserve internal goodness by pulling out the fleshly weeds. Religion depends on the nourishment of human goodness to thrive and on the incorruptibility of a noble character. And the greatest part of a noble character is guilelessness, openness, simplicity and with the departure of openness comes a loss of goodness. If I question everything and look for betrayal instead of consolation behind every expression of love, I am, quite simply, no longer a noble person, perhaps no longer a person at all. We need religion, its '*laws and immutable norms born in the airy heavens*' to effect a righting of the balance when a human requirement is violated from the interference of the world. But religion also needs us; it rests on the stability of good actions in times of adversity, strong enough to withstand the blast of chance events, impurity and betrayal, and we must defend it against the vulnerability to rottenness when trust or the covenant is violated, as vulnerable as a child's trusting simplicity. All of human life and its institutions stand in need of a proper rhythm and harmonious adjustment; the adjustment is not natural (it requires the intervention of habit, discipline and external assistance to reach its natural ends) but the need for it is. Moral training

promotes healthy and natural growth—it is the straightening of the tree with moral excellence the embodiment of its straightness. Be it action, rule or disposition, moral excellence remains the culmination of a conscious and comprehensive spiritual outcome where eye, mind and heart are not at 'mortal war' but conquering.<sup>47</sup> However good we make ourselves true goodness remains a free gift of God.

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NOTES

- 1 "You will...also learn the opinion of mortals, in which there is no true confidence." Parmenides, quoted in Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, revised edition 2001, page 241

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- 2 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979 second printing, p 282
  - 3 Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991 first pocket-size edition, page 85
  - 4 Quoted in the Foreword of "*The Cycles of American History*", Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., page xii
  - 5 The Calvinists in New England self-proclaimed their journey as the elect to salvation beyond history: "Without doubt, the Lord Jesus hath a peculiar respect unto this place, and for this people." Quoted in "*The Cycles of American History*", Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., page 13
  - 6 Edward H. Carr, "*What is History*", Random House, 1961, Page 168
  - 7 *Ibid*, page 54
  - 8 Franz Kafka (1883–1924) see <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/world>
  - 9 Even modern and contemporary art was producing ever eccentric styles. To illustrate the hypocrisy and double standards of society, Pablo Picasso painted the famous *The Red Armchair*, in 1931, where a face appears with its profile and front together for the first time. The oil and enamel painting is currently on display at the Institute of Arts of Chicago.
  - 10 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979 second printing, p 281
  - 11 From G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Law* in Jacob Loewenberg (ed.), *Hegel: Selections* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 461.
  - 12 We are, of course, referring to Socrates' argument that a good person is one who has the parts of the soul in the proper relationship to each other. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato puts forward the same view by picturing reason as a charioteer, commanding the two horses of spirit and appetite. Socrates and Plato held that nobody does wrong willingly; people do wrong only if their reason is unable to control their spirit (emotions like anger or pride) or their appetite (for example greed or lust). The limitation of the rational actor was fiercely advocated by Aristotle as we shall see later.
  - 13 Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-contents.html>, Chapter XIII
  - 14 <http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/00/pwillen1/lit/msysip.htm>
  - 15 In the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels to the West, the only genocide in the modern sense of the word, (the term first appeared in 1941), would

- be the colonial administration of King Leopold II of Belgium in his Congo Free State in the years 1895–1915 where the Congo population was decimated in the millions for slave labor. The first genocide of the 20th century began a few years after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels to the West, in 1915, when there began the systematic persecution of Armenians in Turkey.
- 16 Although the lengths with which such pessimism perdures may be more wearing than worrying. W.B. Yeats wrote on the margin of his copy of Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*, "But why does Nietzsche think the night has no stars, nothing but bats and owls and the insane moon?" quoted in Amartya Sen's brilliant book *The Idea of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 2009, page 36. Yeats' poem *The Second Coming* is particularly auspicious written as it was soon after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the West, in 1919, and used as an allegory to describe the atmosphere in post-war Europe. "Surely some revelation is at hand/ Surely the Second Coming is at hand/ The Second Coming..."
- 17 We may wish to refer to the existence of the 'stochastic' arts, e.g. medicine, navigation, where the outcomes of following known and perfected scientific techniques do not necessarily produce the desired outcome.
- 18 Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, page 27.
- 19 The ancient Greeks called it *akrasia*, where ordinary deliberative rationality breaks down. This was Aristotle's chief criticism with the Socrates and Plato doctrine which said that to know what is good is already to seek to bring it about. For example, we eat a bagel before running knowing full well that it will give us a cramp. We are swayed by the appetitive desire the bagel arouses. In this role of the passions, knowing what is right is not sufficient for doing what is right.
- 20 Quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, Ed. A.S. McGrade, Cambridge University Press, 2003, page 208.
- 21 For a complete discussion on this subject, see Peter Singer, *How Are We To Live: Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*, Prometheus Books, 1995, Chapter 5.
- 22 *Ibid*, page 107.
- 23 There is this extraordinary telling account of an Italian chemist, Primo Levi, sent to Auschwitz because he was Jewish and survived to write *If This is a Man*. As a slave on rations that were not sufficient to sustain life, he was saved from death by Lorenzo, a non-Jewish Italian who was working for the Germans as a civilian on an industrial project for which the labour of the prisoners was being used. Here is an extract: "In concrete terms it amounts to little: an Italian civilian worker brought me a piece of bread and the remainder of his ration every day for six months; he gave me a vest of his, full of patches; he wrote a postcard

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on my behalf and brought me the reply. For all this he neither asked nor accepted any reward, because he was good and simple and did not think that one did good for a reward...I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material AID, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror; something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving." Quoted in Peter Singer, *How Are We To Live: Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*, Prometheus Books, 1995, Page 159.

- 24 Martin Novack, author of *SuperCooperators*, published in the Tuesday, May 17th, 2011 edition of the New York Times newspaper, page A25. The article, written by David Brooks, cites other works of a similar vein, recently being published.
- 25 The economist Francis Edgeworth, quoted in Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 2009, page 184.
- 26 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979 second printing, p 242.
- 27 It is interesting that Adam Smith, the father of modern economics, states these very reasons for going against the dictates of self-love. See his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Clarendon Press, 1976, Page 191.
- 28 Hasan Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, Paperback, Oxford, UK, George Ronald, 2001, page 1.
- 29 The phrase "*Servant Leadership*" was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader*, an essay that he first published in 1970. In that essay, he said: "The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature." "The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?" Refer to the site [www.greenleaf.org](http://www.greenleaf.org) for articles and books on this very special subject of leadership.

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- 30 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 128. A world-wide IBM Survey in 2010 asked over 3,000 undergraduate and graduate students their view of future leaders and their qualities. Humility as a virtue of the CEO came last. See "Capitalising on Complexity—Insights from the Global CEO Study", IBM Institute for Business Value, 2010.
- 31 Carlyle comments in his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* that "The history of the world is but the biography of great men," reflecting his belief that heroes shape history through both their personal attributes and divine inspiration. This, however, must be viewed in the context that the natural social process of civilization brings forth new ideas in specific stages of history which cannot be explained simply in terms of the revolt of one or the other individual. The actions of heroes were not of individuals acting alone in a vacuum: they acted in the context and under the stimulus of a social past. The Great Man theory also reduces the quality of explaining how and why change actually occurs. The process of change is better described as a "clash of wills out of which there emerges something that no man probably ever willed". Carlyle slightly contradicts himself with this passage taken from his masterful *The French Revolution* published in 1837: "Hunger and nakedness, and nightmare oppression lying heavy on twenty-five million hearts; this, not the wounded vanities or contradicted philosophies of philosophical Advocates, rich Shopkeepers, rural Noblesse, was the prime mover in the French Revolution." Book 3 III Chapter 3.3.1 page 426.
- 32 The original Greek of the term genius does indeed mean the 'to be born' or 'to come into being'. See Henry Hitchings, *The Secret Life of Words*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York, 2008, Chapter 6, Page 110.
- 33 Quoted in C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, Oxford University Press, 1968, Appendix I, Page 361.
- 34 Bahá'u'lláh, quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 135
- 35 Quoted in Martha Nussbaum's "*The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*", Cambridge University Press, 1986, revised edition 2001, pages 298–299. By practical wisdom is meant to structure our lives and commitments so that in the ordinary course of events we will be able to stay clear of serious conflict.
- 36 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1970, pages 23–24.
- 37 <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.2.two.html>, Part VIII
- 38 Augustine's *Confessions* [XI 22] quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, Ed. A.S. McGrade, Cambridge University Press, 2003, page 222.



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- 39 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1953, page 368.
- 40 Mentioned in a magnificent photographic publication "*Spectacular Paris*", Universe Publishing, New York, 2008, page 12.
- 41 These ideas are taken exactly as presented in a talk by Peter Khan entitled *The Nature and Challenge of Tests*, at the Bahá'í Temple in Wilmette, September 23rd, 1995. The talk may be accessed by visiting the site
- 42 From a letter 28 March 1953 on behalf Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, cited in *Compiation of Compilations vol II*, p. 223
- 43 From a letter dated 18 December 1953 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, cited in *High Endeavours: Messages to Alaska* p. 55)
- 44 From a talk by Peter Khan entitled *The Nature and Challenge of Tests*, at the Bahá'í Temple in Wilmette, September 23rd, 1995
- 45 *ibid*
- 46 From a letter dated 20 February 1932 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, cited in the *Compilation on Living the Life*, Paragraph # 1275.
- 47 A scholar at Stanford University, ironically, the same University which 'Abdu'l-Bahá famously visited some 100 years earlier (more precisely, October 8th, 1912), wrote in a recent feature of *The Economist*: "... though hundreds of new religions appear and disappear every year, it has been centuries since a truly new great religion has appeared on this planet. We are overdue for a new god." (Paul Saffo "*The World in 2011*", *The Economist*, page 112). The opacity of this unfortunate remark, this splendid exaggeration of omission of the Faith Bahá'í, we may dismiss as the rash sally of a careless writer but for the spot from which this statement was made, our disappointment becomes more evident. A blow to scholarship it is but of greater damage is this indictment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "*It is the light of the intellect which gives us knowledge and understanding, and without this light the physical eyes would be useless* [Paris Talks - 'Abdu'l-Bahá]. Nietzsche may be excused for his premature exaltation: "*Almost 2,000 years and no new God*" [The Anti-Christ Page 19] born as he was in the very year in which the Bahá'í Era began and dying only a few years after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, but our Stanford professor writing in late November of last year [2010] had only to use readily accessible sources to discover that the Bahá'í religion was listed in *The Britannica Book of the Year* (1992) as the second most widespread of the world's independent religions in terms of the number of countries represented.

## “I Know Not How to Sing Thy Praise” Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá’u’lláh

Wolfgang Klebel

This prayer by Bahá’u’lláh<sup>1</sup> gives access to the basic question of theology about “God” for this day and age, in which practical and theoretical atheism and irreligion have captured at least half of mankind, not only in the East but also in the West. It presents an answer to the question how to believe in God today and how to understand words like the following in another prayer by Bahá’u’lláh: “*O Thou Who art the most manifest of the manifest and the most hidden of the hidden!*” (PM 248)

In these reflections the four modes of Revelation described by the Báb are used to understand the theological location of the many prayers of the Bahá’í Manifestations. According to the Báb, prayer is the second mode of Revelation after the Verses of God. Here the language of revelation is uttered in the voice of the Prophet Who now speaks in the station of the creation, addressing the Creator with an attitude of servitude and effacement (an affirmation of “Thou art God”)<sup>2</sup>.

The other two modes of revelation are commentaries and scientific educational discourse. Theological inquiry can benefit from this distinction insofar as the prayers of Bahá’u’lláh are a valid source of theological information, giving the Bahá’í theology a special advantage in the sense of Hans Urs von Balthazar’s distinction between “kneeling” and “sitting” theology.<sup>3</sup> This distinction between the two modes of theology refers to a theology in its connection to contemplative prayer, on the one hand, and to a theology as scientific and educational understanding of the Revelation, on the other. This

distinction can benefit the student of theology and clarify issues, previously not clear.

The reflections on this prayer of Bahá'u'lláh brings a number of important questions to light. What is the difference between not knowing how to praise and describe God in the Bahá'í Faith, and the denial of the existence of God in atheism? What is the relation of the Manifestation to God? Consequently, how do these questions affect religion in today's world? What is the meaning of modern atheism and agnosticism and in what way has the understanding of God changed during the last centuries? Does theology today have to be a "post-atheistic" theology and has any previous theology become inadequate? What is the theological position of the praying person and what is prayer and what is it not? What should we pray for and what is the effect of prayer?

According to the Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation, every revelation responds to the needs of the time; every revelation abolishes, conserves, and expands the previous revelations. Therefore, trying to find new theological insights from Bahá'í prayers is a legitimate scholarly task and this paper attempts to serve as an example of this process. Consequently, Bahá'í theology can legitimately be called progressive theology as it documents the progress of understanding the Bahá'í Revelation throughout the time given to this Revelation.

These reflections have a personal aspect. Bahá'í prayers are used by the faithful as private prayers. It appears to be the first time in the history of religion, that the prayers of the Manifestation are used by the faithful in this personal way. The following reflections helped the writer and, hopefully, will help the reader to improve their devotional life and to understand what is expressed when reciting or chanting Bahá'í prayers. Any theological inquiry needs to be applicable in the life of the faithful; otherwise, *"such academic pursuits as begin and end in words alone have never been and will never be of any worth."* (TB 169)

Let us now turn to Bahá'u'lláh's prayer which is divided into four paragraphs. The first describes the Not-knowing of how to sing God's praise, how to describe God's glory and how to call God's name. In this paragraph, it is emphasized that no creature can do this. This impotence is extended to the issue of praising God's essential oneness, which is included in this declaration of impotence, of Not-Knowing. Any attempt to do this is described as vain imagination.

In the second paragraph the impossibility of knowing God is again pointed out, but then the mercy of God is depicted, which allows the servant to praise God. It presents a colorful picture of this praise. Further, it is noted that this praise will result in the believers attaining what God has destined for them through divine will and purpose.

In the third paragraph, the total impotence of all created beings, even of the Manifestations to praise God, is again declared. Following this, it is explained that it is God—the all Powerful and Supreme Ruler—Who draws the believer towards Him.

In the last paragraph this relationship between God and the human person is again the topic and it is emphasized the personal characteristics necessary to appeal to God's mercy and grace. Moreover, it is again pointed out that God is the cause of the prayer, which allows the servant to reach the heights to which he aspires. The closure of the prayer again lauds God's forgiving mercy and bountiful gift.

### Bahá'u'lláh's Prayer

*All-praise be to Thee, O Lord, my God! I know not how to sing Thy praise, how to describe Thy glory, how to call upon Thy Name. If I call upon Thee by Thy Name, the All-Possessing, I am compelled to recognize that He Who holdeth in His hand the immediate destinies of all created things is but a vassal*

*dependent upon Thee, and is the creation of but a word proceeding from Thy mouth. And if I proclaim Thee by the name of Him Who is the All-Compelling, I readily discover that He is but a suppliant fallen upon the dust, awe-stricken by Thy dreadful might, Thy sovereignty and power. And if I attempt to describe Thee by glorifying the oneness of Thy Being, I soon realize that such a conception is but a notion which mine own fancy hath woven, and that Thou hast ever been immeasurably exalted above the vain imaginations which the hearts of men have devised.*

*The glory of Thy might beareth me witness! Whoso claimeth to have known Thee hath, by virtue of such a claim, testified to his own ignorance; and whoso believeth himself to have attained unto Thee, all the atoms of the earth would attest his powerlessness and proclaim his failure. Thou hast, however, by virtue of Thy mercy that hath surpassed the kingdoms of earth and heaven, deigned to accept from Thy servants the laud and honor they pay to Thine own exalted Self, and hast bidden them celebrate Thy glory, that the ensigns of Thy guidance may be unfurled in Thy cities and the tokens of Thy mercy be spread abroad among Thy nations, and that each and all may be enabled to attain unto that which Thou hast destined for them by Thy decree, and ordained unto them through Thine irrevocable will and purpose.*

*Having testified, therefore, unto mine own impotence and the impotence of Thy servants, I beseech Thee, by the brightness of the light of Thy beauty, not to refuse Thy creatures attainment to the shores of Thy most holy ocean. Draw them, then, O my God, through the Divine sweetness of Thy melodies, towards the throne of Thy glory and the seat of Thine eternal holiness. Thou art, verily, the Most Powerful, the Supreme Ruler, the Great Giver, the Most Exalted, the Ever-Desired.*

## Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

*Grant, then, O my God, that Thy servant who hath turned towards Thee, hath fixed his gaze upon Thee, and clung to the cord of Thy mercifulness and favor, may be enabled to partake of the living waters of Thy mercy and grace. Cause him, then, to ascend unto the heights to which he aspireth, and withhold him not from that which Thou dost possess. Thou art, verily, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Bountiful (PM 122–124).*

Here follows the commentary sentence by sentence, interrupted by personal reflections and theological comments.

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*All-praise be to Thee, O Lord, my God!*

#### **Personal Reflection**

This prayer starts with an invocation of God in which the approach to God is a personal and direct address: “O Lord, my God.” This is a conventional way of addressing God, common to the religions of the past. There is no doubt expressed to whom this prayer is directed, no doubt that it articulates the dependent existence of the supplicant and no doubt that all praise and glory belongs to Him, who is addressed in this first sentence as the Lord of life, the God of creation. After this conventional introduction that places the prayer in the spiritual sphere of openness to God, we come to the surprising claim that the believer, who comes to His Lord, does not know how to do what he is attempting to do.

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*I know not how to sing Thy praise, how to describe Thy glory, how to call upon Thy Name.*

#### **Personal Reflection**

This sentence contains the main topic of the first part of the prayer. The three basic affirmations that are included in prayers of all religions

are mentioned and we are asked to admit that we “know not” how to articulate them. In other words, we do not know how to pray, how to raise our voice to God and sing His praise, how to give Him Glory and even how to call His Name. It is as if we do not know any more how to say even the Lord’s Prayer to “Our Father in Heaven.” This is the first statement and the most ominous declaration of this prayer, i.e. to have to admit that we “know not” how to pray.

It appears that after the suppliant has addressed God in the conventional manner of all religions, he stops and confesses an impotence and inability to go farther. I “know not,” I am incapable, I am helpless and I am not even able to ask for help to pray. “I know not how to call upon Thy Name.”

One of the roots of modern atheism is this “not knowing,” this agnosticism, this helplessness in the face of modern science and all the tragedies, evils and catastrophes of life. We do not know any more how to call to God, how to pray to Him and how to mention His Name. This is illustrated by a Jewish friend who lost her faith when her entire family perished in Nazi concentration camps. Even though she calls herself agnostic, she has even stated that she wished she could believe. In other words, she is one of those who no longer know how to call God’s name.

Another reason why we “know not to pray” is modern science. The knowledge of science has removed the naïve childlike ability to trust and believe in God, to accept Our Father in Heaven and to give Him glory and honor. We do not know any more to whom to direct our prayer; the God of the old religions has ceased to exist for many of us. Even many apparently religious people are really agnostics in the sense that they do not know any more how to address the God in Whom they claim to believe. Instead, they may cling to the God of their childhood, when they heard the story of Moses and

of Jesus, Mohammed, or the Buddha and when they still knew to Whom to pray.

Yet, when we go to work, when we live the modern life with all its technology and electronic equipment, do we really believe in God and pray to him in that old fashioned way? Can we? Do we thank Him for all the modern technological achievements, or is He no longer in the picture of our practical life.

Hence, it is not only the unbeliever, who was raised in atheistic Russia or China, it is not only the capitalist, whose God is money—it is everybody, who “knows not” how to praise God and sing His glory. The world today has lost its religious aura. God has been removed from this world and He seems to have lost out.<sup>4</sup> Growing numbers of people wonder “who needs Him anyway?”

Bahá'u'lláh identifies the place where the paths of believers and non-believers part: the *“dwellers of the city of self... adorning their heads and their bodies with the emblem of knowledge, have proudly rejected Thee and turned away from Thy beauty.”* (PM 77). It is clear that it is not the difficulty to know God, not the honest question about God's existence that has been raised in the last centuries, which Bahá'u'lláh deplors, rather, it is the selfishness of man, the self-centeredness of the *“dwellers of the city of self”* that creates this rejection of God's message. Additionally, it is the pride in their knowledge that prevents them from recognizing the truth of creation and turn away from Him.

To confess with Bahá'u'lláh in a prayer to God that we know not how to pray is the total opposite from the modern man who, in all his knowledge, proudly claims, yes, we do know that there is no God and we can prove scientifically that God does not exist.



While the acceptance of God's plan for man was always a challenge and was always open to rejection, now it is not only the message that is questioned, it is the One who sends the message, Whose existence is questioned. Is there a God or not is the question of our time. The two thousand year quest of Christianity to define God and religion and the numerous different ways of doing so has created this great insecurity about God's existence. Forcefully and belligerently pitting one way of defending religion against another has led to war and discord among the believers of the Messenger of love, and unity.

### Theological Comment: Modern Atheism

Karl Marx (1818–1883), the most influential of modern atheists, was not unfamiliar with the religious and philosophical issues of his time. His formulation of the question of God's existence for the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, assumed the authority of science and philosophy. It found dedicated believers all over the world, in spite of the fact that all his "scientific" predictions failed to materialize. In his early writings in 1844, Karl Marx made the following fundamental announcement: "The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man."<sup>5</sup> Man makes God, not God makes man.

Teilhard de Chardin's answers to this question present an unexpected view from which the solution needs to come. He understands Marx's point about man making God but answers it rather ingeniously through his new understanding of evolution and creation. Teilhard states "Properly speaking, God does not make: He makes things make themselves"<sup>6</sup>

One could follow Marx's statement about man making God to its logical conclusion and say that the problem is exactly this belief that "Man makes religion", because any man-made religion is restricting the conception of God as Bahá'u'lláh revealed:

*Some, deluded by their idle fancies, have conceived all created things as associates and partners of God, and imagined themselves to be the exponents of His unity. By Him Who is the one true God! Such men have been, and will continue to remain, the victims of blind imitation, and are to be numbered with them that have restricted and limited the conception of God (GWB 166).*

This verse clearly states that any attempt to draw God down into the world, which happens in pantheism and in all attempts to try “to know God” in theism, leads consequently to atheism, because it restricts and limits the conception of God.

Marx's statements were not new but followed the tradition of the French Enlightenment<sup>7</sup> and of the German Hegelian philosophical school of thought.<sup>8</sup> This atheistic and irreligious ideology in Communism and in a similar attempt in National Socialism led to all the horrendous consequences of a world without or against God, and caused one tenth of humankind to perish in wars, persecution, torture and terror. The numbers of people killed, starved or worked to death, or condemned to die during the last century is about 100 million.<sup>9</sup> The defenders of atheism never seem to even consider this historical fact.

Modern atheism has been called postulatory,<sup>10</sup> indicating that the non-existence of God has to be postulated in order to preserve the dignity of the human condition and the freedom of man. Karl Marx intended to free man from the shackles of the religion and politics of his time and anticipated a time in the future when the “free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”.<sup>11</sup> None of these developments ever took place where Marx's ideology was applied.

During the last two thousand years of Christianity, the existence of God was never really in question, even though our understanding of God has changed over time. In her book, “The History of God”,

Karen Armstrong describes the development of the understanding of God in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Her last chapter “Does God have a Future?” ends with the statement: “Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings.”<sup>12</sup>

In spite of her theologically and historically excellent analysis and her well-founded warnings about the history of religion, Karen Armstrong—in this writer’s opinion—misses the point here. Human beings cannot fill the vacuum, especially after they declared the death of God and they cannot re-create a new faith. Her statement is yet another expression of a modern woman, who wishes she could believe, but who “knows not how.”

When teaching Bahá’u’lláh’s message, we need to be cognizant of the fact that knowing God in the old way does not create a requirement for the acceptance of the Faith. It is rather the presumptuous attitude that we could and do know, that it is up to the human selfish intellect to decide whether God exists, which makes the acceptance of God’s message for our time so difficult for so many. Re-reading Bahá’u’lláh’s description of the true seeker might help us to understand the requirements of teaching and seeking. There the seeker is admonished that *“he must, before all else, cleanse his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge”* (GWB 246 passim).<sup>13</sup> If we understand our Faith correctly, it should be no more difficult to teach an atheist or agnostic, than an adherent of the previous religions and their Messengers. The reason is clear: we are not arguing about God per se, but about deficient human conceptions of God.

## Theological Comment: Apophatic Theology

It seems that any attempt “to know God” in human terms will necessarily conclude with a picture of God that reasonable thinking people today find unacceptable. That is the meaning of the famous declaration of Nietzsche about the death of God, i.e., any God, we could ever know is dead, we have killed this God.

It needs to be noted here that not-knowing God, that the fact we cannot know who God is has a long tradition in theology and is described under the term Apophatic Theology. Stephen Lambden in his paper “The Background and Centrality of Apophatic Theology in Bábí and Bahá'í Scripture” states:

The following paper will attempt to trace aspects of the history of the theological position of the incomprehensibility-unknowability of God in past major Abrahamic religions and to highlight its importance and significance for contemporary Bahá'ís.<sup>14</sup>

After describing the history of this concept in Jewish, Christian and Islamic religion (especially as expressed in the Shiite tradition), Lambden describes how this Apophatic Theology pervades all of Bahá'í Scripture. God cannot be known by His creatures, all what we know is the Revelation given us through His messengers, the Manifestations. Lambden's conclusion is:

Apophasis as unknowing can be experienced by the Bahá'í who seeks the God whose door is ever closed though ever open. Through the Manifestation of God the door to divine knowledge is eternally open. Yet mystical bewilderment before the Divine is an experience of unknowing: “*To merit the madness of love, man must abound in sanity*”. To approach

the All-Knowing human beings must be full of the ecstasy of unknowing; spiritual excitement before the Ultimate Deity.

Bahá'u'lláh in this prayer will lead to the understanding that the confession of not-knowing is the presupposition of knowing God and praising him. It is God Who in his mercy and through His manifestations has opened up the way for humans to praise God, as will be shown in the commentary below.

In this context, it is necessary to ask, “What is the relationship between modern atheism and apophatic theology?” In other words what is the difference between apophatic theology and postulatory atheism, which thinks it has negated God’s existence in order to allow man to be free and himself? What is the distinction between postulatory atheism and an apophatic theology which teaches that man knows not how to praise God and how to describe God’s glory and how to call upon God? Deciding between the two appears to be the same decision which is described in the book of Genesis when the serpent told Eve that in not serving God and not following His commands, man shall *be as gods, knowing good and evil*.

*And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:  
For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes  
shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.  
(Genesis 3:4–5)*

In fact, Adam and Eve did die, did lose the paradise and were expelled into a life that ends in death. Translating this primitive picture into our time, one could say that the same happened during the last century; atheism, instead of making man free and bringing the paradise-like new changes to earth, brought nothing but death, war and misery encompassing most of this earth. The new man, as postulated by Marx, who had celebrated the death of God and had declared the end of religion, is declaring a new “religion of atheism”—better called

“irreligion,”—yet, he did not become *as gods*, did not know all (*good and evil*), but ended up in war and destruction of human life and civilization. As Bahá'u'lláh stated: *the dust of irreligion hath enwrapped all men* (SLH 67). His interpreter Shoghi Effendi has explicated this, describing state atheism as irreligion in the last century:

From Soviet Russia a definitely anti-religious Communism is pushing west into Europe and America, East into Persia, India, China and Japan. It is an economic theory, definitely harnessed to disbelief in God. It is a religious irreligion... (WOB 1181)

And he has described it as a worldwide phenomenon, which is affecting the Western world as well, weakening the moral fiber of civilization even today:

In these days when the forces of irreligion are weakening the moral fiber, and undermining the foundations of individual morality, the obligation of chastity and holiness must claim an increasing share of the attention of the American believers, both in their individual capacities and as the responsible custodians of the interests of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. (ADJ 29)

It is the not-knowing of God that opens up the real knowledge of God, it is the apophatic theology, the theology that admits that we cannot know God, and it is the conviction that we have to give up all attempts to know God that is the presupposition of any real knowing of God. This attitude of impotence and accepted limitation, this acceptance of being created, is required, before we can know God. This was expressed by the Báb in these words:

*I have known Thee by Thy making known unto me that Thou art unknowable to anyone save Thyself.* (SWB196)

In the tradition of apophatic theology, a similar statement was made in the last century by the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), who stated

Of God we know nothing. Yet, this Not-Knowing is the Not-Knowing of God, as such, this is the beginning of our Knowing of Him.<sup>15</sup>

In the biblical thinking, which is not concerned about the essence of God, but is mainly talking about God's wisdom for this world, the fact that we cannot know God was expressed in terms of God's providence for man. Paul in Romans 11:33–35 expressed this in these words:

*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?*

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*If I call upon Thee by Thy Name, the All-Possessing, I am compelled to recognize that He Who holdeth in His hand the immediate destinies of all created things is but a vassal dependent upon Thee, and is the creation of but a word proceeding from Thy mouth*

### **Personal Reflection**

At the first reading of that prayer, I was shocked; I could not believe it and tried to interpret the following statement in any other possible way. Yet, what is said here leaves no doubt: this “not knowing” is attributed to all humans, even to the Manifestations of God.

This is the situation of the world today, where at least one third of humankind has been educated to ridicule and reject the mere idea

of God. The other two thirds have a tainted picture of what religion is. Bahá'u'lláh in this prayer does not apologize for this situation or helplessly deplore it, nor does He try to go back to the old security of knowing. He does not even try to dispute it; on the contrary, He carries the “not knowing,” of which He speaks much farther and gives it its proper place in the understanding of God. Furthermore, He includes Himself in this “not knowing.” He acknowledges this fact of “not knowing.” His understanding of God, which culminates in His and everybody else’s “not knowing” becomes a guiding light for modern man and the basis of a theology of the future.

Here Bahá'u'lláh speaks not only of you and of me, of women and man, of believers and unbelievers. Instead, he explicitly speaks of Himself; of Him, “*Who holdeth in His hand the immediate destinies of all created things.*”<sup>16</sup> Without any doubt, He includes in this “I know not” the Manifestations of God.

### Theological Comment: Manifestation of God

In these words, Bahá'u'lláh describes the Manifestation as “the creation of but a word proceeding from Thy mouth.” With this statement, He reminds us of the Prolog to the Gospel of John (1:1–3) speaking about Christ as the Word of God, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that was made.*”

What the gospel describes in a static and historical way as happening “in the beginning,” Bahá'u'lláh brings into the present and affirms that the Manifestation holds the immediate destiny of all created things in His hand: Here and now and in reality<sup>17</sup>. Given this divine power, one would expect that the Manifestations at least know God; that They for sure know how to sing His praise, describe His glory, and



call to Him upon His Name. Yet, Bahá'u'lláh clearly states that they are nothing but dependent vassals of God and created by His word. Even they participate in the “know-not” of all creation. That fact alone should give us an indication that this not-knowing is not merely a rhetorical phrase but an ontological statement, a statement that tells us something about the reality of being, i.e., of all created being.

Before God, even the Manifestation is nothing in itself, and knows nothing, except the Will of God. This understanding explains much better the agony of Christ before His crucifixion (Mathew: 36–42) than the theory of the Trinity.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, in relation to humankind, the Manifestation holds the immediate destiny of all created things in His hand.<sup>19</sup> This view of God puts God at two removes from us. Looking at the Manifestation of God—Who is the destiny of the world—we have to recognize that God is absolutely supreme above all created things and that there is no path of understanding and knowing that leads from our created existence to Him. Especially the attempts by “*dwellers of the city of self*” (PM 77) cannot ever reach this height and even the faithful and believers in the message from God have first to confess that they “*know not*”, before the understanding of God can become open to them. The only way to God is in the other direction, from God to humanity through the Manifestation.

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*And if I proclaim Thee by the name of Him Who is the All-Compelling, I readily discover that He is but a suppliant fallen upon the dust, awe-stricken by Thy dreadful might, Thy sovereignty and power.*

### **Personal Reflection**

Therefore, Bahá'u'lláh applies the same principle of I-know-not to every human being, and even to the Divine Messenger, Who, like

us, is but a suppliant, a beggar, in the dust and awe-stricken by God's might, sovereignty and power. Again, it is not the knowing, the theology, the science of the Divine, or any other sciences that allows access to God, because we "know not."

This fact has become clear during the last centuries. The more the familiar picture of the Father in Heaven faded away in the light of modern science; the more the concept of God became distant. Consequently, thinking people lost their faith in such a God. The Churches did not make this process easier. Their insistence in the old understanding and their condemnation of science and modern thought pushed many people into the denial of God<sup>20</sup>.

What Bahá'u'lláh asserts in this prayer is the opposite. God, in His eyes is not becoming smaller and fading away, rather He becomes the All-Compelling, to Whom a suppliant falls in the dust. Therefore, the know-not statement here is not a statement about God, but a statement about the futile human effort to understand God, to grasp the essence of God, or as one could say, to make a God in the image of man. It is the issue of idolatry and only the acknowledgment of God as the total Otherness and unknowable Essence can save man from at first making his own God and then, in an attempt of being honest, throwing this graven image out and proclaiming the death of God. This process is the topic in A. N. Wilson's book: *God's Funeral*, who describes the history of European atheism and modernism from Hume to Pius XI, quoting on the last page of his book Tyrrell, who stated in 1906: "One has to pass through atheism to faith; the old God must be pulverized and forgotten before the new can reveal himself to us."<sup>21</sup>

## Theological Comment: Theodicy

The question of the justification of the physical and moral evil in the creation of a good God must be raised here.<sup>22</sup> This question, why evil exists in the world cannot be solved with a God, who is made in the image of man in an unchanging world. The belief in the “Father in Heaven”, which was easily understandable two thousand years ago, cannot simply be ‘translated’ into our modern world<sup>23</sup>. How can we explain physical and especially moral evil, where the innocent are tortured, where children are abused, or die of painful diseases?

The first answer is the answer of Job. It is not for us to understand and judge: God, the All-Compelling, is greater than our imagination, so how can we understand His plans and the place of evil in the world. Yet, this answer is not satisfactory for modern reasoning. Another, more contemporary understanding of this question is to see God as the God of Evolution.<sup>24</sup> Only this view of the world as it really has evolved will make us somehow understand, what the meaning of evil in the world might be.

Evil is the price of evolution and the rebellion against this process played out in the progression of man and the world. The final answer, given to us, is the answer of the cross, of the suffering of the Messengers sent by God, indicating that the progressive revelation of God does lead to the ever-advancing civilization, but not without pain and suffering. We need to understand that the shadow of this progress is the evil, which is part of this developing, progressive world. This is expressed in another prayer of Bahá'u'lláh:

*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)*

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*And if I attempt to describe Thee by glorifying the oneness of Thy Being, I soon realize that such a conception is but a notion which mine own fancy hath woven, and that Thou hast ever been immeasurably exalted above the vain imaginations which the hearts of men have devised.*

### **Personal Reflection**

Here Bahá'u'lláh tells us that even the highest attributes we can give God are not reaching into His inaccessible essence. Even if we call God the One and we praise the Unity of God, we are only talking about a human concept, we only attempt to attribute to God something of our world; we again make our own God. As legitimate as this expression might seem, and as frequently as it is used in the Bahá'í Writings, seen in this context of human knowing, Bahá'u'lláh calls it a vain imagination designed in the hearts of man. We cannot know, we cannot praise, and we cannot call to God because we only put our imagination to work whenever we pretend to know to whom we speak.

What is required of the true seeker (GWB 264–265) is the abandonment of all his knowledge and even his wish to know and letting himself fall into the hands of God. This is the mystical aspect of faith and prayer, which, as of yet, we Bahá'ís in America have hardly touched in our devotions. To accept that even the highest expression we can make about God is nothing but a vain imagination, is difficult; it requires a detachment and purity of heart that is not easily acquired or reached fully in this world. It is with a sense of loss of our own pride in our thinking and knowing, it is with a sense of an all-embracing dedication that we can only come near to this aspiration of finding God. The purity of heart and of life, as Shoghi Effendi (ADJ 46–55) has stressed, is a precondition of recognizing this reality. The deepest expression of this truth is expressed in the mystical writings of Bahá'u'lláh, where he speaks of the lover seeking the beloved everywhere, even in the dust:

*One must judge of search by the standard of the Majnun of Love.*

*It is related that one day they came upon Majnun sifting the dust, and his tears flowing down. They said, "What doest thou?" He said, "I seek for Layli." They cried, "Alas for thee! Layli is of pure spirit, and thou seekest her in the dust!" He said, "I seek her everywhere; haply somewhere I shall find her."*

*Yea, although to the wise it be shameful to seek the Lord of Lords in the dust, yet this betokeneth intense ardor in searching. "Whoso seeketh out a thing with zeal shall find it."*

*The true seeker hunteth naught but the object of his quest, and the lover hath no desire save union with his beloved. Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifice all things (SVFV 6–8).*

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*The glory of Thy might beareth me witness!*

### **Personal Reflection**

Bahá'u'lláh returns to the beginning in this new paragraph of the prayer. While there, He addresses God by giving Him glory and praise; he calls on God to witness the fact that we know not and can never know.

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*Whoso claimeth to have known Thee hath, by virtue of such a claim, testified to his own ignorance; and whoso believeth himself to have attained unto Thee, all the atoms of the earth would attest his powerlessness and proclaim his failure.*

### **Personal Reflection**

There is no claim to know God. What was stated before is reiterated from a different point of view. Before the inability and helplessness,

the nothingness of the creature in front of God was expressed in the prayer; now the pride of man who claims to know is declared as total ignorance. Again, there is no way to attain God, to reach to Him, to build an intellectual tower of Babel high enough to reach to God. The whole creation will attest the failure of such an attempt. Any attempt to do so, to build a society based on atheism will lead to destruction and terrorism, because of it being contrary to human nature and contrary to reality. All the atoms of the earth indicate that even human sciences dealing with the atoms of the world cannot attain knowledge of God. They can indicate, and this is remarkable, that the old picture of God as a static, defined and definable entity is wrong, and cannot be sustained<sup>25</sup>. They only can open some new venues to approach God through His Messengers.

### Theological Comment: Hierarchical Religions

When praying to God, when approaching Him, there is never a human claim; there is never an institution that has a special privilege, a special power in the sight of God. Bahá'u'lláh's abolition of priesthood and church is clearly implied in this statement. Nobody, not even the Manifestation can claim to know God. Therefore, nobody can speak in the name of God, except He, Who speaks the "Word of God" as revealed to Him.

The meaning of the Revelation and of the Manifestations of God is expressed in the Bahá'í Writings, but it is not easy to understand it fully. We might recall that Jesus said (John 14:10): "*The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does the works.*" The messages of all the Manifestations must be understood this way; they speak not from their human nature and knowledge, no matter how stainless and perfect their humanity is. They are only a conduit bringing the message from God; they are the mirrors of God's Spirit. They never claim to have power

or authority over God's message or to be able to reach God through their human knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

At this point the prayer changes without starting a new section. The meaning of this continuity of the prayer might help us to understand that there is no separation between the "not-knowing of God" and between the "Mercy of God," that one requires the other, that it is the mercy of God giving us permission to pray to God, as long as we accept the "not-knowing of God." Bahá'u'lláh does not talk about the human suppliant. Rather, He talks about God and His mercy, which allows us to pray, even if we know not how to do it. Yet, it is clear that this understanding was there from the beginning of the prayer allowing us to pray with Bahá'u'lláh, to speak His words of prayer while He gives us the confidence to confess our impotence.

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*Thou hast, however, by virtue of Thy mercy that hath surpassed the kingdoms of earth and heaven, deigned to accept from Thy servants the laud and honor they pay to Thine own exalted Self, and hast bidden them celebrate Thy glory, that the ensigns of Thy guidance may be unfurled in Thy cities and the tokens of Thy mercy be spread abroad among Thy nations, and that each and all may be enabled to attain unto that which Thou hast destined for them by Thy decree, and ordained unto them through Thine irrevocable will and purpose.*

### **Personal Reflection**

Bahá'u'lláh, in this long sentence seems to express two thoughts. The first answers the question of how can we pray if we do not know how, the other concerns what the gift of prayer means to mankind.

Why and how can we pray, when we do not know God, cannot know God and cannot praise him? The answer is clear and simple: by virtue of God's mercy alone can we pray. God's mercy is additionally

described in its absolute surpassing character. God's mercy not only surpasses our understanding, it surpasses the kingdoms of earth and heaven, i.e. the whole universe, known and unknown. No matter what science will reveal about heaven and earth, no matter what human progress and evolution will be in the future, God's mercy surpasses it.

This is another statement about the unknowable essence of God, of the absolute impossibility of man, of all men, to know God. Yet, God's mercy is above and beyond this impossibility and opens up for man the possibility to pray to him. God has ordered humankind to *celebrate His glory*. God has deigned to accept man's efforts to *laud and honor His exalted self*. The movement comes from God Who extends to man the possibility of paying honor to His exalted self. God gives man the power of reason to seek to know Him.

What does that fact mean to humankind? Bahá'u'lláh describes the consequences in beautiful imagery encompassing the whole world. Ensigns, colorful banners of joy and guidance will be unfurled in the cities and the tokens of Thy mercy will be spread abroad among Thy nations. All men will be able to attain to what God has decreed for them. This is a prayer anticipating the Kingdom of God, like the Lord's Prayer "*Thy Kingdom come*" (Matthew 6:10).

### Theological Comment: Predestination and Freedom

This issue raises the old question of predestination as it was debated by Christian theologians mainly since the reformation. The freedom of man, on the one hand, and the foreknowledge, or pre-destining of man's fate by God is the issue of this theological debate. How can God know the individual fate of man and how can man freely decide his fate given this absolute foreknowledge of God? How can man be called free to pray, when he is totally dependent on God in doing so? The solution, which transcends logic, is in the fact that the



freedom of man is a gift of God's mercy, something that surpasses our understanding and is therefore included in His foreknowledge. Actually, the word foreknowledge is erroneous in itself because there is no "before" or "after" in God; time is part of creation only. In the final analysis, we do not know how, we only know that God's mercy allows it. The old debate about predestination could only arise, because theologians thought they could know God and could define His actions according to human logic and according to the time constraint to which all creation is subject.

In the Bahá'í Faith this thinking is reversed. Bahá'u'lláh clearly affirms in the beginning of the prayer that we know not, that we cannot know and that even the Manifestations of God do not know God. We cannot attain to the knowledge of God at all, because God is much more exalted and removed from human speculation than ever thought before, and this is what it means to *laud and honor* Him rather than constructing a God of superstition and imagination. On the other hand, we believe that He is closely and intimately related to humankind, through His mercy, and therefore He is called "*the most hidden of the hidden and the most manifest of the manifest.*" (PM 248)

The fact that for each and all, the future is destined by God's decree and has been ordained through His irrevocable will and purpose does not mean that man is not free in his decisions, it only means, that man's freedom does not limit God because it is a gift of God's mercy, which surpasses any limitation by time because time is a fact of creation and cannot be used when talking about God.

Therefore, considering man's impotence in the face of the knowledge of God, Bahá'u'lláh prays in the next section to God to open His beauty to the seeking faithful and to give access to the bounty of His mercy.

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*Having testified, therefore, unto mine own impotence and the impotence of Thy servants, I beseech Thee, by the brightness of the light of Thy beauty, not to refuse Thy creatures attainment to the shores of Thy most holy ocean.*

### **Personal Reflection**

Here Bahá'u'lláh revisits the statement of man's impotence and again clearly includes all of mankind in this statement, himself and all Thy servants. He continues to ask for God's mercy, described as God's beauty, brightness and light. This is a poetical description of what could metaphysically be described as the opening of God to man. Light and beauty are the attributes that open all beings to sight and delight, to human enjoyment and knowing. If we can see the light and the beauty of anything, we can enjoy and understand it. This is true for a work of art, for the beauty of a person, and, for the enjoyment of life and of the whole world. Even the light of understanding that science brings is included here.<sup>27</sup> The modern quest of science to see, to know, and to understand this world becomes worship, like every work performed in the service of humanity. Here, it is applied to God, Whom we cannot know, but Who gives us the gift of light and beauty emanating from Him through his Messengers. This light, which is the origin of all understanding, is also implanted in all beings of this world, especially in man.

Another image is brought to our attention. The immensity and inexhaustibility of the Revelation is compared with the ocean, which confronts the seeker so he prays to be able to attain to its shores. This leaves the infinite depth and expanse of the ocean for the future evolution of the human soul through eternity. The exploration of the shores of this ocean will promote the highest hopes for mankind: "*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.*"(GWB 215)

We are here now at the juncture, where the impotence confessed to above becomes the power to attain to the light and the beauty of God in our life and in this world. In many prayers, Bahá'u'lláh expresses the joy and fulfillment that this attainment can give. Paradoxically, all that was acknowledged before as unattainable now becomes the most attainable, becomes the essence of the life of the believer. Being detached from all knowledge leads to the knowing on a deeper level, which surpasses all other knowledge. God the most hidden becomes the most manifest.

Consider this passage of another prayer of Bahá'u'lláh:

*I am well aware, O my Lord, that I have been so carried away by the clear tokens of Thy loving-kindness, and so completely inebriated with the wine of Thine utterance, that whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies.*

*By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.*

*I swear by Thy might, O Thou in Whose grasp are the reins of all mankind, and the destinies of the nations! I am so inflamed by my love for Thee, and so inebriated with the wine of Thy oneness, that I can hear from the whisper of the winds the sound of Thy glorification and praise, and can recognize in the murmur*

*of the waters the voice that proclaimeth Thy virtues and Thine attributes, and can apprehend from the rustling of the leaves the mysteries that have been irrevocably ordained by Thee in Thy realm. (PM 271–272)*

### Theological Comment: Human Progress— Progressive Theology

Comparing the human learning process and the divine learning process described in this prayer, with those of prayer beginning “I-know-not” reveals two aspects. The first has to do with the way learning happens; the other concerns how we know things. The latter raises epistemological questions about knowing. There is one aspect that is usually not considered when learning is considered.

If we look at the diagram below we find the words “ability” and “permission” as the first steps from not knowing to knowing. Certainly we need to be able to know, but do we need permission to know? While this is not always true, in important issues we cannot learn and know something, unless we have the permission to learn it. Even a teacher will tell her students, you are not ready for knowing this or that, you have to first get my permission and you will get it when you are ready. Obviously, we are not to know many things of a private nature about another person unless we get the permission of the person. We are not allowed to know about specific government secrets, unless we get the permission to learn about it and to know it. The same is true and even more important when we speak of the knowledge of God. We do not only have to have God’s permission to know, we need His help and assistance in order to know. God gives us the ability and the permission to know. And that is expressed in this prayer with the statements on the right side below, which are all quoted from the prayer.

We are asked to pray to God, *“that each and all may be enabled to attain unto that which Thou hast destined for them by Thy decree, and ordained unto them through Thine irrevocable will and purpose.”* (PM 123) God’s irrevocable will and purpose enables us to do, what we “know-not’ to do, such as *“how to sing Thy praise, how to describe Thy glory, how to call upon Thy Name.”* (PM 123)

The instructions are given and we are drawn *“through the Divine sweetness of Thy melodies, towards the throne of Thy glory and the seat of Thine eternal holiness.”* (PM 123) Even the practice of what we learned is ultimately God’s work: He has to draw us to do what gets us closer to Him, so everybody can *“ascend unto the heights to which he aspireth.”*

The Human Learning Process

1. Not knowing
2. Ability
3. Permission
4. Instruction
5. Practice

The Divine Learning Process

6. “I know not how to...”
7. “that all may be enabled...”
8. ” by Thy decree and... will...”
9. “Divine sweetness of Thy melodies”
10. “Cause him, then, to ascend unto the heights to which he aspireth...”

This description of the learning process describes the need to recognize that it is God, in His mercy, Who enables us and gives us permission to know Him. What is it in the human condition that enables us to accept this ability and permission given by God? With this question we approach the field of epistemology, the field of “how do we know?”

There are at least three ways of knowing, Reason, Intuition and Vision (Anschauung). The Catholic theologian Romano Guardini has defined these three ways in his book on the oppositeness of reality, which he calls “Gegensatz.”<sup>28</sup> In this description the three ways of knowing are described as Rational, Transrational and Superrational.

We can refer these three ways of knowing to the three instruments used by the mind: the left hemisphere of the brain corresponds to the rational, the right to the transrational way of knowing i.e. to intuition. The third way of knowing is best attributed to the heart, bringing unity and vision into the area of knowing.<sup>29</sup> The rational is the abstract-logical way of thinking. What Guardini calls Transrational is the way of knowing the individual-in-the-concrete, as a distinct living being. These two ways are in opposition, are a “Gegensatz” i.e., they are opposite, yet have something in common, and, therefore cannot exist without each other.

Whenever we think about an abstract concept, the concrete reality which it refers to must—at least to some degree—be included in the same thought. The same is true when we consider the individual. We always have to include in this thought the abstract and general meaning. For example, we cannot think about humanness, without knowing and including in this thought the individual humans we know; whenever we think about a human being we must include all that generally belongs to humanness in this thought, as well. Only a sociopath can treat humans like things, using and abusing them, without considering or caring about the specific human quality of every human being. This is the condition of the *Gegensatz*, of the opposite, which is pervasive in all thinking about living concrete reality.

The third way of knowing is called Superrational (Über-rational). It includes the first two modes of knowing and exists in the tension of this *Gegensatz* and it is described by Guardini in the following way (translated by this writer):

To understand the core of the living reality and to approach its mystery is not a nebulous imagination, or a mysterious experience; it rather takes vision (*Anschauung*), which is possible only in tension, and in respect of the mystery requiring discipline and self-control.

Real vision is not a mysterious experience, even though it approaches the mystery of reality, it includes the tension between reason and intuition, and this consideration is important, it requires discipline and self-control. In other words, it is not easy and requires efforts in the area of ethics.

Bahá'u'lláh mentions the same qualities when talking about his Revelation and how to approach its sublime Vision:

*Were the breezes of Revelation to seize thee, thou wouldst flee the world, and turn unto the Kingdom, and wouldst expend all thou possessest, that thou mayest draw nigh unto this sublime Vision.”* (ESW 56)

While Guardini talks about discipline and self-control, Bahá'u'lláh expands that concept and speaks about additionally *expending all thou possessest* as demanded by Jesus:

*The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.*  
(Matthew 19:20–21)

To understand this demand, which was unacceptable to the young man at the time of Jesus, must it not be said that following Christ required total detachment from all possessions and not necessarily the selling of all possessions? Does not the statement of Bahá'u'lláh imply the same detachment? This transcends the concept of Guardini that having this vision requires discipline and self-control. In any case, vision is not easy, and it is, like all real understanding, based on the permission and ability given by God, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá interpreted this situation:

## Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

*But the human spirit, unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities. (SAQ 208)*

Here vision means acquaintance with divine secrets and heavenly realities, which directs our thoughts to the understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

To understand the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, indeed, to understand any Revelation, this vision is required and it is a gift of God to the person who is detached from the possessions of this world. Additionally, to acquire this vision and to understand the Revelation is a process, which never ends, individually and even collectively, until the next Manifestation brings a renewed vision.

Another image is presented in the next sentence of the prayer:

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*Draw them, then, O my God, through the Divine sweetness of Thy melodies, towards the throne of Thy glory and the seat of Thine eternal holiness.*

### **Personal Reflection**

The divine sweetness of these melodies will draw mankind towards the throne of God's glory and the seat of His eternal holiness. Glory and holiness are described as sweet melodies and we are reminded here of the nightingales that play such a role as indicators of divine love to the believer in the Bahá'í writings. This picture of God as drawing humanity to Him is used by Bahá'u'lláh for all Dispensations. The melody of the Divine Messenger is like the song of the nightingale, the beauty of the rose and the scent of the hyacinth.<sup>30</sup>



## Theological Comment: Progressive Revelation

When we pray these words, we are reminded of the mercy of God, Who sends His messengers, a Krishna, a Buddha, a Moses, a Zoroaster, a Jesus, a Muhammad and finally the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh to us, so we may pray to be drawn to their message, their eternal World of God. It gives us the understanding that outside the great religions of the World, as they are revealed through the Messengers of God, our understanding of the world is not complete. As religion needs the assistance of science to avert superstition, so science needs the assistance of religion to prevent materialism and all its dire consequences<sup>31</sup>.

### Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

*Thou art, verily, the Most Powerful, the Supreme Ruler, the Great Giver, the Most Exalted, the Ever-Desired.*

### Personal Reflection

Here the prayer seems to close with an invocation to God Whom we “know not,” as we prayed before. We are invited to praise and acknowledge Him with the words of the Messengers of God. What are the attributes that are invoked here? First, God is described as the Most Powerful. We can praise God with that name, as long as we have first testified to our impotence as servants of God. The Most Powerful is experienced in our lives when we experience the mercy of God and the fulfillment of all our aspirations in our love to Him. This experience prevents us from transferring God’s power into the human situation except through His mercy.

Power is never to be used against another person; not in the name of “true” religion against “false” religion, not in the name of orthodoxy and church administration and not in inquisition or excommunication. No eternal damnation can be invoked merely on the basis of human power even in a church or religion. Only if we could know God with our power could we claim this divine right. Not even if

we could have attained to Him with our own power and knowledge, could we claim this right, could we use our power to exercise church politics and authority. Nothing of that kind is possible after the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The same applies individually. We can and must praise God as the Most Powerful. Yet, we cannot derive from this knowledge any power over other human beings. Neither in gossip, nor in suspicion, neither in politics nor in personal interaction with others, neither in love, nor in hate can we assume God's privilege of power. God gives no one this power over his or her fellow human being.

### Theological Comment: Administrative Power

Any power exerted in politics and civil interactions is of a different sort: it is not personal, but administrative only and it depends on the needs of society. It never stretches into the area of consciousness, of thought or religious belief where independent investigation is the rule. Civil as well as religious societies must exert power to keep themselves organized and orderly. Civil society must incarcerate or otherwise make the criminal unable to disturb the peace. Churches and religious communities must be able to exclude members who deliberately try to destroy their community. The power is conditioned and should not be exerted other than by law and in a proper process. That should eliminate the individual abusing this power of administration.

One of the greatest differences between the Bahá'í Faith and my previous experiences as a priest in the Catholic Church was the form of its administration and how modern man has difficulties with the present regime in the Church. With the best intentions and in the sincere belief they are following God's will, the Popes in the Catholic Church seem to have created more difficulties for the believers than all the atheistic philosophers and aberrant theologians together.

This is why many Catholics now abandon the Church or at least become passive and discouraged. I am not saying that there are no possible problems of power even in the Bahá'í Faith, but the structure of the administration and the abolition of priesthood and clergy will make any aberration temporary and transient. The problem in the Catholic Church is the fact that this situation is believed to be unchangeable because it is based on dogma.

The administrative authority of the Bahá'í Faith functions on a different level. It is exerted not by one but by a group of faithful servants in consultation. It is not given to making new laws and dogmas that cannot be revised in the future. It is instituted for protection and for assistance to the individual believer and the Cause. Fortunately, the Bahá'í administration has not only the guidance of the Spirit and a functional infallibility, it can, whenever times change, revise its decisions and provide new guidance in the light of new consultation.

God, the Supreme Ruler, is another title that has to be seen in that light. Nobody on this earth is a ruler in his own right; there is no ruler, who rules as the Son of Heaven, as the Chinese emperors used to be called; there is no ruler in the name of God, as absolute kings and emperors in Europe used to claim. There is no power in the name of the leader of a race or class either. The time of dictators and autocratic rulers is over, even of rulers imposing their power on the faithful of a specific religion.<sup>32</sup>

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*The Great Giver, the Most Exalted, the Ever-Desired*

### **Personal Reflection**

These three attributes express the mercy of God and man's need for this mercy. Since we know not and are helpless without the gift from God, we praise him as the Great Giver. We exalt Him beyond all

limits and declare him as the desire of the whole creation. All religions of God have expressed this need in their prayers and adorations.

While most human prayers are basically a request to God for his assistance in this world, this prayer only now turns to ask God a favor.

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*Grant, then, O my God, that Thy servant who hath turned towards Thee, hath fixed his gaze upon Thee, and clung to the cord of Thy mercifulness and favor, may be enabled to partake of the living waters of Thy mercy and grace.*

### **Personal Reflection**

Again, the praying believers are described in their relation to God. They have turned towards Him and have fixed their gaze upon him, clinging to the cord of God's mercy and favor. This movement towards God is the precondition of any prayer. Only when we assume this attitude, are we allowed to ask God for a favor. Here is no mention of knowledge and theology, no attempt to try to attain closeness and understanding of God's ways and plans. The description is that of men or women who are servants and who turn to their master with no questions and no demands, except for asking God's mercy.

It is impossible here to elaborate on this openness to God, which has been required in all dispensations of God. For example, Jesus required the rich man to leave everything behind and follow him (Luke 18. 22–23). In the description of the true seeker Bahá'u'lláh has laid out the qualifications to participate in God's favors.

The first thing we are taught to ask is for the ability to partake of the *living waters of Thy mercy and grace*. What are those living waters and how does Bahá'u'lláh use this imagery in His writings? The following is a selection of passages in which the diverse meanings of "living waters" is presented. There are many more quotes than could

be referenced here, but these give an idea of the widespread use of this phrase.

*Living waters of Thy mercy and grace* (PM 124)

*Living waters of Thy pardon* (ESW 6)

*Living waters of uprightness and understanding* (KA 139)

*Living waters of immortality* (ESW 38)

*Living waters of God's counsels* (ESW 59)

*Living waters of acknowledgment* (ESW 161)

*Living waters of faith* (ESW 169)

*Living waters of friendliness and charity* (GWB 7)

*Living waters of truth* (PM 197)

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the "living waters of the teachings of God" as the only means to bring tranquility and peace to the whole world.<sup>33</sup> These are the gifts of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The fruit of His teaching and the bounty is promised to every believer. A meditation on these gifts alone could last a lifetime and is the basis of every prayer to God, the Great Giver.

There is one more surprise in this prayer—it is the reference to the highest aspiration of the one, who contemplates this prayer and the fulfillment of this aspiration.

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*Cause him from that which Thou dost possess, then, to ascend unto the heights to which he aspireth, and withhold him not from that which Thou dost possess.*

### **Personal Reflection**

Here we are encouraged to ask God to cause us to ascend unto the heights to which we aspire. How can we ask for more? How could

we ask for anything better? What else is there to ask for, except asking for the heights of our aspiration? Therefore, we ask that God not withhold what He possesses. Obviously, this must be the height of our aspiration, or it certainly should be.

We need to look back at our personal aspiration and wishes and the gifts we usually ask in our prayers to God. While it is stated that it is acceptable to formulate your own prayers, this need to direct our aspiration towards God, should make us careful. The conclusion is to rarely pray with one's own words, and always use the words of the Manifestations. That way, one at least is sure that the words are right, and all what has to be done, and this is not easy, is to conform to our heart's desire, which should be the Revelation Bahá'u'lláh has given us.

As St. Paul said (1 Corinthians 13:11): "*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, but then face to face.*" We can no longer think as children especially about God, we can no longer speak in our prayer like children; we need to see God in a more mature fashion because humankind has reached the stage of maturity, as Bahá'u'lláh stated:

*No sooner had mankind attained the stage of maturity, than the Word revealed to men's eyes the latent energies with which it had been endowed—energies which manifested themselves in the plenitude of their glory when the Ancient Beauty appeared, in the year sixty, in the person of `Alí-Muḥammad, the Báb.*  
(GWB 77)

Alternatively, `Abdu'l-Bahá has interpreted the same situation of humankind, which has matured during the last two thousand years of Christianity and Islam:

*The Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is the same as the Cause of Christ. It is the same Temple and the same Foundation. Both of these are spiritual springtimes and seasons of the soul-refreshing awakening and the cause of the renovation of the life of mankind. The spring of this year is the same as the spring of last year. The origins and ends are the same. The sun of today is the sun of yesterday. In the coming of Christ, the divine teachings were given in accordance with the infancy of the human race. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh have the same basic principles, but are according to the stage of the maturity of the world and the requirements of this illumined age. (BWF 400)*

The maturity of mankind, the new revelation of God, the global tests and upheavals of the last generations—all of these are included in the not knowing and yet knowing of God Who is “*the most hidden of the hidden and the most manifest of the manifest.*” Do we not all have to go through this experience of loss of old securities and concepts, of traditional rituals and customs, of ingrained understandings and misunderstandings? The Dawn of the new revelation tests us to see if we have this measure of maturity. It is the quest of a new humanity in the Kingdom of God.

This promised development of humankind is a slow, spiritual process; it works its way from person to person and is not a mass movement which can be covered by the media, measured by government statistics or proclaimed by election outcomes. Yet, its “latent energies” are transforming the world while we speak and its Divine fecundity can be observed by anybody who will look and has the eyes to see. As Bahá'u'lláh has stated at the beginning of His mission: “*The universe is pregnant with these manifold bounties, awaiting the hour when the effects of Its unseen gifts will be made manifest in this world.* (KI 60–61)

This hour of God has come. We can see the influence of the Faith in the world; we can teach it and live it and we need to be alert to

all the signs and events that tell us about it. This appears to be what Shoghi Effendi intended to say, when fifty years ago a letter written on his behalf stated, “*The world has—at least the thinking world—caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Bahá'u'llah over 70 years ago, and so of course it does not sound ‘new’ to them. However, we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly to such men!*”<sup>34</sup>

It might well be that even the facts of atheism and agnosticism, which influence so many of our contemporaries are not merely a negative and deplorable development of history. These historical developments have certainly caused great pain and destructiveness to humankind, yet, were also caused by the distortion of religion, at least to some degree. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clearly states: “*If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act.*” (PT 130) Therefore, we can join Bahá'u'lláh in this prayer and admit that we know not and thereby learn from him how to pray in a world of unbelievers. We can do this because we know this world is getting ready for the Kingdom of God, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

The prayer closes with a final Praise to God;

### **Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh**

*Thou art, verily, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Bountiful.*

### **Personal Reflection**

Again, it is affirmed here that God is verily the Ever-Forgiving. The errors and sinfulness of humankind can only find forgiveness from God. We need to pray not only for forgiveness of our transgressions but also for the forgiveness of the transgressions of this century with the knowledge that God is the Ever-Forgiving. That must be our approach to the victims and perpetrators alike, to the people who



caused the terror and who suffered from it. They—and we—need the forgiveness of God.

God is the Most Bountiful who gives freely and makes us free.

### Theological Comment: God's Grace

Let's consider the last attribute, the Most Bountiful. Not knowing the original meaning of this word as written by Bahá'u'lláh, we have to follow the translation, which fortunately is from Shoghi Effendi's pen. We know that he used an English Dictionary extensively in his translations to find the fitting words. So it seems to be legitimate to look up the word bountiful in the dictionary<sup>35</sup> where the following definitions are given: "1. Full of bounty, liberal in bestowing gifts and favors; gracious; 2. Abundant, Plentiful."

This Divine grace here certainly includes all the Gifts we have described above. Especially the gift of the living waters is meant here, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls the "*living waters of the teachings of God.*" This includes the supreme and unique gift of freedom to humankind as well.

### Conclusion

With this understanding, I read the last sentence of praise in two complimentary ways. First, God gives freely and graciously, and what is more, He gives me the gift of freedom to accept His mercy and to sing His praise. Knowing that such freedom includes the possibility to refuse to obey God or even work against Him, we learn as well, that even opposition to God's will does not limit the providence and wisdom of God, so that "*all abide by His bidding.*" (SWB 15) When it was stated in the beginning, that "*I know not how to sing Thy praise,*

## Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

*how to describe Thy glory, how to call upon Thy Name*”, and when we accept the truth of this statement, we now can freely accept the gift of God to know Him and to love Him and to give praise to Him, because God is the *Ever-Forgiving* and *Most Bountiful*, the Most Giving, giving freedom and choice, giving humankind independence and self, yet giving the ability to freely choose God, to love Him, and to accept the infinite bounty of God.

## Lights of 'Irfán Book Thirteen

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### NOTES

- 1 Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*. (PM 122) Bahá'í Writings are quoted according to the accepted abbreviation. In this paper, all quotations from Holy Scriptures are in italics
- 2 Nader Saiedi. *Logos and Civilization, Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, University Press of Maryland, 2000, page 295.
- 3 Edward T. Oakes, SJ, and David Moss, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Cambridge University Press, 2004, page 265. ISBN 0-521-89147-7
- 4 Karen Armstrong in her book *The Battle for God*, (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2000) has described the change in the European civilization during modern times, especially in the chapter: "Christians, The Brave New World" (1492–1870), pp 61–97, spanning the time from the Reformation to Darwin, Hegel and Nietzsche and culminating in the statement of the Death of God.
- 5 Karl Marx, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" in *Karl Marx selected writings*. Edited by David McLellan, Oxford University Press, 1977, page 63.
- 6 Teilhard de Chardin. *Christianity and Evolution*. San Diego, New York, London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1969 page 28.
- 7 Described extensively by Will & Ariel Durant in *The age of Voltaire*. New York: MJF Books, 1992, especially in Book V, *The Attack upon Christianity 1730–1774*.
- 8 Wucherer Huldenfeld, Augustinus Karl; J. Figl and S. Mühlberger, Editors, *Welt Phänomen Atheismus*, ("World-Phenomenon Atheism") Basel: Herder, Wien Freiburg, 1979, especially in the chapter by Max Josef Suda, page 89 and *passim*.
- 9 Stephane Courtois et al. in: *The Black Book of Communism, Crimes, Terror, Repression*. Cambridge Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999, page 4.  
These are the "cold" statistics of the victims of communism:  
U.S.S.R      20 million deaths      Eastern Europe      1 million deaths  
China      65 million deaths      Latin America      150,000 deaths  
Vietnam      1 million deaths      Africa      1.7 million deaths  
North Korea      2 million deaths      Afghanistan      1.5 million deaths  
Cambodia:      2 million deaths
- 10 A.K. Wucherer et al, editors, *Welt Phänomen Atheismus*, (Worldwide Phenomenon Atheism). Vienna, Freiburg, Basel: Herder, 1979, confer the contribution of A.K. Wucherer, "Phänomen und Bedeutung des gegenwärtigen Atheism" (Phenomenon and Meaning of present Atheism) p. 35–58.
- 11 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848.

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- 12 Karen Armstrong, *A History of God, The 4000-Year Quests of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York: Alfred and Knopf, 1994, p. 399.
- 13 O My brother! When a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading unto the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy. He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments. He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth. (GWB 264).
- 14 Stephen N. Lambden, in *Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, Vol. 8, pp. 37–78. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997. ISBN 0-933770-95-2 (HBk) ISBN 0-933770-96-0 (PBk).
- 15 Quoted from Bernard Casper, *Das dialogische Denken. Eine Untersuchung der religionsphilosophischen Bedeutung Franz Rosenzweigs, Ferdinand Ebners und Martin Bubers*. (Dialogical Thinking, an Investigation about the Importance in the Philosophy of Religion of Franz Rosenzweig, Ferdinand Ebner and Martin Buber) Freiburg/Breisgau, Germany 1967, page 92.
- 16 St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians (1:16–17) stated the same about Christ: “All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things and in Him all things consist.”
- 17 The concept of “universal Christ,” and “of the Christ of the Evolution” coined by Teilhard de Chardin in his article about *Christology and Evolution*, (in *Christianity and Evolution*, A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company; San Diego, New York, London, 1969) puts his understanding of Christ (for Bahá'ís that means all Manifestations) into the modern scientific context of evolution following the Pauline view of Christ. By stating that the Manifestation holds the immediate destiny of the world in His hand, Bahá'u'lláh, as well, extends the static formulation of the gospel “all things were made through him” into the dynamic evolution of the world and, therefore into the present. This Teilhardian perspective of a universal Christology (could we say as well “Manifestology”?) based on the modern scientific idea of the world as evolution was followed up in Wolfgang Klebel “Unity and Progressive Revelation: Comparing Bahá'í Principles with the Basic Concepts of Teilhard de Chardin.” in *Lights of 'Irfán*, Book Five, 2004, pages 77–108.
- 18 In another prayer Bahá'u'lláh describes this situation, with empathic understanding:  
*He Who was Thy Spirit (Jesus), O my God, withdrew all alone in the darkness of the night preceding His last day on earth, and falling on His face to the ground besought Thee saying: “If it be Thy will, O my Lord, my Well-Beloved, let this cup, through Thy grace and bounty, pass from me.”*

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*By Thy beauty, O Thou Who art the Lord of all names and the Creator of the heavens! I can smell the fragrance of the words which, in His love for Thee, His lips have uttered, and can feel the glow of the fire that had inflamed His soul in its longing to behold Thy face and in its yearning after the Day-Spring of the light of Thy oneness, and the Dawning-Place of Thy transcendent unity. (PM 192–193).*

- 19 This understanding of the Manifestation not only being the cause of creation, but also the sustaining power behind the world, could be understood within the Teilhardian concept of the Universal Christ, the final focus point, the Omega point of creation (Revelation 1:9) and the Pauline theology of Christ who “is all and is in all” (Col. 3:11). The new understanding expressed in Teilhard’s opus is the scientific understanding of the world as an evolution of the spirit in matter, of the principle of unity in plurality, of body and spirit, which fits surprisingly well into the Bahá’í writings, as especially expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The correspondence of these two worldviews, one from the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, the other from the Christian revelation as understood in a new way by Teilhard, is worth further exploration following the statement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Furthermore, religion must conform to reason and be in accord with the conclusions of science. For religion, reason and science are realities; therefore, these three, being realities, must conform and be reconciled. A question or principle, which is religious in its nature, must be sanctioned by science. Science must declare it to be valid, and reason must confirm it in order that it may inspire confidence” (PUP 394).
- 20 Bishop John Shelby Spong. *Why Christianity Must Change or Die.*, San Francisco: Harper,, 1998. In this, and in his other books, Spong has expounded on this topic that a modern man cannot simply believe in the traditional Biblical God. Spong sees himself in exile, waiting for the return of Christ in a new advent.
- 21 A. N. Wilson. *God’s Funeral.* New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.
- 22 The doctrine about the justification of God in the face of physical and moral evil is called theodicy.
- 23 Modern man cannot believe in a good God who creates a world that was good and then became bad through the original sin of the first man Adam. This in turn required the salvation of the world through a divine sacrifice. As a matter of fact Teilhard, a Jesuit, had expressed this impossibility in one of his early writings, which did not pass the censorship of his order, consequently most of his writings were only published after his death and he turned from teaching theology to studying paleontology in China. (See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution.* San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1969, note on page 55).
- 24 Teilhard de Chardin has addressed this problem in the book *The Phenomenon of Man.* New York: Harper & Row, 1975, pages 311–313) and has attempted to see this issue in a much wider perspective. His thoughts are surprisingly close to those of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who describes sin as falling back into the animal

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nature of man and evil as absence of good and not a dualistic counterpoint to God. Teilhard sees sin in a similar context of man evolving in a spiritual progression and sin and evil as a problem, or a fall from progressive development in the direction to “humanization” and “spiritualization” of the world. This seeming parallel certainly needs further illumination.

- 25 The concept of a God of Evolution, coined by Teilhard de Chardin is such an attempt of the scientific understanding of the world and implies as well that the old concept of God as a static being in heaven is scientifically untenable, (Confer. *Christianity and Evolution*, *ibid.* Page 237) and especially in: *The Phenomenon of Man*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975 *passim*, especially the Postscript, page 300–310.

How some understanding of Quantum Mechanics can assist in understanding the truth about the Manifestations of God was presented in an ‘Irfán Occasional Paper, Wolfgang Klebel, *Revelation of Unity, Unity of Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh's Most Sublime Vision*, ‘Irfán Colloquia Publications, Bahá'í National Center, Evanston, IL 60201-1611, 2009, especially pages 50–81.

- 26 One way to try to understand it is the following thought. Each progressive Revelation opens the ability of man to know and love God, they even illuminate man to see and find God in the nature of all created things and in men's own nature. The Bahá'í writings in numerous places speak about the openness of the creation to the knowledge of God, but that knowledge originates in a movement from God to the world, which seems to be the truth behind the notion of creation, incarnation and detachment.
- 27 The dedication of scientists to the service of humanity is described as worship by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *“In the Bahá'í Cause arts, sciences and all crafts are (counted as) worship. The man who makes a piece of notepaper to the best of his ability, conscientiously, concentrating all his forces on perfecting it, is giving praise to God. Briefly, all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity.”* (PT 176–177)
- 28 Romano Guardini, *Der Gegensatz, Versuch zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten*, (The Opposite, attempt to a Philosophy of the Living–Concrete). Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald Verlag, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1998.
- 29 Confer: Wolfgang Klebel. “In the Pure Soil of Thy Heart, in Bahá'í Writings and Neurocardiology.” in *Lights of ‘Irfán*, Book Ten, 2009, pp.131–148
- 30 *“They that valiantly labor in quest of God, will, when once they have renounced all else but Him, be so attached and wedded unto that City, that a moment's separation from it would to them be unthinkable. They will hearken unto infallible proofs from the Hyacinth of that assembly, and will receive the surest testimonies from the beauty of its Rose, and the melody of its Nightingale. Once in about a thousand years shall this City be renewed and readorned....”* (GWB 269)

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*“That City is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus, the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, the Qur’án; in this day, the Bayán; and in the Dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest, His own Book—the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book that standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme.”* (GWB 269–270) (KI 199).

- 31 To quote only one passage of (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *“Religion and science are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.”* (PT 143).
- 32 It is interesting what Bahá’u’lláh wrote to Pope Pius IX, just around the time the Pope defined his own infallibility at the Vatican I council. If seen in the light of God’s supreme power and of men’s inability to know and to attain this power of God, it certainly limits the functions of the Pope and every future religious leader. Bahá’u’lláh in his message praises the Pope with these words: *“You, in truth, are one of the sons of heaven in his name.”* And yet he directs him to *“Abandon thy kingdom unto the kings, and emerge from thy habitation, with thy face set towards the Kingdom, and, detached from the world, then speak forth the praises of thy Lord betwixt earth and heaven. Thus hath bidden thee He Who is the Possessor of Names, on the part of thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.”* (PB 85).
- 33 *“Note thou: could these fevers in the world of the mind, these fires of war and hate, of resentment and malice among the nations, this aggression of peoples against peoples, which have destroyed the tranquillity of the whole world ever be made to abate, except through the living waters of the teachings of God? No, never!”* (SWA 53).
- 34 Shoghi Effendi. *“The Importance of Deepening.”* *“It is the obligation of Bahá’í scholarship to elucidate these events, to interpret the contemporary writings and to draw the lines into the future”* (CC 230). Or in another excerpt from letters by Shoghi Effendi: (19 April 1947, *The Importance of Deepening*, CC 228–229) it is stated on his behalf: *“Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá’ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá’í teachings. What he wants the Bahá’ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific and otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá’í teachings more deeply. One might liken Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them.”*
- 35 Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, of the English language, unabridged, 1976.

# The Bahá'í Writings and Kant's "Perpetual Peace"<sup>1</sup>

Ian Kluge

## Introduction

In 1795, Immanuel Kant published *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*<sup>2</sup> in which he outlined the practical steps necessary to end war among nation-states. This work is a part of the history<sup>3</sup> of utopian thought<sup>4</sup> in Europe, and was preceded by a long tradition of plans to improve individuals and the society that began most famously with Plato's *Republic*, continues through St. Thomas More's *Utopia*, and comes in the period before and after Kant to a number of proposals for eliminating war. Among those preceding Kant's "*Perpetual Peace*" was Emeric Cruce's *Discourses on the Opportunities and Means for Establishing a General Peace and Freedom of Trade Throughout the World* (c.1623).<sup>5</sup> Among the root causes of war, Cruce listed "bigotry, profit, reparation and glory-seeking."<sup>6</sup> In his view, the best way to overcome these causes are closer trade and communication among the peoples of the world, a global currency and a political congress made of representatives from all of humankind. His solutions are still discussed today.<sup>7</sup> Another noteworthy work in the 'peace tradition' is William Penn's "*An Essay Towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe*" (1693). Penn proposes a European parliament with mandatory attendance by all European monarchs to settle all disputes that cannot be solved by direct negotiations by the affected parties. States refusing to submit their differences or refusing to abide by the European parliament's decisions shall be compelled to do so and be liable for all costs and damages resulting from their refusal. Two decades after Penn, the French philosopher Saint-Pierre published *A Project for Setting an Everlasting Peace in Europe* (1714) which



suggested that peace was best achieved by uniting all European states into a “representative federation based on population rather than power”<sup>8</sup> and by limiting the size of national armies. Difficult issues would be discussed and resolved by committees established to reconcile conflicting claims. In short, the relations among European states were to be based on the rule of law and not on the ambitions or advantages of kings. Jean-Jacque Rousseau suggested a European federation or confederation united by the rule of law in *A Lasting Peace Through the Federation of Europe* (1782). Rousseau saw four necessary requirements for a lasting European peace: first, all the important powers in Europe must be members of this federation; second, whatever laws these powers legislate must be binding on all; third, there must be a common military force able to compel obedience from every members state and fourth, once in, no state can withdraw from this federation.<sup>9</sup> Here, too, we observe a proposal for a trans-national parliament with dispute setting powers and the means for enforcing its judgments.

There were, of course, others who had contributed to this ‘peace tradition’ before Kant. Three of the most famous are Hugo Grotius who formulated the first code of international laws regarding war and peace (1625), Samuel Pufendorf, the first man to be a professor of international law (1674) and Christian Wolff who tried to organize the different types of laws among nations (1754) in order to clarify legal processes. Of course, these authors advocated plans to bring order to current diplomatic and military practices rather than the complete elimination of international conflict. War among sovereign nation-states might be limited in scope to combatants, made more humane and legally allowed only in certain circumstances but the practice of war would remain as a tragic but inevitable part of the human existence. However, what Cruce, Penn, Saint-Pierre, Kant and the Bahá’í Writings aim at is the eventual complete elimination of war itself.

## The Bahá'í Writings and Kant's "Perpetual Peace"

Because of Kant's incalculable influence on the development of virtually all aspects of modern philosophy and thought in general, our comparison study will focus on the Bahá'í Writings and "*To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*." We shall devote our efforts to answering one question: To what extent does Kant's essay directly anticipate and/or indirectly foreshadow the Bahá'í teachings about the elimination of war and the establishment of a workable peace? Answering this question requires a careful examination of their similarities and differences not only in what is or is not said explicitly but also in what is also left implicit or in the background.

Our examination will show that while there are numerous similarities between "*Perpetual Peace*" and the Bahá'í Writings, these similarities are not only superficial, but also accidental and not essential. In other words, as long as we confine ourselves to surface presentations, it appears that Kant's proposals and the Writings are much of a kind, but in-depth analysis shows such is not the case. Indeed, because these similarities are based on vastly different foundational principles, they are accidental or coincidental, rather than essential and necessary conclusions derived from common principles. Therefore, any claim that Kant anticipated Bahá'u'lláh is only tenable when our analysis remains superficial.

### 1: A Brief Overview of Kant's "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch"

At the beginning of the first section, Kant outlines the six "preliminary articles for perpetual peace among nations." (Kant 1983, 107) The first of these is, "No treaty of peace that tacitly reserves issues for a future war shall be held valid." (ibid) In other words, no treaty may have secret clauses that legitimize future declarations of war. Obviously such clauses would change a peace treaty into a mere truce. Kant's second article states that "No independent nation, be

it large or small, may be acquired by another nation by inheritance, exchange, purchase or as a gift.” (ibid 108) Territories and especially human beings are not “mere objects to be manipulated at will.” (ibid) This principle stems from Kant’s famous dictum that human beings are never to be treated as objects or means disposable for others’ use.<sup>10</sup> The third article says that “Standing armies (*miles perpetuus*) shall gradually be abolished” (Kant 1983, 108) for the simple reason that maintaining them lays unduly burdensome expenditures on the people. Article four demands that “No national debt shall be contracted in connection with the foreign affairs of a nation.” (ibid 109) Kant believed that contracting foreign debt especially with regard to foreign affairs encouraged profligate spending and military adventures. In the fifth article, Kant asserts the principle of absolute national sovereignty: “No nation shall forcibly interfere with the constitution and government of another.” (ibid 109) Finally, the sixth article states, “No nation at war with another shall permit such acts of war as shall make mutual trust impossible during some future time of peace.” (ibid) In other words, countries must not make use of tactics like assassination, encouraging treason in the opposing nation, or other underhanded stratagems that erode the trust necessary to build a future peace.

Kant next adds three “definitive articles of perpetual peace” (ibid 112) the first of which is that “[t]he civil constitution of every nation should be republican,” (ibid) i.e. members of every nation-state should be free and in government, the executive and legislative powers should be separate. (ibid 114) The second “definitive article” states that “the right of nations shall be based on a federation of free states” (ibid 115) that would eventually include all nations. (ibid 117) The third and final article states that “Cosmopolitan right shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality.” (ibid 118) A visitor to a foreign country has a right to hospitality “as long as he behaves peaceably.” (ibid) In other words, citizenship is universal, or global, so long as a person does nothing to undermine the peace.

In the first of the two supplements, Kant explains that

Perpetual peace is insured (guaranteed) by nothing less than that great artist *nature* (*natura daedala rerum*) whose mechanical process makes purposiveness [*Zweckmaessigkeit*] visibly manifest, *permitting harmony to emerge among men through their discord, even against their wills.* (ibid 120).

In this passage (remarkably prescient of Hegel's theory of history) Kant seems to be predicting that human unity will occur not just despite the fact of war but also because of the fact of human war. Conflict, he says has not just driven peoples to populate the world but also to "establish more or less legal relationships." (ibid 121) Like Toynbee after him, Kant noticed that peoples entangled in war inevitably draw closer even though this is not their intent. Kant's second supplement requires that while political leaders must rule, they should at least consult with philosophers who bring a wider perspective to the analysis of any subject. Obviously, the idea of Plato's philosopher king still has some life left in it according to Kant. The two appendices which follow the supplements are concerned with various issues related to the concept of individual, public and international "right" which Kant believes must underlie any perpetual peace.

## **2: The Baha'í Vision of International Order: An Overview**

Bahá'u'lláh's vision for the attainment of world peace is divided into two major phases, a Lesser Peace which will "be established through the efforts of the nations of the world"<sup>11</sup> and the Most Great Peace which is "the ultimate peace promised to all the peoples and nations."<sup>12</sup> The Most Great Peace will be the crowning stage of the current chapter of human development. According to Bahá'u'lláh, the process leading to these momentous and revolutionary changes has already begun:

*The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed. (GWB 136)*

In other words, Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation has initiated the process by which “[m]ankind's ordered life,” i.e. politics, culture, economics and spirituality will be “revolutionized” or radically transformed in ways unimaginable in pre-global phases of historical development. Now that all human activities are globally inter-connected, radically new ways of thinking and acting are necessary for individuals and collectives like national states, economies and religions. Bahá'u'lláh prophesies that this may happen more quickly than we think: “Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead” (GWB 313) These changes are unavoidable because it is no longer reasonable to believe that “the world will somehow be able to continue muddling its way through world-problems using nation-oriented solutions.”<sup>13</sup> The current order stands in the way of human progress, i.e. hinders the full realization of individual and collective potentials and must be replaced by something else. This immanent transformation will be ‘revolutionary’ not in the historical sense of fomenting a violent upheaval but in the sense of changing the fundamental principles by which individuals and societies view the world and function. Such changes will be far-reaching and deep because they extend beyond the superstructural phenomena of politics, culture and economics and “*revolutionized the soul of mankind.*” (PB 117) In other words, these changes touch the very foundations of human nature.

Before humankind can attain the Most Great Peace, it must first establish the Lesser Peace. Bahá'u'lláh writes,

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*We pray God—exalted be His glory—and cherish the hope that He may graciously assist the manifestations of affluence and power and the daysprings of sovereignty and glory, the kings of the earth—may God aid them through His strengthening grace—to establish the Lesser Peace. This, indeed, is the greatest means for insuring the tranquillity of the nations. It is incumbent upon the Sovereigns of the world—may God assist them—unitedly to hold fast unto this Peace, which is the chief instrument for the protection of all mankind... It is their duty to convene an all-inclusive assembly, which either they themselves or their ministers will attend, and to enforce whatever measures are required to establish unity and concord amongst men. They must put away the weapons of war, and turn to the instruments of universal reconstruction. Should one king rise up against another, all the other kings must arise to deter him. Arms and armaments will, then, be no more needed beyond that which is necessary to insure the internal security of their respective countries. (ESW 30)*

Although it has spiritual aspects, the Lesser Peace is chiefly a political process involving the nations of the world. It will come about not so much by virtue of spiritual enlightenment as by the quest for national survival and mutual economic benefit, i.e. by largely secular concerns. These concerns may be correlated with some spiritual developments, but spiritual matters are not of primary interest. According to Ali Nakhjavani, the Lesser Peace “is solely founded upon political considerations and requirements”<sup>14</sup> and will be viewed by political leaders “as the last and only remaining solution to their political ideals.”<sup>15</sup> He adds,

although its future constitution will—to some extent—be influenced by moral and ethical standards, it will undoubtedly be devoid of the bounty of the spiritual principles of the Cause of God.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the Lesser Peace is primarily political and not spiritual in nature. This means, among other things, that the Lesser and Most Great embody two different forms of consciousness, one grounded in purely human will and without any concern for the transcendent aspects of reality, and the other grounded in transcendent divine will as expressed in revelation. These forms of consciousness are manifested in differences in law, culture, philosophy, social organization and norms, leadership the arts as well as the life-expectations people have. But the differences go further. We might also say that the Lesser Peace is superstructural insofar as it is not based on humankind's spiritual nature, i.e. does not involve the whole human being. Given the frailty of human nature, this is not assuring.

If the Lesser Peace did not lead to the Most Great Peace, humankind would never evolve spiritually. Shoghi Effendi states,

*No machinery falling short of the standard inculcated by the Bahá'í Revelation, and at variance with the sublime pattern ordained in His teachings, which the collective efforts of mankind may yet devise can ever hope to achieve anything above or beyond that "Lesser Peace" to which the Author of our Faith has Himself alluded in His writings. (WOB 162)*

This statement clearly means that the Lesser Peace while necessary, is not sufficient for the fullest development of human potentials both in individuals and in collectives. It is not sufficient because, among other things, "religious strife and racial prejudice will not have entirely left the hearts and souls of the human race."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in the last analysis, how much can we rely on superstructural political, cultural, and economic changes that are not grounded in spiritual transformations that have "revolutionized the soul of mankind"? (PB 117) We need more than good intentions.

This intermediate stage is called Great Peace, a terminology used in the Bahá'í Writings in Persian, and as elaborated by Ali Nakhjavani, the historical nature of human development means there will be an intermediate, transition period between the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace. In this transition period, we can observe the appearance of some of the key components of the Most Great Peace.<sup>18</sup> This intermediate phase is the "Great Peace," is the time when "the Bahá'í Teachings will have beyond any doubt penetrated the organs of the Lesser Peace"<sup>19</sup> and when religious and racial prejudice will be eliminated. Bahá'í institutions will become influential at all levels in the unfolding unification of humankind and the renewal of all aspects of human existence. However, even at this point, the crowning achievement of this development is missing, namely the Most Great Peace. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh,

*That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith. This can in no wise be achieved except through the power of a skilled, an all-powerful and inspired Physician. This, verily, is the truth, and all else naught but error. (SLH 91 emphasis added)*

'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race, and become a single people. All will dwell in one common fatherland, which is the planet itself. (SAQ 64–65) Of course, this spiritual unity will reflect itself in the governance of the new world order and the establishment of a renewed cultural, scientific, economic and political existence.

Because the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace are phases of a single historical process, we shall discuss them both in our study of the Writings and Kant's "Perpetual Peace."



### 3. A World Federation

The best known feature of Kant's "*Perpetual Peace*" is his proposal for a "league of peace" (Kant 1983, 117) whose goal is to "end all wars forever." (ibid) In Kant's view, the most practical way to achieve this goal is by means of a "federation of free states" (ibid 115) that will eventually include all nations on earth. As members of this "league" or "federation," all nations give up the right of their "savage (lawless) freedom" (ibid 117) to make war just as individuals give up some of their 'lawless' freedoms in return for the benefits of living in a peaceful nation. Restraining the exercise of some of their freedoms is the only way for individuals and nations to the gain greater advantages made possible by cooperation, especially in regards to collective security. Kant says, "For the sake of its own security, each nation can and should demand that the others enter a contract resembling the civil one and guaranteeing the rights of each." (ibid) Furthermore, for Kant, the guarantee of national rights was an absolute necessity in upholding peace:

This league does not seek any power of the sort possessed by nations but only maintenance and security for each nation's own freedom as well as that of other nations leagued with it **without their having thereby to subject themselves to civil laws and their constraints** (as men in a state of nature must do). It can be shown that this idea of federalism should eventually include all nations and lead to perpetual peace. (ibid 117 emphasis added)

In other words, Kant's vision limits the powers of the federation to external affairs, specifically in regards to waging war, and does not envisage any jurisdiction over a state's internal issues. Nations will not be subject to "civil laws" the way individuals are subject to "civil laws" within the state. This view harmonizes with his previously announced principle that "No nation shall forcibly interfere with the

constitution and government of another." (ibid 109) The principle of national sovereignty, i.e. non-interference in a state's internal affairs prevails in Kant's proposals.

This aspect of "*Perpetual Peace*" shows that Kant's thinking lies within the framework of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) which established the modern nation-state system on the principle of absolute national sovereignty. Consequently, he is at pains to point out that nations voluntarily join the "league of peace" "*without their having thereby to subject themselves to civil laws and their constraints.*" (ibid 117) They are only subjecting themselves to a voluntary agreement regarding external relationships, specifically about war and the capacity to go to war and not about their own internal affairs. There they retain absolute sovereign rights. According to Kant, nations give up the right to war only because it is irrational: it replaces reason with force and it serves only those "who are disposed to seek one another's destruction and thus to find perpetual peace in the grave." (ibid) In short, it serves only the blood-thirsty.

However, in one respect Kant's proposal leaves the Westphalian framework behind, viz. the recognition that purely nation-based solutions to the problem of war will not work. Simple bi-lateral agreements among individual nations are not enough to ensure peace. Consequently, some kind of 'supra-national' agency is needed, a "league of peace" which ensures that all members are committed to the same basic principles, i.e. have unity of vision, and act within the same basic limitations, i.e. have some unity of action. This unity of outlook and action lays the foundation for predictability in internationality and, thereby, for stability and peace. International action will thus be driven by law and not by personal will.

Nevertheless, Kant's move beyond the Westphalian model is rather limited, more a matter of improving than actually dealing with the fundamental short-comings of the model. As we shall observe

below, his proposals leave too much power in the hands of individual nations and rulers to be truly effective in preserving peace. In short, “*Perpetual Peace*” is too restricted in its scope to achieve its goal. There is, for example, no clear method for dealing with recalcitrant rulers and nations or even those who renege on their commitments, i.e. no way of dealing with “rogue states” which threaten the peace. It is also doubtful that by themselves Kant’s proposals are enough to lay a foundation for a lasting peace. For example, he is silent about the need for a unified world-view among the peoples of the world—as distinct from their governments—or the abolition of racial, religious and class prejudice. These are not just theoretical quibbles. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century humankind has had bitter experience with the ability of clashing world-views or ideologies and racial, religious and class prejudices to plunge the planet into mass warfare despite such international agreements as the Kellogg-Briand Pact (General Treaty for the Renunciation of War, 1928), which was signed by virtually every participant in WW II. Obviously, purely political or diplomatic agreements are not enough to ensure peace.

The Bahá’í teachings certainly agree with Kant as to the need for a global federation in preventing war and to establish a “world federal system” (WOB 204) in which humankind will be “liberated from the curse of war and its miseries.” (WOB 204) Elsewhere the Guardian refers to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s hope “in the hoisting of the standard of the Lesser Peace, in the unification of mankind, and in the establishment of a world federal government on this planet.” (CF 126) However, while for Kant, the realization of a global federation or “league of peace” marks the terminus of humankind’s socio-political evolution, for the Bahá’í Faith, the Lesser Peace which brings about “*unity in the political realm*” (SWAB 32) is only a transition phase to the still more comprehensive Most Great Peace in which

*all nations and kindreds will be gathered together under the shadow of this Divine... and will become a single nation.*

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*Religious and sectarian antagonism, the hostility of races and peoples, and differences among nations, will be eliminated. All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race, and become a single people. All will dwell in one common fatherland* (SAQ 65 emphasis added).

In the Bahá'í vision, the ultimate end of our social evolution will be a unity based on spiritual principles which will over-ride differences of religion, race, class and nationality, and make the earth itself our homeland. This, of course, requires a momentous spiritual transformation that will, in effect, make politics as we know them, obsolete.

For Kant, such a vision raises concerns about national sovereignty i.e. the rights of nations. When all "*dwell in one common fatherland*" what remains of the autonomy of the national state? As he says, "Such a federation is necessarily tied rationally to the concept of the right of nations." (Kant 1983, 117) Only in regards to war-making can there be any limitation of national sovereignty or rights. The basic problem with this is that as noted above, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century we have learned by experience that establishing peace requires measures far beyond political and diplomatic agreements for reducing the ability to wage war; enduring peace can only be established when other, non-political/diplomatic conditions are met such as unity of world-view and the abolition of racial, national, religious and class prejudice. It is relatively easy for well-meaning or politically shrewd nations to admit that unilateral war-making is not a national right. As Kant says, "[F]rom the throne of its moral legislative power, reason absolutely condemns war as a means of determining the right." (ibid 116) Few would argue that being stronger proves one is right. However, the question that 20<sup>th</sup> Century history raises is 'How long can such good political intentions last if the foundations for peace are not firmly in place'? How long can they resist internal pressure from a population ablaze with racial, religious, nationalist or class fervor? And how long can they refrain from war in a struggle of ideologies? Kant, of course,

could not have foreseen such developments and, therefore, he set up no provisions for preventing or short-circuiting them. The Bahá'í Writings, on the other hand, seem to have foreseen such developments insofar as they prescribe, as we shall see, the exact measures needed to forestall them. While they do not use the word 'ideology'—who would have understood it at the time?—they do prescribe the exact remedies needed to undermine and undo the effects of these various forms of prejudice and their ideological outgrowths.

The Bahá'í Writings both agree and disagree with Kant's proposals in "*Perpetual Peace*." They agree that the "league of peace" must be a federation of some kind. Asked by an official of the American government how best to serve both the interests of his country and the people of the world, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised him "*to assist in the eventual application of the principle of federalism underlying the government of your own country to the relationships now existing between the peoples and nations of the world.*" (WOB 36 emphasis added) In American federalism, responsibilities and rights are divided between the central government which looks after the well-being of the whole federation, and the states which look after a particular part of the union. The individual states are united by a covenant or agreement but are not subject to an autocratic centralized government. In this regard, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also states,

*It is very evident that in the future there shall be no centralization in the countries of the world, be they constitutional in government, republican or democratic in form. The United States may be held up as the example of future government—that is to say, each province will be independent in itself, but there will be federal union protecting the interests of the various independent states* (PUP 167 emphasis added).

It is noteworthy that the "*federal union*" will protect the legitimate interests of its "*independent states.*" What these "*legitimate interests*"

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are may, of course, vary from one historical circumstance to another; this guarantees flexibility but the rights and responsibilities of the constituent states prevents this power to look after the whole from becoming a dictatorial centralized power. According to Shoghi Effendi, the principle of federalism applies even to the Most Great Peace; he describes the international form of government in the Most Great Peace as "a world federal system." (WOB 203)

This general agreement notwithstanding, the Bahá'í concept of federalism differs substantially from Kant's. The difference is not one of degree but of kind. As we have already seen, Kant writes that nation-states can join the federal union of the "league of peace" "without their having thereby to subject themselves to civil laws and their constraints." (Kant 1983, 117) Elsewhere he writes, "Nations can press their rights only by waging war and never in a trial before an independent tribunal," (ibid 116) and that nations "have outgrown the compulsion to subject themselves to another legal constitution that is subject to someone else's concept of right." (ibid) In other words, nations remain absolutely sovereign except in regards to war-making which they relinquish by voluntary agreement. There is no supra-national authority or tribunal where a state may be arraigned.

Such is not the case in the Bahá'í vision of a world federalism neither in the Lesser Peace nor in the Most Great Peace. Shoghi Effendi points out that Bahá'u'lláh advocates "the *inevitable curtailment of unfettered national sovereignty* as an indispensable preliminary to the formation of the future Commonwealth of all the nations of the world." (WOB 40) This preliminary to the Commonwealth of the Most Great Peace is foundational to the Bahá'í vision of the future world order. Humanity must abandon the basic principle of the Westphalian system of international politics in order to attain genuine security and progress in eliminating the basic causes of war. This alone makes the difference between Kant's "*Perpetual Peace*" and the

Bahá'í vision a difference not in degree but in kind. In essence, Kant's plan is still Westphalian in nature, and Bahá'u'lláh's is not and this divergence leads to a number of significant consequences.

For example, as Shoghi Effendi tells us, there will be more than a "league of peace"—there will be a "world super-state" (WOB 40) in which all nations will not only give up the right to make war, and, by implication, to build up war-making potentials, but will also give up "certain rights to impose taxes." (WOB 40) The political and diplomatic provisions for limiting the capacity for waging war are, in principle, present in Kant's dictum that "standing armies (*miles perpetuus*) shall be gradually abolished." (Kant 1983, 108) Obviously, standing armies must be eliminated not only because they encourage wars of aggression by encouraging arms-races that increase the risks of war breaking out, but also because they impose needless and burdensome costs on the citizens of a nation. However, nothing in "*Perpetual Peace*" suggests that the "league of peace" will "include within its orbit an international executive adequate to enforce supreme and unchallengeable authority on every recalcitrant member of the commonwealth" (WOB 40). For Kant, this integral part of the Bahá'í vision would go too far in requiring nations "to subject themselves to civil laws and their constraints (as men in a state of nature must do), (Kant 1983, 117 emphasis added) something which he finds unacceptable. Because it entails a severe curtailment of national autonomy, Even more unacceptable to Kant is the concept of "a supreme tribunal whose judgment will have a binding effect even in such cases where the parties concerned did not voluntarily agree to submit their case to its consideration." (WOB 40) Obviously this entails a severe curtailment of national autonomy since according to Kant, nations can never pursue their rights in "a trial before an independent tribunal." (Kant 1983, 116) Such subjection would be exactly the kind undergone by individuals in the state of nature. However, historical developments have surpassed Kant's rather Westphalian version of global federalism. Rather than having

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absolute, even autarkical independence, members of the WTO take each other to binding arbitration on a regular basis and political leaders have found themselves charged and/or tried by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for policies they have enacted both abroad and in their own countries. Finally nations can find themselves being sanctioned by the U.N. for their behavior. Appeals to the principle of absolute national sovereignty are still made but they no longer carry the conceptual or ethical force they once did. The Westphalian concept of unfettered national independence is rapidly becoming an artifact of humankind's political past.

On this issue of absolute national independence and tribunals, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*It is necessary that the nations and governments organize an international tribunal to which all their disputes and differences shall be referred. The decision of that tribunal shall be final... International questions will come before the universal tribunal, and so the cause of warfare will be taken away. (PUP 300 emphasis added)*

In other words, on certain matters at least, nations can indeed, be required to face an international tribunal which is akin to a Supreme Court in a federal system. Moreover, this tribunal's decisions are "final," i.e. not appealable to any higher authority and thus, binding on nation-states. Shoghi Effendi adds,

*A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. (WOB 202 emphasis added)*

The fact that this tribunal's verdicts are compulsory in "all and any disputes" involving the "various elements" making up the "universal system"



suggests that even non-state actors like NGO's, transnational corporations, cartels and international unions fall under its jurisdiction. After all, modern politics, especially at the international level, is no longer limited to state-actors as was traditionally the case. This position, too, indicates a substantial difference with Kant's proposals and outlook insofar as the Bahá'í plan is not necessarily limited to state-actors.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, it is important to re-emphasize that the Bahá'í version of world federalism simply applies the federalist principle of the division of powers to the international sphere. The central government and each constituent state, province, canton or republic have their own, inviolable sphere of rights, powers and responsibilities. There will be no autarkies. "*[E]ach province will be independent in itself, but there will be federal union protecting the interests of the various independent states.*" (PUP 167) With this division of power "the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded." (WOB 202) According to Shoghi Effendi, even though there will be "a single code of international law" (WOB 40) in the future world commonwealth, "the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded." (WOB 202) He adds that in a Bahá'í global federation, there is no intent "to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential **if the evils of excessive centralization are to be avoided.**" (WOB 41 emphasis added) Over-centralization is seen as a cause of war for which reason one of the goals of the future world is "*[t]o cast aside centralization which promotes despotism is the exigency of the time. This will be **productive of international peace.***" (PUP 167 emphasis added)

A federal framework is also conducive to the essential Bahá'í concept of unity in diversity, i.e. the goal of preserving unity while at the same time maintaining

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the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race (WOB 41).

Shoghi Effendi summarizes the Bahá'í position: "It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity" (WOB 41). Federalism is the only way to achieve this goal.

Because excessive centralism inevitably leads to tensions and hostilities, it is an example of 'structural violence,' i.e. social, economic and political structures that repress certain groups and deprive them of their rights. This repression is built into law, political processes and rules, social customs and economic arrangements and are regarded as 'normal' or 'appropriate' by those who benefit from the arrangements. Sooner or later, however, such structural violence erupts into open hostilities because it is inherently unjust; "the absence of justice is the principle source of social upheaval and unrest."<sup>20</sup> On this issue as well, there is a significant difference between the Bahá'í Writings and Kant, who simply passes over this subject. This is noteworthy because some of his predecessors in writing 'peace literature' such as Emeric Cruce and St. Thomas More touched on many of these issues as part of their proposals. Whether Kant was aware of them or not is a matter for Kant specialists to decide. What matters to this study is that in contrast to the Bahá'í Writings, Kant gives no consideration to the topic of structural violence.

The Bahá'í Writings make it clear that economic injustice is an absolutely intolerable form of structural violence and to cure it envisages a "world community in which all economic barriers will have been permanently demolished and the interdependence of Capital and Labor definitely recognized." (WOB 40) Unlike Kant, the

Bahá'í federal system recognizes that economic ties are necessary to establish and maintain peace both within nations and among them. Within nations, the Writings teach that the extremes of wealth and poverty should be abolished (DG 20) not only because such extremes are unjust but also because they create a climate for class conflict within society. By recognizing the “interdependence of Capital and Labor” Bahá'í federalism removes the basis for all concepts of class warfare, i.e. the belief that the interests of the working classes and of capitalists or investors are always irrevocably opposed in a struggle that can only end with the complete victory of one or the other. By saying that “Capital and Labor” are interdependent, the Bahá'í federalism suggests that their best interests can be managed so they are complementary insofar as each depends on the other. Thus, each benefits by restraining and conforming its demands for the good of the whole economic system. Furthermore, at the international level, making nations economically inter-dependent and, thereby making each of them an integral part of the global economy will help make destructive actions such as war economically unfeasible. The more national economies depend on each other, the less they are able to go to war against each other.

Finally, the Bahá'í federal world order will be one in which:

the clamor of religious fanaticism and strife will have been forever stilled; in which the flame of racial animosity will have been finally extinguished; in which a single code of international law—the product of the considered judgment of the world's federated representatives—shall have as its sanction the instant and coercive intervention of the combined forces of the federated units; and finally a world community in which the fury of a capricious and militant nationalism will have been transmuted into an abiding **consciousness of world citizenship** (WOB 40 emphasis added)

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In the future state sought by Bahá'ís, some of the major causes for war will be eliminated, i.e. "religious fanaticism" as well as "racism" and lawlessness or anarchy in international affairs. The first two undermine peace because they are really forms of tribalism dividing humankind into "them versus us" factions and, thereby, creating a culture of conflict that is the necessary psycho-social pre-condition for war. Without a "single code of international law" there will be anarchy in international affairs which in turn engenders an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and fear of the unpredictable, in which arms races flourish. These, in turn, destabilize international affairs and often make it easy for wars to be ignited.

There will also be a monumental expansion of loyalties as people see themselves not only as citizens of a particular nation but also as citizens of the world. This widening of perspective is not merely a matter of sentiment. Our loyalties influence our priorities and these affect our actions. For example, the issue of global poverty elicits different responses from those who think primarily in terms of a global loyalty than from those who think primarily in terms of national loyalty. We would approach problems not from a particularistic perspective of one nation or group of nations, but from the perspective of the whole world. This is especially true in an age when very few national issues do not have international repercussions given globalism in trade, communications, travel, finance, military matters and increasingly, culture. Of course, this expansion of loyalties is not intended "to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts"(WOB 41) but an "intelligent patriotism" means precisely that we can recognize that the long-term best interests of our own country are in self-restraint and cooperation for the good of the whole global community.

The cumulative importance of these differences between Kant's "*Perpetual Peace*" and the Bahá'í vision of a global federalism is that the Bahá'í vision seeks to remedy the underlying conditions that make war possible whereas Kant's proposals for the most part

seek remedies at the political or diplomatic level. Consequently, his proposals are primarily superstructural in nature and do little to remedy the underlying causes that are pre-conditions for war. Among these are international anarchy, i.e. too much national independence or diplomatic and economic autarchy; racism, religious fanaticism, “militant nationalism;” class warfare ideology, and extremes of wealth and poverty. “*Perpetual Peace*” has little if anything to say about these.

The diplomatic or political nature of Kant’s proposals is evident even from a cursory examination. For example, the first, “No treaty of peace that tacitly reserves issue for a future war shall be held valid” (Kant 1983, 107) is something that only rulers or governments can decide among themselves. What is or is not valid in international affairs is a matter of political convention. The same can be said regarding the rule that “The rights of nations shall be based on a federation of free states.” (ibid 115) Who else but rulers or governments could agree to or sign such an accord? It is strictly an issue of government-to-government negotiation and ratification. Here are other ‘articles’ of Kant’s “*Perpetual Peace*” that are largely matters of diplomatic convention:

1. No nation at war... shall permit such acts of war as shall make mutual trust impossible during some future time. [Assassinations, instigation of treason etc.] (ibid 110)
2. No independent nation be it large or small may be acquired by another nation by inheritance, exchange, purchase or gift. (ibid 108)
3. No national debt shall be contracted in connection with the foreign affairs of the nation. (ibid 109)
4. No nation shall forcibly interfere with the constitution and government of another. (ibid)
5. Standing armies (*miles perpetuus*) shall be gradually abolished. (ibid 108)

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The decision to establish and abide by each of these articles or conventions lies entirely in the hands of a nation's political and diplomatic leadership. Who else would have the authority to agree to and institute any of them? Who else could be responsible for maintaining them? Who else but leaders and diplomats could amend, abrogate or counteract them on the international scene? Of course, the Bahá'í vision of a new world order also includes political measures but it focuses equally if not more on establishing the necessary pre-conditions for an enduring peace.

Reasonable and workable as they are, Kant's proposals implicitly assume that if nations and rulers agree to these provisions, there shall be universal peace, i.e. that political will or fiat are sufficient to create and maintain peace perpetually. There are at least two serious difficulties with Kant's assumption. The first is the "*force majeure*" problem, i.e. external forces compel actions that a ruler does not wish to take.<sup>21</sup> Such actions may include violations of the "league of peace." Common examples throughout history are natural disasters such as prolonged unseasonable weather, disease and famine or unfortunate conjunctions of events ("perfect storms") like precipitous plunges in economic fortunes. If, for example, a ruler's people are facing starvation and a neighboring ruler has a vast surplus he will not share, the first ruler may not have much choice about going to war to get food to get territory where food can be produced. This violates at least one of Kant's rules, i.e. not acquiring territory by conquest. The ruler may not want to do so this but the people may demand it regardless of what treaties have been signed. Political will or fiat is simply inadequate to keep the peace in such cases. As we shall see later, the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace outlined in the Bahá'í Writings have ways of solving these difficulties. World War I is another example of the "*force majeure*" problem. The balance of power politics was supposed to prevent WW I yet leaders quickly lost control of a seemingly unstoppable cascade of unforeseen events. Again we see that diplomatic means and political will

may be sufficient to establish peace but they are not always sufficient to maintain it especially in times of crisis.

The second weakness in Kant's reliance on diplomatic means is the "bad apple" problem. The inevitable succession of monarchs or changes in republican politics make it doubtful that political fiat alone can maintain peace perpetually because sooner or later there will arise one or a number of leaders who manipulate political, economic and social factors into an 'explosive mix' that suits their aggressive purposes. This is exactly what led to WW II. Despite the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1929) which renounced war "as an instrument of national policy,"<sup>22</sup> it was three signatories—Japan, Italy and Germany—which manipulated and/or violated diplomacy to bring about war. Again, this shows the limitations of purely political measures to establish and keep peace. More than treaties are needed to maintain peace. We shall examine below how the Bahá'í vision deals with this problem.

It is, therefore, clear that Kant's diplomatic proposals are incapable of maintaining peace because they do not address the underlying conditions that make war possible and, indeed, likely. However, Kant does appear to recognize the importance of underlying conditions for peace in one important—albeit political—respect. In the first place, he believes in a constitutional state, one in which the exercise of power is limited by law so that the will of an individual does not become the supreme power. To have "domestic legitimacy,"<sup>23</sup> a state must "cohere with the concept of right" (Kant 1983, 115) within countries. Without this coherence with right, a state becomes despotic and despotism facilitates war. In conjunction with this requirement for "domestic legitimacy," Kant stipulates that the "civil constitution of every nation should be republican" (ibid 112) by which he means it should have a division between the executive and legislative branches of government. (ibid 114) Republicanism also ensures the translation of the public will into political action, a development that he believes "provides for this desirable result, namely, perpetual peace." (ibid 113)

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According to Kant, in a republic, war requires the "consent of the citizenry" (ibid) and, therefore, will also require the citizens to make great sacrifice of materiel and lives, often themselves or their children. Except for self-defense, citizens are rarely inclined to go to war. Moreover, since in a representative government rulers "take[] hold of the public will and treat it as their own private will" (ibid 114) the public will is translated into political action and war will, thereby, avoided.

The foregoing explanation shows that even when Kant discusses a nation's internal conditions for peace, he focuses on the political aspects of national life, i.e. on legitimacy, power, representation, leadership and so on. This is not to suggest that these matters are unimportant but as the far more comprehensive Bahá'í vision shows, while they are necessary they are not nearly sufficient to achieve the abolition of war. From a Bahá'í perspective, this makes Kant's proposals deficient.

Furthermore, Kant's proposals are clearly associated with the concept of 'negative peace,' i.e. focusing on the actual fighting, either preventing it or stopping it once it starts. In this approach, peace is simply the absence of actual fighting.<sup>24</sup> Negative peace only addresses "overt, direct violence but largely ignores those social inequalities... [or] 'structural violence' from which overt violence often springs."<sup>25</sup> We shall examine below what the Bahá'í Writings have to say about 'positive peace' and the creation of conditions that facilitate peace, but for now it is important to note that the Writings also concern themselves with 'negative peace' i.e. the prevention or stopping of actual combat:

*Should any king take up arms against another, all should unitedly arise and prevent him. If this be done, the nations of the world will no longer require any armaments, except for the purpose of preserving the security of their realms and of maintaining internal*



*order within their territories. This will ensure the peace and composure of every people, government and nation (GWB 249)*

Clearly, Bahá'u'lláh is aware of the necessity of preventing aggression which means that action must take place before the aggression starts. In other words, He recommends pre-emption, a controversial issue even in our age with a United Nations to oversee collective security. Nothing in "*Perpetual Peace*" suggests that the principle of pre-emption fits into its framework. On the other hand, Bahá'u'lláh explicitly mandates pre-emption, He says "*all should unitedly arise and prevent him*" i.e. He speaks in the imperative; pre-emption is a duty for leaders. This is vitally important in facilitating peace. If nations can be sure that potential aggressors will be prevented from gathering arms and attacking, then they can meet their security needs even while keeping armaments at a minimum. This, in turn, reduces military tension among states, i.e. "ensure peace and composure," and allows other, peaceful methods of problem solving to do their work.

However, Bahá'u'lláh's injunctions go beyond the principle of pre-emption. In His Tablet to Queen Victoria he says, "*Should any one among you take up arms against another, rise ye all against him, for this is naught but manifest justice.*" (WOB 40, 192) Again, it is important to notice the imperative mode of this statement. This is not a matter of choice, of political preference or even of popular will. It is an unqualified duty and this duty is identified with "justice." Modern history justifies Bahá'u'lláh's strictness in this regard. The events leading to WW II show the results of not following Bahá'u'lláh's commands: Japanese aggression in China in 1935; Fascist Italy's attacks on Ethiopia starting in 1934; and Nazi Germany's march into the Rhineland in 1936 are all significant preludes to the global conflict of WW II. Nor should we carry out Bahá'u'lláh's command in a half-hearted or sporadic fashion; doing so simply opens the door to aggression as various nations 'try their luck' in avoiding counteraction.

#### 4: Peace-Building

Let us now turn our attention to positive peace-building. In its broadest terms, peace-building involves establishing the political, social, cultural, economic and spiritual conditions that make possible an enduring peace. The concept of peace-building is based on the conclusion that "[t]raditional methods of diplomacy have proved ineffective in preventing and resolving... hostilities."<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that diplomacy is unnecessary, but only that without the foundations for a lasting peace, diplomacy is not sufficient to prevent wars from erupting. While diplomats can make peace, they are unable to maintain it without establishing conditions that make peace a more advantageous option than war. Peace-building assumes that if the right conditions exist within and among states, there is little if any chance of war occurring because there will always be more political, social, cultural, economic spiritual and even military factors against war than for it.

Kant's "*Perpetual Peace*" really has only one proposal in regards to peace-building i.e. that all states must be representative and republican. (What that means precisely we shall examine in a moment.) This proposal makes "*Perpetual Peace*" one of the first examples of what is now known as "democratic peace theory"<sup>27</sup> according to which citizens of democratic states do not go to war, at least not against other democratic states. In this view, "the spread of legitimate domestic political orders would eventually bring an end to international conflict."<sup>28</sup> Peace is "fundamentally a question of establishing legitimate domestic orders throughout the world."<sup>29</sup> Kant would agree for which reason he insists that the "civil constitution of every nation should be republican." (Kant 1983, 112) Constitutional republican states are not much inclined to go to war because the traumas of war are not borne only by professional armies but also by the general population. The vast majority of people are generally adverse to such ordeals, though, of course, defensive war may be the exception. Consequently, according to Kant, if all nations

were republics as he prescribes, then war will be eliminated. However, Kant's assent to "democratic peace theory" is qualified because he does not think being republican by itself is not enough assure peace. That is why he proposes the "league of peace." Republicanism is part of the solution but not all of it. On this he is in agreement with the Bahá'í Writings.

It should be noted that we must be careful not to interpret Kant's republicanism as identical to democracy. Universal suffrage, a *sine qua non* for modern democracy is not even mentioned in "*Perpetual Peace*"; indeed, Kant is "no champion of democratic government"<sup>30</sup> in its modern form. He associates democracy as we understand it with "despotism" (ibid 114) because majority rule—"the tyranny of the majority"—threatens individual freedom. As we have seen before, Kant's republicanism only requires representative governments in which the executive and legislative branches are separate. The representation need not come from popularly elected representatives.

The Bahá'í Writings agree with Kant that representative government is, in the last analysis, the only legitimate form of governance. However, the Writings differ markedly from Kant in defining what constitutes a legitimate government. Unlike Kant, they show preference for popular democracy. Bahá'u'lláh states that although "*a republican form of government profiteth all the peoples of the world,*" (TB 28) He prefers constitutional monarchy which combines democratic representative government with monarchy. He writes,

*The system of government which the British people have adopted in London appeareth to be good, for it is adorned with the light of both kingship and of the consultation of the people. (TB 93)*

The British parliamentary system is, of course, a form of democratic representative government in which the representatives are elected by popular vote. At the same time, Britain is a constitutional monarchy,

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i.e. a popularly elected democratic government with a monarch who is the head of state but does not rule. Actual executive power rests with a prime minister who, as head of the government, rules in the name of the monarch who is the titular head of state and has largely ceremonial functions.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá clearly supports democratic i.e. free and consultative forms of government:

*Consider what a vast difference exists between modern democracy and the old forms of despotism. Under an autocratic government the opinions of men are not free, and development is stifled, whereas in democracy, because thought and speech are not restricted, the greatest progress is witnessed. It is likewise true in the world of religion. When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail—that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs—development and growth are inevitable. (PUP 197 emphasis added)*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá portrays “modern democracy” positively and associates it with “the greatest progress.” The “old forms of despotism,” whether secular or religious, hinder progress and development by stifling free thought and expression. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stresses the importance of freedom elsewhere too. He makes freedom the third of the ‘seven candles of unity’ and, in his introduction to the seven candles, individual freedom is the underlying condition which makes peace and unity possible. (SWAB 31) For example, he mentions the freedom to travel and communicate, to associate without hindrance, and to exchange viewpoints and beliefs. Because of these freedoms and the interdependence they encourage, “the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved.” (PUP 197) Here, too, we observe how closely freedom, democracy and progress are connected in the Bahá'í world-view. The Bahá'í International Community makes a similar point, stating that

democracy is among the chief characteristics that ensures human progress.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, grassroots democracy is an integral part of the Bahá'í Faith's internal structure as seen for example in the Feast which "combines religious worship with grassroots governance and social development."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the Feast is an arena of democracy at the very root of society<sup>33</sup> and in that sense, of the Bahá'í social order.

However, in reflecting on the subject of democracy it is important to keep in mind Shoghi Effendi's statement that

No form of democratic government; no system of autocracy or of dictatorship, whether monarchical or republican; no intermediary scheme of a purely aristocratic order; nor even any of the recognized types of theocracy... none of these can be identified or be said to conform with the Administrative Order which the master-hand of its perfect Architect has fashioned... It blends and harmonizes, as no government fashioned by mortal hands has as yet accomplished, the salutary truths which each of these systems undoubtedly contains without vitiating the integrity of those God-given verities on which it is ultimately founded. (WOB 152)

The future Bahá'í Administrative Order will incorporate the positive aspects of the various forms of government without "introducing within its machinery any of the objectionable features which they inherently possess." (ibid) Indeed, Shoghi Effendi explicitly states that "The Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh must in no wise be regarded as purely democratic in character" (ibid) because "democracies depend fundamentally upon getting their mandate from the people." (ibid) Shoghi Effendi's words strongly suggest that democracy, while invaluable in the progress of human development, is not the end-station in regards to humankind's socio-political evolution.

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The Writings also associate progress and peace. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*God has chosen you for the purpose of investigating reality and promulgating international peace; God has chosen you for the progress and development of humanity (PUP 434).*

Elsewhere he says,

*Bigotry and dogmatic adherence to ancient beliefs have become the central and fundamental source of animosity among men, the obstacle to human progress, the cause of warfare and strife, the destroyer of peace, composure and welfare in the world. (PUP 439)*

The reason for associating progress and peace is clear: unless people today progress beyond the "old order" (PB ix) and its restricted beliefs, attitudes, world-view and ways of thinking and acting, we shall be stuck with its political, religious, cultural and economic hostilities. If we cannot move beyond the "old order" we shall be trapped within it and its constantly erupting wars as we have been in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This, in turn, undermines all other positive human developments or progress.

The foregoing argument makes it clear that "*Perpetual Peace*" and the Bahá'í Writings converge on an "inside-out"<sup>34</sup> approach to international relation insofar as they both link the internal, political constitution of a state to its external relations. Each sees the establishment of representative and republican government as conducive to peace, although the Writings differ from Kant inasmuch as they require democratic representative government. Both also agree that representative government, while necessary, is not sufficient to guarantee peace which is why Kant proposes a "league of peace" and the Bahá'í Writings some form of a global tribunal.

However, unlike Kant, the Bahá'í Writings outline various vital peace-building measures necessary to ensuring peace in the phase of the Lesser Peace and its fruition in the Most Great Peace. In our view, the most fundamental teaching to eliminate conflict is recognizing the essential unity of humankind. Without a deep commitment to this idea, i.e. a commitment so strong it will over-ride cultural, national, ethnic, class, economic, religious and political barriers, there is no realistic hope of establishing a durable peace. We must learn to make loyalty to humanity our prime—though not only loyalty—and to realize that the best way to serve our own nation or sub-group is by serving the good of the humankind as a whole. As long as we fail to shift our primary loyalty to humanity we will continue to be divided along lines that sooner or later fracture into hostilities. The reason why is clear: a primary loyalty to humankind limits the influence of narrower national, ethnic, religious or other interests on our world-view and decision-making. Or, to put it in pragmatic terms, until the good of all as opposed to the good of some becomes the primary goal of global action, we cannot rationally expect to achieve and maintain peace. Anything less inevitably pits some against others and re-creates situations that undermine peace and facilitate war. Moreover, until human beings inwardly identify themselves with all other humans, i.e. until our identity as humans trumps all other identities, we cannot create a mental and spiritual condition that is prepared to make the sacrifices necessary for global peace. To use a sports expression, everyone must be willing to “take one for the team.” In support of this psycho-spiritual condition, the Writings frequently mention the importance of sacrifice. (PUP 130) As Bahá'u'lláh says, “*Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind...*” (PB viii) Such a shift in our scale of loyalties is an absolute *sine qua non* for the elimination of war.

To support the contention that realizing the oneness of humankind is essential to peace, the Bahá'í Writings provide two ways in which

humankind is essentially one. The first of these is the universal possession of a "rational soul." (SAQ 208)

*The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names—the human spirit and the rational soul—designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things. (SAQ 208)*

This may be understood from a secular and spiritual perspective. From a perspective of secular philosophical anthropology, this statement asserts that rationality is the distinguishing feature of all human beings. Regardless of culture, historical time or circumstances, all humans possess the power of rational thought which allows them to discover the truth about reality and reason abstractly. (SAQ 187–188) Even a cursory glance at human achievement shows that humans possess rationality to such an overwhelming extent that we are, in effect, different in kind from animals. In other words, there is a uniquely characterized human nature that we all share<sup>35</sup>—and this human nature is one of the foundation stones of human unity. Of course, this single human nature with its countless potentials can be expressed in different ways in different times and circumstances. But in the last analysis, it is always a clearly recognizable human expression. The oneness of humankind is also observable at the physical level; humans share a fundamentally identical physiology so that doctors trained in one part of the world can practice medicine in another. There are some physiological differences but these are accidentals adhering to an essential or universal identity.

Furthermore, it is possible to take a spiritual perspective on the concept of the rational soul. The rational soul is the basis for our spiritual lives since it sets us free from an animal captivity to the senses and allows us to reason not only about physical, natural phenomena but



also about non-physical beings like God, gods and ultimate powers, as well as revelation, the soul, Manifestations and spirituality in general. Consequently, the universality of religion and the efforts to understand and explain non-physical reality provides additional evidence for the universality of human nature and the rational soul.

The Writings also offer a purely spiritual reason for accepting the oneness of humanity: we are all the creations or children of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "Look upon the whole human race as members of one family, all children of God; and, in so doing, you will see no difference between them." (PT 170) Elsewhere he states,

*each individual member of the human family is a leaf or branch upon the Adamic tree; that all are sheltered beneath the protecting mercy and providence of God; that all are the children of God, fruit upon the one tree of His love. God is equally compassionate and kind to all the leaves, branches and fruit of this tree. Therefore, there is no satanic tree whatever—Satan being a product of human minds and of instinctive human tendencies toward error. (PUP 230)*

And again,

*therefore must all souls become as one soul, and all hearts as one heart. Let all be set free from the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire, and in the oneness of their love for God find a new way of life. (SWAB 76)*

Our 'humanity' must be our only over-arching identity, which, while including others, has priority over them. However, we are not to lose our identities: rather, we are to become "as" one soul and "as" one heart," i.e. distinct but harmonized by one supreme identity. The mandate of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is to let this essential oneness of humankind achieve outward expression in the lives of individuals, societies

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and the world in general. We should cease indulging in a fetishism of artificial, man-made barriers, and seek ways to make differences work together, or, if necessary, rid ourselves of them altogether. As Bahá'u'lláh says, "*He Who is your Lord, the All-Merciful, cherisheth in His heart the desire of beholding the entire human race as one soul and one body.*" (GWB 213 emphasis added) He also says,

*If any man were to meditate on that which the Scriptures, sent down from the heaven of God's holy Will, have revealed, he would readily recognize that their purpose is that all men shall be regarded as one soul, so that the seal bearing the words "The Kingdom shall be God's" may be stamped on every heart* (GWB 259 emphasis added).

In our interpretation, the injunction to regard each other as "one soul and one body" means that we must work together, cooperatively, as the human body and soul work together to engender a unified living being. Consequently, we must set aside all accidental differences that hinder laboring together on the common project of building peace. (Diversities that do not prevent us from working together are a different matter.) In other words, we must work organically, with each part in its own way supporting every other part. Applied to the planet as a whole, this means that we must not only be unified physically or by material means but also spiritually, as in "*one common faith.*" (SAQ 65)

These statements from the Writings make it clear that the oneness of humankind must be transformed from a fine sentiment for ceremonial occasions into a robust, universally applied principle that informs thoughts, feelings and actions both in individuals and collectives. For peace to be enduring instead of temporary, we must cease to think, feel and act as if race, religion, nationality or class constituted essential differences among humans instead of being mere accidentals.

Kant's "*Perpetual Peace*" does not include the inherent oneness of humankind as part of its foundations for a durable peace. It is mentioned neither explicitly nor implicitly. The closest he comes to this idea is his concept of "cosmopolitan right" (Kant 1983, 118) or "universal hospitality." (ibid) Kant claims that "the right to visit, to associate, belongs to all men by virtue of their common ownership of the earth's surface." (ibid) He then adds that "the idea of cosmopolitan right" is part of an "unwritten code of national and international rights, necessary to the rights of men in general." (ibid 119) In other words, for Kant the oneness of humankind is chiefly a juridical matter established by governments and diplomats i.e. by fiat, in sharp contrast to the Bahá'í concept of a natural oneness based on human nature and a spiritual oneness based on the Fatherhood of God. The problem with a juridical oneness is that laws can be unmade according to the willfulness of rulers and governments. Consequently, such a concept is weak and, thereby, a poor foundation for a lasting peace. It does not serve Kant's purposes well. On the other hand, a concept of oneness based on human nature cannot be undone by sheer willfulness or political action; it is an empirical fact of nature and will assert itself through any attempt to deny or suppress it. Nor is our status as divine creations subject to human will. Therefore, the Bahá'í concept of the oneness of humankind is more solidly grounded than Kant's concept of human oneness insofar as we find one in "*Perpetual Peace*."

Another key principle of peace-building is the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "*The fourth principle or teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the readjustment and equalization of the economic standards of mankind.*" (PUP 107) Kant's "*Perpetual Peace*" says nothing about this vital topic or even about economic reform in general as a necessary part of building an enduring peace. For that reason alone, belief that his proposals are sufficient to establish a permanent peace is not justified. The "maldistribution of wealth"<sup>36</sup> inevitably undermines both domestic and international stability and unity (COL 25) especially in an age when global

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communications make it impossible to hide the enormous disparities in wealth. This sets the stage for war.

*This readjustment of the social economy is of the greatest importance inasmuch as it ensures the stability of the world of humanity; and until it is effected, happiness and prosperity are impossible.* (PUP 181 emphasis added)

When, for example, a small portion of the world's people use up half or more of the world's resources, we would be foolish to expect a lasting peace. The immense suffering and consequent anger caused by such gross inequalities undermines peace in two ways. First, it destabilizes countries internally as various groups scramble for what little wealth is left and/or violent revolutions erupt and second, it destabilizes international relations as internal conflicts affect surrounding nations and political opportunism exacerbates problem through foreign involvement. Even a cursory glance at the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals how all of these scenarios can unfold and unbalance large portions of the world.

While the Bahá'í Writings recognize that reasonable economic and social differences are based on natural variations of ability and temperament, they also teach that these variations do not justify excessive disparities of income. Shoghi Effendi sums up the Bahá'í position by saying, "Extremes of wealth and poverty should... be abolished." (DG 20) Sympathy for the less fortunate is one reason: "Is it possible that, seeing one of his fellow-creatures starving, destitute of everything, a man can rest and live comfortably in his luxurious mansion?" (SAQ 276) However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives another reason:

*[e]very human being has the right to live; they have a right to rest, and to a certain amount of well-being. As a rich man is able to live in his palace surrounded by luxury and the greatest*

*comfort, so should a poor man be able to have the necessaries of life. Nobody should die of hunger; everybody should have sufficient clothing; one man should not live in excess while another has no possible means of existence. (PT 131–132 emphasis added)*

It is important to notice the “rights” language, used by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. This language implies that people have an innate and irrevocable claim to the basic “necessities of life” solely by virtue of being human. Conversely, this implies that society has at least some obligation to provide people the opportunity to attain their basic requirements. (Precisely how this is to be done, is, of course, a matter of intense debate and cannot be discussed here.) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes extreme disparity of wealth as “*the height of iniquity*” and adds that “*no just man can accept it.*” (SAQ 273) By implication, no just society can accept it either. The importance of this issue is emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s insistence on economic justice for workers. In order to “*regulate the excessive fortunes of certain private individuals and meet the needs of millions of the poor masses*” (ibid)

*laws and regulations should be established which would permit the workmen to receive from the factory owner their wages and a share in the fourth or the fifth part of the profits, according to the capacity of the factory; or in some other way the body of workmen and the manufacturers should share equitably the profits and advantages. (ibid)*

To counteract these injustices, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá establishes the principle of wage and profit-sharing as a way of preventing an undue and excessive concentration of wealth which exacerbates tensions and hostilities within and among countries. He also teaches a just redistribution of wealth must include provisions for old age as well as what we today call a ‘progressive income tax’: “*taxation will be proportionate to capacity and production and there will be no poor in the community.*” (FWU 37)

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At this point, it is very important to issue a caveat that the Writings must not be associated with communism in regards to income distribution. 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that

*absolute equality is just as impossible, for absolute equality in fortunes, honors, commerce, agriculture, industry would end in disorderliness, in chaos, in disorganization of the means of existence, and in universal disappointment: the order of the community would be quite destroyed. (SAQ 273)*

The unfortunate history of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia proves the truth of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's warnings on this matter. Thus, the Writings accept some differences in wealth as natural, but do not accept that these differences should be allowed to emiserate large portions of humankind. Moreover, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw how destabilizing gross maldistribution of wealth can be. For example, though it eventually morphed into something else, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was a reaction against the extreme concentrations of wealth and the subsequent emiseration of much of humanity. Its destabilizing effects were felt throughout the rest of the century. It is simply unrealistic to expect an enduring peace within or among nations without decisively remedying this underlying injustice which distorts and destroys the lives of countless human beings.

In addition to legal reforms, the Writings in addition to making voluntary donations also offer another way to achieve the appropriate adjustment of wealth: the law of Huqúqu' lláh. This law—which has many detailed provisions—provides a way of calculating a payment made of a percentage of one's increase in wealth, beyond what is essentially needed, to a special Fund at the Universal House of Justice for humanitarian services. The prime purpose of Huqúqu' lláh is *"the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, and a more equitable distribution of resources."* (PUP 102) In other words, obeying this law is one way in which virtually everyone can contribute to the laying

the foundations of world peace. The law of Huqúqu' lláh fosters the spiritual maturity needed to make people voluntarily accept the moderation of wealth, a new attitude that is itself a necessary part of the economic foundations of a lasting peace. Unless people evolve to find satisfaction and purpose in things other than the accumulation of wealth, the innate competitiveness of material, economic pursuits will continue to destabilize the intra-and-inter-national scene.

In the Bahá'í teachings, another necessary foundation stone for establishing and maintaining an enduring peace is the essential oneness of religion. Religion has always played an important role in human existence and, therefore, must be included in any serious plan for changes in international relations. No other social phenomenon in history has shown itself as potent in transforming large numbers of people as religion, a fact which suggests that Kant's plan to establish a "perpetual peace" without religion simply ignores human nature and is, thereby, unrealistic. Moreover, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, *"It has been the basis of all civilization and progress in the history of mankind."* (PUP 361) Without including the potency of religion, it is highly doubtful that rationally based political plans for world peace will be successful.

However, religions can only fulfill their role as an agent of perpetual peace if they cease to promote divisions among humankind and decide to work in unity on the basis of their essential principles which are identical. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, sums up this position quite succinctly: *"Truth is one in all religions, and by means of it the unity of the world can be realized."* (PT 129) By 'religion' the Writings mean *"the essential foundation or reality of religion, not the dogmas and blind imitations which... are inevitably destructive."* (PUP 363) Because the *"essence of all religions is the Love of God, and... is the foundation of all the sacred teachings,"* (PT 82) religion, or at least, religion in its original intent, is necessary for an enduring peace. When religions return to their

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essential truth, they, not man-made philosophical concepts, will unify humanity Bahá'u'lláh declares,

*O ye children of men! 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.* (GWB 215 emphasis added)

In a similar vein, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "*The central purpose of the divine religions is the establishment of peace and unity among mankind.*" (PUP 98) "[U]nity is the essential truth of religion." (PUP 32)

The need for religion as a 'partner for peace' illustrates the need for a unifying world-view, or, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá states it, the need for "*unity of thought in world undertakings.*" (SWAB 32) If we are to have genuine peace, we must have effective cooperation, and effective cooperation requires a common framework of thought and action, i.e. a common world-view. This common world-view provides, among other things, the ultimate purpose for which we act; the allowable means by which we may act to achieve those goals; the terms in which to analyze and evaluate situations; the guidelines for planning, prioritizing and coordinating action. Furthermore, if different nations and/or cultures are to work together effectively, they need a set of "core values... which are sought to be maintained."<sup>37</sup> Without such a set of "core values" participants will have neither goals to aspire to nor standards by which to judge their efforts; in effect, they would be 'flying blind.' These values also provide the moral legitimacy to enlist popular support. In addition, they provide the "unity of conscience"<sup>38</sup> needed to motivate people intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, i.e. to awaken and energize the complete human being. Without all these advantages provided by a coherent world-view, our efforts to achieve peace will be half-efforts at best and counter-productive at worst.



Kant's "*Perpetual Peace*" does not, of course, promulgate anything like the essential oneness of all religions. This is a major short-coming that the Bahá'í Writings remedy. However, Kant does recognize the need for a unifying world-view or framework of thought to establish a genuine peace. As stated in "*Perpetual Peace*," for Kant the necessary harmony of thought is based on a universal ethical and juridical unity based on the concept of 'right.' According to Kant, "All politics must bend its knee before morality" (Kant 1983, 131) or "the right" (ibid 128) by which he means that politics must be guided by morality or 'the right' and not by expedience or any consideration of results. This holds true both for individuals and nations.

Men can no more escape the concept of right in their private relations than in their public ones; nor can they openly risk basing their politics on the handiwork of prudence alone, and, consequently they cannot altogether refuse obedience to the concept of public right (which is particularly important in the case of international right). (ibid 131)

'Right' applies to all human activities, including politics because the concept of 'right' takes precedence over all other considerations. Consequently, he is able to say, "The rights of men must be held sacred, however great the cost of sacrifice may be to those in power." (ibid 135) The alternative to such strict principles is social and political anarchy because actions will no longer be guided by a universal rule. Rulers and nations will simply do whatever is convenient. Without such law, how are we to judge actions or insist on certain standards? For Kant, 'right' itself derives "from the ought, whose principle is given *a priori* through pure reason" (ibid 134) which means that 'ought' and 'right' are determined by reason alone and not by expediency, prudence, desirability or consideration of consequences. 'Ought' and 'right' have an "unconditioned necessity," (ibid 132) i.e. the 'ought' and its resulting 'right' are applicable regardless of results or wishes. Kant approvingly quotes the dictum, "Let justice reign, even if all the

rogues in the world should perish." (ibid 133) Summing up his ideas, he says, "Seek first the kingdom of pure practical reason and its righteousness and your end [Zweck] (the blessing of perpetual peace) will come to you of itself." (ibid)

More specifically, actions are 'right' if they conform to the categorical imperative (CI) which for Kant has uncontested universal validity. Kant does not specifically explicate the CI in "*Perpetual Peace*" but make use of it in his arguments as shall see. In its first form, the CI states, "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature."<sup>39</sup> In other words, if we do something we should agree that everyone else should do the same thing in the same circumstances. For example, if we choose to act on the principle of 'destroy your enemies,' we would soon realize that everyone—ourselves included—would eventually be destroyed because everyone is somebody's enemy. The irrational, suicidal nature of the act is immediately clear. Analogous results follow if we apply Kant's CI to lying, stealing, cheating or being lazy, to name only a few. Social existence would quickly become unworkable. "*Perpetual Peace*" applies the first form of the CI to nations, which, he says do not have the right to go to war

because it is then a law of deciding what is right by unilateral maxims through force and not by universally valid public laws which restrict the freedom of everyone.<sup>40</sup>

Even states must behave in such a way that its acts may become universal law instead of being arbitrary and special-pleading. The latter is a logical fallacy and inimical to Kant's rationalism.

The other form of the CI asserts that we should always treat all humans as if they were ends-in-themselves and never as means to serve the purpose of another's will.<sup>41</sup> In "*Perpetual Peace*" Kant refers to this form of the CI in his objection to standing armies, i.e. paying men

to kill or be killed is to “use them as mere machines and tools in the hands of another.” (Kant 1983, 108) It violates their right to be ends-in-themselves. (The whole modern theory of human rights grows out of this aspect of Kant’s work.) If we treat others as ‘means’ to satisfy our will, then others are logically entitled to treat us as ‘means’ too—a situation which rapidly makes personal and collective life unworkable. Special pleading or making ourselves an exception from either form of the categorical imperative traps us in a logical inconsistency, i.e. in irrationality, which violates our nature as rational beings.

Both Kant and the Bahá’í Writings endorse treating human being as end-in-themselves and not merely as a means or tool to be used to the advantage of another. The Writings state this in two ways. The first is through the teaching that we must love all human beings; to love another person is to value him in-himself, to see him as an end-in-himself, as a ‘Thou.’ There is no meaningful sense of separation or limitation to such love.<sup>42</sup> Of course, the Bahá’í Writings express this in a theological form as in the following:

*Like the sun, let them [“the loved ones of the Lord”] cast their rays upon garden and rubbish heap alike, and even as clouds in spring, let them shed down their rain upon flower and thorn.*  
(SAQ 257)

Another way of stating that all humans are ends-in-themselves is to say we are made in the image of God and that “*Inasmuch as all were created in the image of God, we must bring ourselves to realize that all embody divine possibilities.*” (PUP 113) Consequently, all persons are valuable in-themselves as unique, distinctive and irreplaceable images of the divine and must be treated as ends-in-themselves. Because they recognize that everyone is an end-in-himself, the Writings implicitly acknowledge that the rules of behaviour we apply to ourselves must be applicable by all insofar as we are all equally images of God. This agrees with the first form of the categorical imperative.

## 5 Why Religion and not "Reason Alone"?

The foregoing discussion leads to an important question vis-à-vis Bahá'u'lláh's and Kant's plans for world peace: Why choose religion over philosophy as a unifying world-view? Or, to put it another way, what does religion offer the quest for world peace that philosophy lacks? To answer these and related questions, it is necessary to examine Kant's proposal in the light of recent history.

According to Kant and the Bahá'í Writings, humans are essentially rational by nature. In other words, rational behavior and thought is more appropriate to our essential nature than irrational behavior though although we still have free will to act irrationally. Again, this is not specifically explicated in "*Perpetual Peace*" but underlies its arguments. That is why Kant says, for example, that we look down on those who prefer a senseless and lawless, "mad freedom to a rational one," (Kant 1983, 115) which restrains "the depravity of human nature." (ibid 116) The Bahá'í Writings assert that "[t]he human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names—the human spirit and the rational soul—designate one thing." (SAQ 208) What Kant calls the "depravity of human nature," they refer to as our "animal nature" (PUP 41) which we must overcome in order to live up to our distinctly human and rational potentials. Of course, we must recall that in the Writings, the rational soul requires the assistance of "*the spirit of faith*" (SAQ 208) in order to "*become acquainted with the divine secrets and heavenly realities.*" (ibid) Consequently reason is not fully independent in regards to ethical teachings which are ultimately grounded in a transcendental God. Reason may prove the validity of these teachings, but proof alone is not authority of which God is the ultimate source. Kant does not recognize any need for such assistance because he denies that we can ever know the transcendental, noumenal or "heavenly realities."

Despite our rational nature, humans do not always act rationally. At least some leaders do not care about logical inconsistency in their actions if they can get what they want by acting irrationally. They are not impressed by the universality of the CI, and are quite prepared to indulge in special pleading for themselves. They are willing to 'take their chances' and are agreeable to other leaders doing the same, thereby, ironically fulfilling Kant's dictum that we must be willing to see our behavior universalized. Then, there are other motives to act irrationally—such as a belief in national destiny or in a certain ideology or even a belief in 'war hygiene' as to weed out the weak and unfit. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, humankind has witnessed all of these motives at work. Consequently, it is clear that leaders must intentionally choose to be reasonable in their domestic and international dealings. That means they must be willing to sacrifice certain advantages for the sake of reason and rational morality. They must willingly forego the freedom to exploit another nation's weakness or natural misfortune, to pass up an opportunity to form an advantageous alliance or to acquire new territory or to weaken a political or economic rival. But why would they want to do so? What fundamental attitude would encourage them to make such a choice?

Given the historical record, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that while rationality is necessary to peace-building, it is by no means sufficient. What is needed is something that can motivate humans to *want* to apply reason, to *want* to be rationally consistent and to *want* to value themselves and others. "*Perpetual Peace*" explains how reason can help us do these things in political action but it does not provide a motivation to actively desire to do them, especially when it is to our advantage to ignore them. What can fill this gap?

What is needed is not a purely intellectual idea but rather, an existential attitude or stance towards humankind, the world, the Not-me, the stranger, the 'Other.'. It must be something that does not rely only on calculative reasoning about gain and loss, 'mine and

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thine' or 'friend and foe.' It must also not simply be rational but trans-rational, i.e. not just an idea but an idea with personal and collective transformative power. In other words, it cannot only be objective but must have a subjective aspect as well so that it really touches people's hearts because ideas that do not touch the heart, no matter how well conceived they may be, can atrophy all too easily. There must not only be a new world-view, but there must also be a new world-feeling, a deep, personal and subjective sense of connection to all peoples and a commitment to their future together. Purely intellectual agreement is not enough to bring about a new way of being-in-the-world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes this clear when he says,

*the Holy Spirit unites nations and removes the cause of warfare and strife. It transforms mankind into one great family and establishes the foundations of the oneness of humanity. It promulgates the spirit of international agreement and insures universal peace. (FWU 85)*

His reference to the family taps one of the strongest and deepest subjective experiences of love known to humankind. Applying these feelings to humanity would go a long way in establishing genuine peace.

The lack of such a trans-rational and transformative element in "Perpetual Peace" is only one of the decisive differences between Kant and the Writings. Unlike the Bahá'í Writings, Kant does not consider this topic at all, apparently believing that political and diplomatic action within the current framework is sufficient to reach his goal. He neglects the need for personal and intellectual transformation in both populations whose views must be represented and in diplomats and politicians who must craft and carry out agreements. After all, both these groups have had their thinking and feeling shaped by the competitive Westphalian nation-state system with its emphasis on absolute national sovereignty. Perhaps his proposals lay the objective

foundations for peace but overlook the equally necessary subjective pre-conditions for peace.

According to the Bahá'í Writings, the motivation to adopt the way of being-in-the-world needed to establish and maintain a lasting peace, must come from love. As Bahá'u'lláh says, “*Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind...*” (PB viii) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains why this is so:

*God alone is Creator, and all are creatures of His might. Therefore, we must love mankind as His creatures, realizing that all are growing upon the tree of His mercy, servants of His omnipotent will and manifestations of His good pleasure.* (PUP 230)

Elsewhere he says,

*My admonition and exhortation to you is this: Be kind to all people, love humanity, consider all mankind as your relations and servants of the most high God... God has created all, and all return to God. Therefore, love humanity with all your heart and soul.* (PUP 290–291)

Bahá'u'lláh identifies the ultimate goal, saying, “*He Who is your Lord, the All-Merciful, cherisheth in His heart the desire of beholding the entire human race as one soul and one body.*” (GWB 214) This universal love is based on the fatherhood of God: “*God is the Father of all*” (PUP 266) regardless of our worldly circumstances or spiritual state. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “*we are the servants of one God, that we turn to one beneficent Father, live under one divine law, seek one reality and have one desire.*” (PUP 66) With an outlook of universal love, we naturally approach others with goodwill, and desire to treat them as ends-in-themselves instead of means, and want such treatment to be the universal standard of behavior. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states,

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*The third virtue of humanity is the goodwill which is the basis of good actions. Certain philosophers have considered intention superior to action, for the goodwill is absolute light; it is purified and sanctified from the impurities of selfishness, of enmity, of deception. Now it may be that a man performs an action which in appearance is righteous, but which is dictated by covetousness... But the goodwill is sanctified from such impurities.* (SAQ 301 emphasis added)

With universal goodwill as a foundation for their actions, humans are inwardly transformed so that humans will choose to act rightly not from a sense of duty or fear or logical consistency but from an inner *want* to do the right thing, a *want* to apply the categorical imperative to their dealings with others. With goodwill, each person chooses to be his 'brother's keeper,' and has a sense of "ultimate concern" for the well-being of others. Goodwill effects an inward character transformation that simply cannot be replaced by any outward regulations no matter how detailed they are. When goodwill is the basis of diplomacy, problems like deception, secrecy and under-handed methods—all mentioned in "*Perpetual Peace*"—disappear not because of formal treaties, concerns about logical consistency or notions of duty, but because with goodwill, diplomats lack the desire to commit such acts. Moreover, with goodwill, their peoples no longer expect them to indulge in perfidy for the sake of the 'national good.'

We know this from history: without genuine love and goodwill, diplomats will be free to support treaties as long as it suits their interests to do so. The 1929 Kellogg-Briand treaty is an example. All future instigators and participant of W.W. II renounced war, yet Kellogg-Briand was not enough to restrain the unscrupulous. Clearly, true restraint must come from within and must be borne of deep conviction, i.e. must come from transformation of character and a new way of being-in-the-world. Insofar as they neglect this aspect of achieving "perpetual peace," Kant's proposals are inadequate to their task.



It may be objected that the whole project of "*Perpetual Peace*" as well as the second form of Kant's categorical imperative, i.e. the injunction of treating others as ends and not means already covers the issue of goodwill. Indeed, Kant seems to give implicit recognition to the importance of goodwill by enshrining rules against secret clauses (Kant 1983, 107) and dishonest tactics. (ibid 109) One problem, of course, is that a diplomat may sign any number of such protocols without sincere goodwill. "A man may smile and smile and be a villain."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, diplomatic and political means, while necessary in establishing and maintaining a durable international peace, are not sufficient to guarantee the required universal goodwill. Leaders and governments, and with them, policies and attitudes, inevitably change. The decisive fact is that Kant does not specifically identify and develop goodwill or love as crucial components in "*Perpetual Peace*"; he seems to think that the outer restraints provided by treaties, agreements and purely rational agreements can create and maintain peace without any character transformation.

Another issue is the problem of "the transcendent."<sup>44</sup> Put in its starkest terms, the difficulty revolves around the question, 'Can we achieve perpetual peace by means of immanent reason alone?' Immanent reason rejects any suggestion of the transcendent, i.e. God, as a necessary factor in the quest for peace and confines itself to the phenomenal realm.<sup>45</sup> However, if perpetual peace has no better and more authoritative grounding than human reason, then sooner or later this peace will be challenged by another idea. Perhaps a belief will arise that war is good hygiene for the nation and species, that it rids us of the weak and unfit and establishes the natural dominance of the biological and intellectually stronger. If ideas have no other authority than themselves, who is to say if this last alternative is wrong or evil? All we can do is argue on the basis of yet another idea which also has its authority only in itself. Thus, we are caught in an infinite regress making a solution impossible—and this is a situation which makes perpetual peace an unlikely prospect. If immanent reason is

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insufficient to serve as a foundation of goodwill and peace, then we are at least obliged to examine the alternatives.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there is good evidence to reject immanent reason as sufficient. Kant's proposals operate within the framework of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls "*material civilization*" (PUP 11) which pertains to scientific, technical, economic, government, law and so on. However, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, and, as we have learned in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even a high degree of material civilization is no sure bulwark against barbarism:

*Progress and barbarism go hand in hand, unless material civilization be confirmed by Divine Guidance, by the revelations of the All-Merciful and by godly virtues, and be reinforced by spiritual conduct... Therefore, this civilization and material progress should be combined with the Most Great Guidance (SWAB 284).*

Elsewhere he adds,

*among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that although material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind, yet until it becomes combined with Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained... These battleships that reduce a city... are the result of material civilization. (SWAB 303)*

Immanent reason and its resulting material civilization are unable to deliver peace to the world for the next phase of its evolution because they cannot effect the inner transformation, i.e. the universal love and goodwill, needed to bring about peace. Therefore, while necessary, they are not sufficient to reach the goal of an enduring peace.

This conclusion leads to a new question: 'What can religion provide that immanent reason cannot?' Most obviously, religion can provide the element of "the transcendent," i.e. the belief, however it is articulated, that there exists something beyond the limits of human perception and ordinary human experience to which we can and must develop a positive relationship. The universal presence of belief in the transcendent throughout all known cultures from all historical times and places, not to mention the strong resurgence of religious faith after decades of systematic suppression in the former Soviet Bloc provides irrefutable evidence that belief in the transcendent is inherent in human nature.<sup>46</sup> Whether this faith is intellectually sophisticated or not is irrelevant—the need it fulfills is the same. The transcendent may be called God, gods, the Tao, Brahman, the One, the Unknowable or anything else but in each case it exists beyond the limits of all phenomenal things and finite human beings. Ideas grounded in "the transcendent," i.e. ideas that 'come from God' also seem to show a far greater transformative power than ideas originating from men. `Abdu'l-Bahá confirms this when he says that the influence of the greatest philosophers comes nowhere close to the influence of the Manifestations Who are the Spokesmen for the Transcendent. (PT 164, SAQ 14) The transcendent origin of their teachings gives these ideas a legitimacy and authority that no mere human ideas can ever have.

This leads to an interesting line of thought. Even if one does not believe in the ontological reality of the transcendent, given the vast power that belief in it clearly has, there are reasons to act *as if* it really exists. Why not make use of this idea, since it will always be a factor in human affairs? Indeed, Kant did something very like this in *The Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant discusses "the existence of God as a postulate of pure, practical reason."<sup>47</sup> According to Kant, practical reason "must postulate the existence of God, as the necessary condition of the possibility of the *summum bonum* (an object of the will which is necessarily connected with the moral legislation of

pure reason).<sup>48</sup> Kant's postulatory theism holds that although we cannot prove God's existence speculatively, i.e. by logical argument, we must, nonetheless, postulate God's existence as a purely practical matter, i.e. as the basis of morals. How else can moral injunctions gain legitimacy and final authority? God is needed because morality is connected to achieving the greatest good (*summum bonum*) and it is only God Who can make this highest good a matter of absolute moral duty. As Creator of all, He alone has, or could have the ultimate legitimacy and authority to do so. That is why "it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God."<sup>49</sup> Consequently, on the basis of Kant's own work, we can assert that religion bestows a practical reason for basing the necessity of universal love and goodwill on the existence of God.

However, Kant does not make use of this religious aspect of his thought in "Perpetual Peace." This is a major difference with the Bahá'í Writings which, of course, completely reject the notion of a mere "postulatory theism" and recognize God's ontological reality, even from a strictly logical standpoint. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*The existence of the Divine Being hath been clearly established, on the basis of logical proofs, but the reality of the Godhead is beyond the grasp of the mind. (SWAB 46)*

The "Godhead" is unknowable, but the logical necessity for such a 'Being' can be known by man within the limits of human experience and reason. From the foregoing discussion, we may conclude that a religious approach to establishing and maintaining world peace is more likely to succeed than a purely rational approach such as taken by Kant.

## 6 The Guarantor Question

Any discussion of world peace inevitably raises the question 'How can we be sure this is not just a pipe-dream?' Kant shows his awareness of this question when he writes,

Perpetual peace is insured (guaranteed) by nothing less than that *great artist nature*... whose mechanical process makes her purposiveness [*Zweckmassigkeit*] visibly manifest permitting harmony to emerge among men through their discord, even against their wills. (Kant 1983, 116)

In other words, the natural processes of history, including human conflict, ultimately lead to harmony and peace—even if it is against our wishes. Such is the purpose of nature. Kant, however, goes even further, adding

the mechanism of nature, in which self-seeking inclinations naturally counteract one another in their external relations, can be used by reason as a means to prepare the way for its own end, the rule of right, as well as to promote and secure the nation's internal and external peace. (ibid 124)

Kant's idea, which pre-dates Hegel's "cunning of reason"<sup>50</sup> asserts that reason uses usually conflicting human self-interest as a means to achieve peace both domestically and externally. In other words, reason itself takes an active role, as if it were a character, in the evolution towards a perpetual peace. Thus reason takes on a role not unlike that of a transcendent God, Who guides humankind through the wilderness of its own errors and evils towards the ultimate promised land. Through its 'cunning,' reason is able to make positive use of our mistakes, or, as Milton put it in *Paradise Lost*, reason or God will "Out of our evil seek to bring forth good."<sup>51</sup>

As we have seen above, the "rule of right" is intimately connected to the goal of perpetual peace since, as we have seen before, politics must be based on "the rule of right" if proper order is to be maintained. Kant even thinks that war itself is part of the historical process of evolving towards perpetual peace since "through war she [nature] has constrained them to establish more or less legal relationships." (ibid 121) The possibility of war forces humans to organize themselves i.e. adopt orderly, legal regulation in their national and international relations (ibid 124) and, thereby, eliminate war itself. Kant also recognizes the importance of "mutual interest," (ibid 125) especially economic mutual interest as a means by which "nature unites[s] people against violence and war" (ibid) and says,

financial power may be the most reliable in forcing nations to pursue the noble cause of peace (though not from moral motives); and whenever war threatens to break out they will try to head it off through mediation as if they were permanently leagued for this purpose.

Kant seems to recognize that the "league of peace," its political and diplomatic treaty and the establishment of "cosmopolitan right" may be incapable of eliminating war. This reliance on economics is a *de facto* admission of the insufficiency of his statement that "All politics must bend its knee before morality" (ibid 131) or "the right."<sup>52</sup> Moreover, even though Kant believes war "appears to be ingrained in human nature," (ibid 123) he maintains that the necessity of survival will drive human beings in the direction of order, the rule of right and, ultimately, peace. But, here, too, he argues on the basis of animal necessity rather than rational right and, thereby, makes his 'right' based argument unnecessary. Humanity will attain perpetual peace with our free and conscious participation or without it. Nature will compel us to act in the ways that will bring about peace despite our lack of interest: "in this fashion nature guarantees perpetual peace by virtue of man's inclinations to themselves." (ibid 125)

The problem with this position is obvious both from a Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í perspective. The natural “mutual interest” common to humankind has always existed—and yet has been remarkably ineffective in eliminating or even limiting war. Our personal survival and economic needs have not changed for ages; the needs of trade and finance are fundamentally the same (though now fulfilled in different ways) and yet war continues, and indeed, is itself a profitable business. Even class loyalty could not over-ride forces like nationalism as shown at the start of WW I when socialist deputies—who had previously sworn to oppose international war in the name of class loyalty—everywhere voted in favor of war credits to their governments in 1914. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine that Kant would not have known this, given the history of his own time, let alone previous human history. The inescapable conclusion is that economic motives are not sufficient to eliminate war. They cannot serve as replacements for goodwill and love, though they can support the efforts motivated by goodwill and love.

From the perspective of the Bahá'í Writings, there are several noteworthy points in Kant's views. The first, and perhaps most important, is the introduction of the transcendent as the guarantor of ultimate peace. “*Perpetual Peace*” thus gives the place of the transcendent or God to nature, which, according to Kant, has its own “purposiveness” in letting order, “rule of right” harmony emerge from conflict. We have already noted how Kant assigns an active role to reason in transforming human self-interest into an instrument for peace; reason itself has virtually become an active character in its own right. Seen in this light, Kant's proposals surreptitiously rely on the power of God, the transcendent or a somehow active reason as a guarantor of ultimate peace no less than the Bahá'í Writings. This is an area of agreement between them, but it is not, of course, an intentional agreement since Kant's whole philosophy rejects invoking the transcendent in any way. The fact that he invokes God, albeit in the form of a personified nature, indicates that Kant, too, has found

no better way of 'grounding' his proposals for a durable peace than in the transcendent.<sup>53</sup> We have already seen why in the foregoing discussions on diplomacy and economics.

Kant's position—at least in effect, though not in intention—is similar to the Bahá'í position insofar as the guarantor for world peace is a transcendental power or God. Through His Manifestations, God has guided humankind through numerous evolutionary stages and historical circumstances, but always with the theme of unity in mind:

*All the divine Manifestations have proclaimed the oneness of God and the unity of mankind. They have taught that men should love and mutually help each other in order that they might progress. Now if this conception of religion be true, its essential principle is the oneness of humanity. The fundamental truth of the Manifestations is peace. This underlies all religion, all justice. (pup 32)*

In the Bahá'í vision, God acts through history, i.e. through human beings and Manifestations living in particular historical circumstances; thus, while the theme of love and human unity is always present, it appears in different forms through the vicissitudes of history. That is why Bahá'u'lláh says,

*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)*

In other words, even the troubles and hostile actions against us serve God's purposes. Another prayer emphasizes the same idea, stating that "All are His servants and all abide by His bidding!" (SWB 217) The concept that God uses history as a vehicle for the realization of



His plan is also found in the teachings about the process of world history. Jeffrey Huffines writes, that the Bahá'í world view

is shaped by the teleological belief in the oneness of humanity that is at once a cardinal principle and an assertion of the ultimate goal of human existence on this planet... Bahá'í theology presupposes a linear flow of history....<sup>54</sup>

The apparent chaos of historical processes notwithstanding, there is a goal and purpose at work in history, viz. the unification of humankind in the Most Great Peace. This means, in effect, that the goal of the historical developments we live through is, in the long run, to bring about the “perpetual peace” both the Bahá'í Writings and Kant desire. The Bahá'í International Community writes,

The central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's writings is that humanity is one single race and the day has come for its unification into one global society. Through an irresistible historical process, the traditional barriers of race, class, creed, faith and nation will break down. These forces will, Bahá'u'lláh said, give birth in time to a new universal civilization. The crises now afflicting the planet face all its peoples with the need to accept their oneness and work towards the creation of a unified global society.<sup>55</sup>

Of course, in the Bahá'í view, this goal will be achieved through the power of the Manifestation and religion and not through the power of immanent reason alone.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussions—and there is still more to be said—demonstrate the untenability of any suggestion that Kant's “*Perpetual*

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*Peace*" anticipates the Bahá'í vision of a Lesser and Greater Peace in anything but accidental ways. They are substantially different in underlying assumptions as well as in what they consider to be the necessary components of any realistic peace project. In the Bahá'í Writings, the foundation of peace is made of spiritual principals such as the Fatherhood of God, the essential oneness of humankind, justice, the role of the Manifestations and the primacy of love and goodwill. Political diplomatic and economic factors in addition to natural self-interest are secondary insofar as they gain their value, purpose and direction from the spiritual foundations. In Kant, the situation is virtually reversed. Spiritual factors, if they play any role at all, do so surreptitiously. Nature is portrayed as having plans and reason as cunningly turning our self-interest into public benefit. However, these concessions to the need for the transcendent are smuggled into Kant's argument.

These differences notwithstanding, some rapprochement with Kant is possible, at least from a Bahá'í perspective. Kant's proposals in "*Perpetual Peace*" can be integrated almost *in toto* into the Bahá'í plan; none of his articles contradict or undermine the Writings and some of them, such as the need for representative government and the need for moral conduct in politics are in clear agreement. Of course, Kant's reliance on immanent human reason alone contradicts the Writings, but this difficulty is mitigated by the recognition that he smuggled in the transcendent in order to guarantee the workability of his proposals. Generally, we conclude that Kant's proposals are better suited to the process of the Lesser Peace and not to the Most Great Peace which is based on spiritual principles and developments.

Unfortunately, the converse is not true. "*Perpetual Peace*" has no place for many key aspects of the Bahá'í plan, above all for the necessity of character transformation and the cultivation of love and goodwill towards all on the basis of recognizing the Fatherhood of God. This is obviously essential to the Bahá'í plan. From a Bahá'í viewpoint

this lack of a religious foundation is a serious weakness in Kant's program, if only because religion has historically demonstrated the power to effect deep and permanent character transformation in large numbers of people. This transformation may be for good or bad—but the transformative power of religion is beyond question and any plan to change humanity without it is self-defeating.

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### NOTES

- 1 Paper presented at the Irfan Colloquium, May 18–22, 2011 at Bosch Bahá'í School. This paper is dedicated to my parents, Dr. Frank Kluge and Annaberta Kluge. The author can be contacted at [iankluge@netbistro.com](mailto:iankluge@netbistro.com). Additional material by the author related to this subject can be found at <http://www.bahaiphilosophystudies.com/index.php>
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, translated by Ted Humphries. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1983.
- 3 also see Kant. *On History*, edited by Lewis Beck,
- 4 Frank E Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, p. 519.
- 5 Anthony Adolf, *Peace: A World History*, p. 127.
- 6 Anthony Adolf, *Peace: A World History*, p. 127.
- 7 See, for example, Shahrzad Mohtadi, "Conflict and Harmony Among Nations: The case for International Trade," in Chales O Lerche, editor, *Healing the Body Politic*.
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- 12 *ibid*, p. 295.
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- 28 *ibid*, p. 59.
- 29 *ibid*, p. 61.
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- 31 Baha'i International Community, 1998 Feb 18, *Valuing Spirituality in Development*.
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- 34 Scott Burchill et al, editor, *Theories of International Relations*, p. 59.
- 35 See Donald Brown, *Human Universals*.
- 36 John Huddleston, *The Earth Is But One Country*, p. 8.
- 37 Danesh Sarooshi, "Collective Security as a Means of Ensuring Peace Among Nations" in Charles O Lerche ed. *Processes of the Lesser Peace*, p. 163.
- 38 J Tyson, *World Peace and World Government*, p. 76.
- 39 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Trans. by H.J Paton, p. 89.
- 40 Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, trans. by Lewis White Beck, p. 101. I have used Beck's translation because Humphrey's is rather obscure on this point.
- 41 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Trans. by H.J Paton, p. 95.
- 42 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*,
- 43 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. V, 108.
- 44 I have borrowed this term from the German existentialist, Karl Jaspers.
- 45 The nature of Kant's work in this regard can be seen in the title of his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, which derives God's existence from morality instead of vice versa.
- 46 In Soviet and Eastern European classrooms, "scientific atheism" courses were mandatory throughout school. The sudden resurgence of religion in these countries after 50–80 years of rigorous anti-religious education highlights scientific atheism's failure to convince large portions of the population and strengthens the argument for humankind's inherent religious needs.
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- 48 ibid
- 49 ibid
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- 51 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk I, line 165.
- 52 Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, trans. by Lewis White Beck, p. 128.
- 53 Once again we observe the truth of the saying that when God is tossed out the front door, He quietly returns through the back.
- 54 Jeffrey Huffines, "Bahá'í Proposals for the Reformation of World Order," Babak Bahador and Nazila Ghanea, eds. *Processes of the Lesser Peace*, p. 1.
- 55 Baha'i International Community, 1992, Magazine—*The Baha'is*.

# The New Atheism—A Bahá'í Perspective

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## Introduction

Since the publication of Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* in 2004, a number of books extolling the virtues of atheism have gained prominence in North America, notably Christopher Hitchens' *god Is Not Great*, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*. Other books have also appeared but none achieved the fame and/or notoriety of these four. These texts adopted a pugnacious and even contemptuous tone towards religion and theists of all kinds, even the mildest of them, Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, suggesting that atheists ought to rename themselves "brights"— which suggests that theists are obviously less 'bright.' According to the 'new atheists' as they were called, the only truth-claims we can accept are those meeting the standards of modern science. They completely rejected the existence of the super-natural or super-sensible aspects of reality. In addition, they attempt to dismantle various philosophical proofs of God, develop theories about the pathological origin of religion, detail crimes committed by religion and challenge the link between religion and morality.

This paper is a response to the philosophical claims of the new atheists, i.e. an analysis of the philosophical foundations of their beliefs both from a logical point of view, and from the perspective of the Bahá'í Writings. Logically and philosophically speaking, their works are deeply flawed, and, as is to be expected, they are often in disagreement with the Bahá'í Writings—though on a number of issues they are in agreement with them. This paper shall focus only on the major issues



and shall not point out every error of fact, every identifiable logical error (and there are plenty)<sup>1</sup> or the various polemical and rhetorical theatrics they perform to advance their case.

Not unexpectedly, the number of differences between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings far exceeds the number of agreements or convergences. Writers calling for the wholesale abolition of religion and all concepts of the super-natural or super-sensible, are not likely to have much in common with the scriptures of any religion, even one that accepts evolution, rationalism, the essential harmony of religion and science and believes in the independent investigation of truth. We must remember that the goal of the new atheists is to put as much distance as possible between their ideas and religion. They have a programmatic disinterest in common ground with religion.

Given the scope of disagreement with the new atheists, not to mention their generally pugnacious style of self-expression, is there room for debate with the new atheists? The answer is a qualified yes, certainly on the basis of a number of agreements. We can also agree to explore each other's viewpoints to improve mutual understanding, although, given the contempt they express for theologians and/or theistic philosophers, there is room for a guarded optimism at best. There is, of course, no reasonable hope for philosophical agreement since the absolute denial of super-sensible realities undermines any basis for agreement with religion. In other words, there can be no agreement on foundational essentials, although there may be coincidental agreement on other, non-essential issues.

## Part I: Some Major Problems with the New Atheism

### 1: What is the New Atheism?

The 'new atheism' is the name given to contemporary atheism as spear-headed by the work of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett. It is a form of explicit atheism which requires a conscious and intentional rejection of belief in God, gods and the super-sensible or supernatural realities, as distinct from implicit atheism which is absence of belief in God, gods or the supernatural without any conscious, i.e. intentional rejection. Implicit atheism may be the result of ignorance or indifference. We must also distinguish between the explicit, strong, positive or dogmatic atheism which requires the conscious denial of any super-sensible realities, and a "negative theoretic atheism"<sup>2</sup> which is based on the lack of sufficient data to assert the existence of super-sensible realities, and on the inherent limits of human intelligence in knowing the existence of such realities. This second type of atheism is close to agnosticism. Finally, we must distinguish between atheism which denies the existence of personal a God or gods but accepts the existence of a super-sensible ground-of-being and an atheism which rejects the existence of any and all super-sensible entities, personal or not. Theravada Buddhism is often cited as an example of the former, as is Jainism.

The new atheism has twelve characteristics that define its nature:

1. A commitment to explicit, strong or dogmatic atheism as the only rational choice for modern, independent, free-thinking individuals. The new atheists reject agnosticism as too weak a response to the dangers of religion.
2. A categorical rejection of any and all super-sensible beings and realities and a corresponding commitment to ontological (metaphysical) materialism in explaining all phenomena.

3. A militant agenda and tone which opposes not just the idea of religion itself but even the tolerance of any religious beliefs in others; this agenda and tone is driven by the belief that religion per se is pathological in nature.
4. A strident, aggressive, and provocative way of expressing themselves and indulgence in all kinds of polemical and dismissive rhetoric.
5. Belief in the ability of science to answer all human questions by means of the scientific method with its criteria of measurability, repeatability, predictability, falsifiability; quantifiability.
6. A belief that faith is inherently an enemy of reason and science and no reconciliation between them is possible. Religion is defined as inherently irrational, and thus, in a perpetual conflict with reason and science that must end with the ultimate victory of one or the other. Faith is defined as “belief without evidence.”<sup>3</sup> They adhere to a conflict model of the relationship between religion/faith and reason/science.
7. Belief that religion is part of our past but not of our future, i.e. religion is part of our evolutionary heritage that we must learn to overcome.
8. An insistence of reading scriptures literally (in order to condemn religion) and a consistent rejection of centuries of non-literal theological interpretations of the relevant scriptures.
9. An insistence that humankind has an innate and reliable moral sense or intuition that does not require the guidance of religion; morality is not inherently connected to or based on religion and our morals have less to do with religion than we tend to think.
10. Presentism: judging past ages by the standards of today, which is, in effect, a failure to recognise the scientific principle of

evolution (or the principle of progressive revelation) operating in religion as it does in all other aspects of life. (also the logical error of anachronism)

11. A tendency to characterize religious faith as a form of mental illness, a criminal offense comparable to child-molesting or an anti-social act that 'dumbs down' society as a whole.
12. Rejection of the freedom to be religious; because religion is so damaging to the well-being of society, it is not a legitimate choice for individual or collective behavior in society

## 2. Are the New Atheists Really New?

If Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris and Dennett are the dominant figures in the 'new atheism,' who are the representatives of the 'old atheism'? Since 1800, five major figures stand out, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Sartre. Feuerbach developed an anthropological view of God in which God is nothing more than the projection of human nature, i.e. of emotions, wishes, fears, dreams, hopes and ideals projected outward in a larger-than-human form. In other words, God is man writ large; God is made in man's image. Ontologically, there is no such being as God. Feuerbach influenced Marx according to whom God is an invention used by the ruling classes to control those beneath them. Marx's atheism is based on three principles: (a) dialectical materialism according to which only matter is real; (b) historical materialism according to which all historical and cultural developments are based on economic factors; (c) radical humanism in which man, not God, is the supreme being in the universe. Nietzsche's most famous contribution to the development of atheism is his statement that "God is dead"<sup>4</sup> which may be interpreted as a claim that our current conception of God is dead, or that the idea of a metaphysical God is dead. He believes that we can live more authentically human lives without a God Who stands in our way and prevents us from choosing and asserting our own identity and values, and Who weakens our commitment to and

appreciation of earthly existence in the name of an abstract spiritual heaven. Rather he proclaims “Dead are all the Gods”<sup>5</sup> so that the way is cleared for the evolution of the Superman. Nietzsche rejected the concept of metaphysical aspects of existence. Freud asserted that God is an illusion surviving from humankind’s childhood and that this illusion prevented us from attaining intellectual and moral maturity. God was a father figure to Whom we turned for protection instead of doing what was necessary for ourselves. Thus, belief in God infantilizes us. Sartre, the most influential post WW II atheist, rejects the existence of God because the existence of God limits human freedom by imposing a pre-determined essence on us and thereby preventing us from creating ourselves by our choices. He also argues that the idea of God is self-contradictory insofar as no being can be both “in-itself” like any object in the world and “for-itself” like all self-conscious beings since “for-itself” is a negation of “in-itself.”

As a sidebar, we might also mention Anthony Flew, easily the best known atheist philosopher in the English speaking world for almost five decades. However, starting in 2003, Flew revised his position and in his latest book, *There Is a God* (2007) he frankly admits to being a theist. Almost as if he wished to scandalize his former atheist colleagues, Flew based his change of mind on a vigorous philosophical defence of a variation of intelligent design.

A survey of the “old atheists” work shows that very little of what the new atheists say is substantially new. Almost all major themes—materialism, the adequacy of science to solve all problems, religion as part of our evolutionary past, the inherent conflict of reason and faith or religion, the rejection of super-sensible aspects of the universe and the militant denunciation of religion—have all been anticipated by the “old atheists.” They also attempted to disprove the earlier philosophical arguments for the existence of God and to show that the concept of God was a social control mechanism.

What is new in the new atheists is their denunciation of religious tolerance, which they see as pandering to dangerous religious superstition; their rejection of the freedom to be religious; their rejection of belief in belief which is viewed as adopting a second-hand faith instead of facing the truth of atheism; their attempts to link religion to our evolutionary genetic endowment as well as the assertion that religion is child abuse. Finally, when compared to the work of the “old atheists” their work shows a willingness to engage in polemics and rhetorical theatrics that is unprecedented in Feuerbach, Marx, Freud and Sartre, though it has some, though not nearly as extreme, roots in Nietzsche.

### 3. Ontological Materialism and Its Problems

From the point of view of the Bahá'í Writings, the first problem with the new atheists is their adherence to ontological and methodological materialism or physicalism. This philosophy is also referred to as naturalism, which asserts that “[a] everything is natural, i.e. that everything there is belongs to the world of nature and [b] so can be studied by the methods appropriate to studying that world...”<sup>6</sup> Part [a] of this definition covers ontological naturalism or materialism which is the view that “the world is entirely composed of matter,”<sup>7</sup> that reality is fundamentally physical (matter or energy) and that non-physical entities have no part in composing reality. Consequently, “the supernatural does not exist, i.e. only nature is real, therefore supernature is not real.”<sup>8</sup> Part [b] of this definition refers to methodological materialism, viz. that the proper method of studying nature takes only natural, i.e. physical factors into account. Any appeal to non-natural or non-physical factors is rejected in our quest for understanding.

It is worth noting that adherence to methodological naturalism does not necessarily require adherence to ontological naturalism. We may accept methodological naturalism as the proper technique for the study of physical nature without dismissing the existence

of non-physical or spiritual aspects of reality which have their own appropriate methods of study. In other words, science confines itself to statements about empirical studies and refrains from extrapolating beyond its specific findings to such ontological issues as the nature of reality as a whole. It limits itself to the study of phenomenal reality from a strictly physical/natural perspective. Of course, those who accept ontological naturalism are logically required to accept methodological naturalism as well.

However, the new atheists are strong advocates of naturalism both in its ontological and methodological forms. As Dawkins says, "I decry the supernaturalism in all its forms." <sup>9</sup> One reason for his stance is that ontological: supernaturalism simply does not accurately reflect reality and therefore, cannot be a proper object of scientific study because nothing exists to be studied. A second reason is methodological: in a purely physical universe, only purely physical studies are appropriate and attention to non-physical/spiritual entities will only distract our attention and distort our conclusions. In a word, supernatural considerations violate Occam's Razor, a subject we shall discuss in more detail below.

From a Bahá'í perspective, the new atheist's naturalistic/materialistic ontology is unacceptable. 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that he categorically rejects the view that sensible material reality is all that exists. Somewhat mockingly he says,

*if it be a perfection and virtue to be without knowledge of God and His Kingdom, the animals have attained the highest degree of excellence and proficiency. Then the donkey is the greatest scientist and the cow an accomplished naturalist, for they have obtained what they know without schooling and years of laborious study in colleges, trusting implicitly to the evidence of the senses and relying solely upon intuitive virtues. (PUP 262)*

Later, he compares the mental conditions of the materialists to that of the cow which is a

*captive of nature and knows nothing beyond the range of the senses. The philosophers, however, glory in this, saying, "We are not captives of superstitions; we have implicit faith in the impressions of the senses and know nothing beyond the realm of nature which contains and covers everything. (PUP 311–312)<sup>10</sup>*

In more technical language, the cow is a good positivist, holding the belief that all valid knowledge must come from and is limited to the senses. Positivists elaborate these requirements—knowledge must be physically measurable, quantifiable, objective and predictable/testable—but they maintain the fundamental position that there can be no knowledge “beyond the range of the senses” or “beyond the realm of nature.” Even a cursory reading of their books makes it clear that the new atheists are strong positivists.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá comments that if materialism/positivism is true, if it is the final result of our studies, “*why should we go to the colleges? Let us go to the cow.*” (PUP 361) The implication of his remarks is clear: just as the animal’s materialistic view of reality is inadequate to understand reality as a whole—obviously there are realities beyond the knowledge of the cow—materialism or positivism in philosophy and science are inadequate tools for understanding reality as a whole. Even in principle, physical nature does not explain itself, i.e. is not completely intelligible on its own terms. If we want to understand the existence of nature, then we will have to go beyond physical nature itself. That does not mean we necessarily have to invoke super-natural factors in explaining each chemical reactions or every application of the law of gravity but it does mean that super-natural factors must be included when we try to explain certain fundamental questions such as the origin of nature itself, of natural laws or of contingent beings. This, of course, is precisely what atheists—old or new—either ignore or deny.



The Bahá'í Writings illustrate the unintelligible character of strictly materialist explanations of the existence of physical reality in numerous ways that we shall explore throughout this paper. For example, in *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá discusses the way things affect each other, stating,

*The same can be said of other beings whether they affect other things or be affected. Such process of causation goes on, and to maintain that this process goes on indefinitely is manifestly absurd. Thus such a chain of causation must of necessity lead eventually to Him who is the Ever-Living, the All-Powerful, who is Self-Dependent and the Ultimate Cause. This Universal Reality cannot be sensed, it cannot be seen. It must be so of necessity. (TAF 18)*

'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly endorses the argument of the Uncaused Cause. Denying the Uncaused Cause implies the existence of an infinite regress of causal acts since it means that a causal sequence has no beginning or end. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá the idea of an infinite regress of causal acts is "*manifestly absurd.*"

In examining this argument, it is essential to clarify what is being rejected, viz., an infinite series of actual dependent causal acts or things, i.e. an 'infinite' series in which each depends on and is conditioned by its predecessor. In other words, no act is self-sufficient in its own being, but depends on something else for its coming into existence or for acting. If all the things or causal acts in the universe are not self-sufficient, but rather externally conditioned and thereby dependent on others, then how can their existence or action be intelligible on strictly material terms? As W. Norris Clarke, SJ, says,

Can there be an infinite regress in this chain of dependence, so that it could extend endlessly with all its members having the

same existential status of [externally] conditioned existents, none of them self-sufficient for its own existence?<sup>11</sup>

The question, of course, is rhetorical because when all things or causes are dependent on and conditioned by something external to them, then there can be no point at which a specific thing or causal act meets the proper conditions for existence or action by itself—and, consequently, nothing can act or come into existence. This is not a problem that can be solved with better instrumentation or sharper calculation; rather, the problem exists *in principle*, i.e. is constitutive of the nature of an infinite series of causal acts or things. Furthermore, if such an infinite regress of causal acts existed, the universe would be in stasis since no causal act has the required conditions for activation. But the universe is obviously not in stasis and, therefore, any solely material explanation fails to explain causal action, i.e. leaves the dynamic universe as we know it unintelligible. We may have limited local explanations for local actions, e.g. the motion of a billiard ball, but the ultimate origin of motion *per se* remains unintelligible.

It is virtually self-evident that whatever ultimately initiates the “chain of causation” cannot itself be dependent on, i.e. caused or conditioned by anything external to itself. It must be absolutely self-sufficient. In other words, the initiator, the first cause, the “Prime Mover” (PM 261) must itself be unconditioned and/or uncaused, and this logically requires that it be a completely different kind of entity than all other conditioned things and/or causes known to us in the phenomenal world. It must be transcendent to the material world not subject to causes and/or conditions. In short, it is what religious philosophers call God.

There are other examples which show why, in principle, the material universe cannot explain itself and why logically there must be a non-physical source or ground of being. How and why do fundamental particles get their specific natures? As previously shown, we cannot

posit an infinite series of evolutionary causal acts by which fundamental particles got their attributes through evolving from other forms of matter. How did those other forms of matter get their natures including their ability to evolve into something else and their receptivity to influence? Once again, we either posit a source or we succumb to the problems of an actual infinite regress.

We may also ask about the origin of physical laws. Since the laws that regulate things cannot be the same as the things they regulate (otherwise they require regulation themselves), they must be different in kind from the things they apply to. Therefore, in principle, such laws cannot arise from matter itself—which in turn raises the question of their source. Yet again we see that the natural world cannot explain itself, i.e. cannot explain itself in exclusively material terms and that some concept of a ground of being or “Ultimate Cause” is necessary.

There is yet another way in which the Bahá'í Writings show the rationality of theism and the inadequacy of atheism's purely naturalistic explanations of the existence of the universe. Nothing in the universe exists by necessity; everything we know comes into and passes out of existence. This is what 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to when he says, “*the phenomenality of contingency is essential,*” (SAQ 203) i.e. that being contingent and being a phenomenon like matter are inseparable. Contingent beings are dependent beings. This means they are not self-sufficient and depend on something else to explain their own existence or action; certain pre-conditions must be fulfilled before they can come into existence and that whatever fulfills these pre-conditions cannot itself be contingent. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*Because a characteristic of contingent beings is dependency, and this dependency is an essential necessity, therefore, there must be an independent being whose independence is essential. (SAQ 6)*

In other words, whatever fulfills the pre-conditions for the existence of contingent things or causal acts must itself be independent of all other pre-conditions. This is the case because it is clear that something comes to exist only by virtue of something else that already exists (something cannot come from absolute nothing<sup>12</sup>) and that if we follow this sequence we eventually arrive at something that exists by its own nature, i.e. does not depend on something else for its existence, and which, therefore, is not a natural object. Here again we encounter a non-physical “Ultimate Cause.” (TAF 17) If we reject this “Ultimate Cause” we shall find ourselves trapped in an impossible infinite regress.

It is, of course, possible to ask if the phenomenal universe is contingent. There are two ways to answer this question. First, the Bahá'í Writings and empirical experience tell us that everything that exists is contingent, i.e. it is possible for them not to exist. It is possible for me or my house not to be. Because the universe is existentially constituted entirely by contingent beings, it follows that the universe itself is contingent. If every part of a machine is destructible, the machine itself is destructible, i.e. it does not have to exist. If a machine is constituted by its parts, the machine does not exist until the parts are assembled correctly.<sup>13</sup> Denying this fact would lead atheists into the strange position of asserting the somehow non-physical existence of a house whose components have been hauled to the dump, and to the continued non-physical existence of a plant whose cells have been destroyed. This is not only illogical but also violates their own naturalistic principles of sticking to empirical observations.

Second, the phenomenal universe is contingent because it is just one of many possible universes that could have existed in the past or could exist in the future. After all, the universe could have been arranged differently, natural laws could have been different, as well as proton mass and the strength of the weak force. In other words, the universe as we know it does not exist necessarily, i.e. it is radically contingent,

which is to say, its existence does not inevitably follow from what it is, i.e. from its own being. A different universe could have existed and ours not at all. However, such a radically contingent universe requires a cause, since it obviously cannot create itself, nor can it create itself from nothing. Furthermore, whatever brings the entire universe into existence must be a non-contingent or necessary being i.e. in theological language, God Who exists necessarily. (SAQ 203)

The Bahá'í Writings make it clear that science by itself cannot answer certain fundamental questions about why phenomenal nature came into existence, how or why natural laws arose and how or why particles acquired their attributes. The first problem as we have seen is that of an actual infinite regress. Furthermore, answering these fundamental questions scientifically requires us to apply the scientific method, which is designed to study measurable, quantifiable, repeatable physical phenomena in time and space, whereas these questions refer to the conditions that make measurability, physicality, quantifiability, repeatability and time and space possible in the first place. These are the pre-conditions necessary for phenomenal existence. Consequently these questions lie beyond the scope of the scientific method which is limited to phenomenal reality once these conditions have been established. Science cannot answer them even in principle.

#### **4. The Principle of Sufficient Reason**

Another way in which the Bahá'í Writings deal with the denial of God is to point out that strictly materialist explanations for the existence of the universe violate the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). The PSR, a venerable philosophical principle especially associated with Leibniz but with roots harkening all the way back to Anaximander, states everything exists or happens for a reason that is necessary and sufficient to explain why it exists/happens and why it exists/happens in the particular way it does.<sup>14</sup> Any scientific explanation seeks to provide a necessary and sufficient reason for whatever it studies, i.e. it seeks to fulfill the PSR. If a purportedly scientific explanation does

not satisfy the PSR, it will be considered wrong or incomplete. If an explanation can never—not even in principle—fulfill the PSR, then it is scientifically inadequate or deficient in some major way.

Like science, the Bahá'í Writings posit the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) in a variety of contexts. Bahá'u'lláh makes theological use of the PSR when He writes, God

*through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation. (GWB 64)*

Elsewhere, this purpose is also described as God's desire to reveal Himself which He does through humankind, the phenomenal embodiment of His purpose. Bahá'u'lláh's reason for the existence of the phenomenal world is obviously not a scientific explanation in terms of material or efficient causality. This account is existential insofar as it explains existence in terms of human purpose, value and final causality but this does not prevent it from meeting the PSR in a theological context. (We shall have more to say about final causality below.)

'Abdu'l-Bahá also affirms the PSR when he states, “*everything which happens is due to some wisdom and ... nothing happens without a reason.*” (PUP 46) In its context, this statement has an existential and theological application since it applies the PSR to events in the human world and implies that any purely physical explanation of the tragic event may be physically correct but is not complete. For a complete existential and/or theological understanding of earthly events we must look beyond the phenomenal world. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement is also applicable to existence in general since he believes that creation functions according to natural laws and is not “fortuitous.”<sup>15</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá invokes the PSR in a scientific sense when he states that *“the existence of everything depends upon four causes,”*(SAQ 280) i.e. the material cause (wood), the efficient cause (the carpenter), the formal cause (the form of the chair) and the final cause (the purpose of the chair). Without all of these aspects, the explanation is incomplete. We may know everything about the material aspects of the chair, but if we do not know what it is for—its purpose or goal or *telos*—we do not truly understand what it is. Nor can we adequately explain its form, i.e. why it exists in the way it does. Therefore, any strictly material account of the chair (or anything else) that cannot account for the final cause does not truly satisfy the PSR.

#### **4.1. An Important Digression: the PSR and Final Causes**

At this point, a question important to atheism/religion debate arises: why do we need to know the final cause in order to satisfy the PSR? To understand why this is the case requires a brief digression in order to rectify some common confusions about final causes. It is an oft-repeated truism that science rejects final causes and confines itself to material and efficient causes; belief in final causes is regarded as a remnant of pre-scientific thinking to which religion is especially susceptible.

However, this issue is not as clear as it might seem. To see why, let us perform a thought experiment. Imagine a group of scientists finding a book in an alien language. They can physically analyse the book to the smallest detail of every material and efficient cause, and yet, unless they know what the book is for i.e. a science text, a novel, a news article, a philosophical text etc, they cannot claim to understand what they have found. They do not know what it means and what its purpose is. Their knowledge is correct but incomplete and, therefore, their explanation cannot completely satisfy the PSR.

The usual objection to final causes is that nature is not a man-made artifact like a chair or a book and, therefore, does not embody a goal or

purpose. Hence, the appeal to final causality is unscientific and must be rejected. Scientific explanations have no room for teleology of any sort. The problems with this retort begin with the misunderstanding that the final cause is a conscious intention or a plan externally imposed on some object or process. Aristotle, whose work is the foundation of teleology, states, "It is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the [conscious] agent deliberating."<sup>16</sup> In other words, purpose or goal can be present without a conscious agent externally imposing his wishes on an object or process. Aristotle was clearly aware that in natural processes, we see no such extrinsic agent guiding the changes.

According to Aristotle, in natural processes "the form [formal cause], the mover [the efficient cause], 'that for the sake of which' [the final cause] ...often coincide,"<sup>17</sup> i.e. are aspects of a single causal act. The formal, final and efficient cause act together to produce certain effects on a regular basis. The final and formal causes are simply what determines the efficient cause to consistently achieve one particular effect rather than a different one. For example, we expect sunlight on a windowsill to produce a warm windowsill instead of rainbows or ice-cream. The sunlight acts one way and not another precisely because it is pre-determined to affect things in certain ways only; it is inwardly constrained, by its nature to do only certain kinds of things, which is to say, constrained to reach only a limited repertoire of goals. As W. Norris Clarke, S.J. says,

[i]f the efficient cause at the moment of its productive action is not interiorly determined or focussed towards procuring this effect rather than another, then there is no sufficient reason why it should produce this one[effect] rather than [another]. Hence it will produce nothing [no effect] at all: indeterminate action is no action at all... [This is] precisely what is meant by final causality or focussed efficient causality...<sup>18</sup>



The effects of any process can only be of a certain kind, i.e. they operate to reach particular goals or purposes. Consequently, it becomes clear that the laws of nature also act as final causes because they guide processes to certain specific ends instead of others; sowing iron filings will not let us harvest sunflowers but will allow us to gather rust. Planets follow the laws of motion—and therefore circle the sun rather than inscribing figure-eights. The laws of chemistry require acetic acid and baking soda to react in a certain way. All these processes are constrained to act towards certain ends which are predictable.

According to Henry Veatch, final causality is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as to the work of conscious agents. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends... Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*<sup>19</sup>

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of mixing acetic acid with baking soda or a satellite's orbit. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so

often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and, if correctly understood, do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

Among the new atheists, only Dawkins seems even peripherally aware of the PSR, in his rejection of the view that “only theology is equipped to answer the why questions. What on Earth is a why question?”<sup>20</sup> He tries to brush them aside *tout court*: “Some questions simply do not deserve an answer.”<sup>21</sup> This, of course, is more an expression of attitude and prejudice rather than a rational reply. However, in taking this path, he goes too far; insofar as his retrogressive argument could just as easily be used to dismiss some of the most important scientific questions of our time, e.g. Einstein’s question of whether time was constant for all observers and why it was not. Dawkins also fails to distinguish between questions that can be rationally justified and those that cannot, i.e. questions based on scientific data or logical reasoning and those that are baseless speculation. For example, it is not unscientific to ask how and why the initial cosmological singularity came into existence since there is general consensus that such a singularity must have existed but, until empirical and/or logical evidence arrives there is no point in wondering why fairies rode sea-horses in the prehistoric oceans.

Based on his previous statements, Dawkins would seem to imply that only questions that can be answered scientifically deserve to be answered but this reply, as we shall see in detail below, is highly problematical.

### **5: Methodological Naturalism**

As we may recall, the second part of our previously given definition of naturalism refers to methodological materialism i.e. the view that everything there is “can be studied by the methods appropriate to studying that world.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, all phenomena must be studied and explained scientifically, i.e. in strictly material or physical terms; we cannot appeal to any non-physical causes in our explanations. All

studies must adhere to the methods of natural science, i.e. be measurable, quantifiable, repeatable, objectively observable, and falsifiable. Ideally, we should be able to conduct or at least conceive of an actual experiment to help determine what is true, or minimally, what is false. Only that which can be scientifically established or at least is not forbidden by the scientific method can be called truth.

The adherence to methodological materialism creates serious problems for the new atheists. The first is the claim that only knowledge meeting the demands of the scientific method is genuine knowledge, i.e. is not faith or "belief without evidence." One problem is how to verify such a claim scientifically. What experiment could prove that only scientific knowledge claims are valid, or that all other knowledge claims are false? The impossibility of doing so is self-evident. Obviously, the new atheists' claim about genuine knowledge refutes itself because it cannot meet its own criteria for testing knowledge claims. Hence, their position is untenable.

A second problem follows. If only scientifically established facts are genuine knowledge, how can the new atheists assert ontological materialism, i.e. that there are no supernatural or super-sensible aspects to reality?<sup>23</sup> By its very nature a scientific experiment can only tell us about physical things and nothing at all about the existence or non-existence of super-physical entities. How then, could an experiment prove or disprove the existence of the supernatural or super-sensible? Again, the new atheism's basic ontological premise is undermined by its own insistence of excluding anything but scientific evidence. In effect, their categorical denial of super-sensible realities is left without a foundation even on their own terms.

The new atheism's foundational claims are, in the final analysis, self-undermining and self-refuting. Paradoxically then, the assertion of these claims as if they were genuine truth is ultimately no more than an act of faith, or as Dawkins puts it, a delusion that grows out of

“belief without evidence.”<sup>24</sup> This places the new atheists in a position of serious self-contradiction since they are opposed to believing anything on faith. Harris, whose book is called *The End of Faith*, says “faith is simply *unjustified* belief,”<sup>25</sup> i.e. belief “unjustified” by the scientific method, while Dennett approvingly quotes Mark Twain’s jest, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”<sup>26</sup> Hitchens, too, views faith as belief without evidence.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the new atheists are in a position of asserting a position based on “faith” (not provable by science), and, this ironically, makes the new atheists the inadvertent target of their own grand pronouncements about the untenability of faith: “Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself,”<sup>28</sup> “It is therefore the very nature of faith to serve as an impediment to further inquiry,”<sup>29</sup> “faith and superstition distort our whole picture of the world.”<sup>30</sup>

What all this demonstrates is that the philosophical foundations of the new atheism, specifically, the methodological and ontological root premises, are severely flawed inasmuch as they cannot meet the basic logical criterion of internal consistency or non-self-contradiction. Even on their own terms, they cannot prove that the physical world is the only real one, and, therefore, they cannot prove the foundation principle of atheism that God does not exist. This leaves belief in God available as a rational possibility.

### **6. Is the Existence of God a Tenable “Scientific Hypothesis”?**

Another problem with ontological materialism is Dawkin’s view is exposed in the two statements that “the God question is not in principle and forever outside the remit of science”<sup>31</sup> and “the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other.”<sup>32</sup> These two statements entangle him in a flagrant self-contradiction. How could a natural, physical experiment prove or disprove the existence of a non-physical entity? How could God, Who is not a natural object, Who does not exist in the limitations of time and space be proven or disproven by an experiment precisely limiting itself to entities that exist in time and space? “God” would be subject to scientific study

and experimentation only if that Being is a quantifiable, physical or material being, i.e. part of nature—but "God" is not. Thus, Dawkins sets-up a straw-man argument insofar as he tries to portray God as a mere 'natural object'—something to which no religion agrees. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*The Divine Reality is Unthinkable, Limitless, Eternal, Immortal and Invisible ...It [the "Infinite Reality"] ...cannot be described in terms which apply to the phenomenal sphere of the created world. (PT 50)*

He adds, "*in the world of God there is no time. Time has sway over creatures but not over God.*" (SAQ 156) Moreover, God is not limited by place. (SAQ 203) In short, the God posited by the Bahá'í teachings, and I would argue, ultimately by all religions, has none of the characteristics of the phenomenal reality which science is designed to study. Therefore, Dawkins' argument does not refute the existence of God as accepted by religions but only refutes a 'straw-man,' a naturalistic 'god' as Dawkins has contrived him for polemical purposes. Like all straw-man arguments, Dawkins' contention simply misses the point. The existence or non-existence of God is beyond the reach of scientific study, though, as we have already seen, it is not necessarily beyond the man's reasoning capacity.

This problem also dogs Dennett's work, though from a different perspective. He proposes to study religion scientifically—a project not in itself incompatible with the Bahá'í Writings—but then he forgets that scientifically studying the human phenomenon of religion in evolutionary terms is not the same thing as establishing atheism on a scientific basis. The latter requires evidence that God does not exist, whereas the former merely studies how the religious impulse manifests itself in various cultural forms—which does not say anything at all about God's existence or non-existence. His attempt to argue from the historical manifestations of religion to God's non-existence

is a patent *non sequitur*. Finally, Dennett reduces God to the kind of phenomenon science can study and seems oblivious to the fact that he has substituted his own naturalistic 'god' for a supernatural God and, therefore, has set up a reductionist argument.

### 7. Self-Contradictions: Meme Theory and HADDs

The demand that all genuine knowledge must be scientific also causes trouble for the new atheists insofar as it leads them into self-contradictions. In order to explain the spread and powerful hold of religion, Dawkins and Dennett assert that religion is a meme, i.e. a "unit[] of cultural imitation"<sup>33</sup> which functions like a gene for ideas, beliefs, customs, feelings, skills and so on. These are transferred through teaching, imitation and law. As Dennett points out, these memes operate for their own benefit, and must be studied in light of the question "*cui bono?*"<sup>34</sup> i.e. who gains?

The most obvious problem with meme theory is that it is beside the point to the issue of God's existence or non-existence because it is a theory about the transmission of ideas and images, and, as such, says nothing about the truth of these ideas and/or images. Nothing in meme theory can be used to tell us whether or not the 'God-meme' refers to an existing reality. Any conclusions one way or another are simply a *non sequitur* fallacy. The method of transmission of an idea does not allow us to assess if the idea is true.

But there are deeper difficulties, viz. that meme theory itself does not meet the demands of the scientific method. Here are ten reasons why memes are no more than metaphors and not products of reasoning guided by the scientific method: memes (1) do not exist in space, (2) are not physical, (3) have no internal structure i.e. no physically separate or component parts or clear boundaries, (4) are not involved in any measurable energetic processes within themselves, amongst themselves or with other beings, (5) do not show, action, agency, e.g. competition, accommodation, (6) have no inherent interests or even

self-interests (all their interests are attributed to them externally), (7) have no intention and cannot act intentionally, (8) have no inherent reproductive capacity, (9) cannot be quantified, (10) “have no chromosomes or loci or alleles or sexual recombination.”<sup>35</sup> Given these characteristics, how are memes amenable to scientific study? They are not measurable, quantifiable, physical, predictable nor any of the other attributes of genuine scientific objects. Furthermore, they cannot be subject to evolution in any but a metaphoric sense.

Consequently, Dawkins' and Dennett's meme theory is based on a fallacy, or perhaps more precisely, a false analogy, not only because memes are essentially different from genes but also because unlike genes, memes are not scientifically testable objects. Furthermore, treating memes as if they had inherent interests is an example of a logical mistake known as the pathetic fallacy, which treats inanimate things as if they were alive.<sup>36</sup> Since a non-living thing has no intentions or goals, it cannot have any inherent interests to achieve or lose. Any 'interests' it has must be imposed from the outside and Dennett's "*Cui bono?*" question is irrelevant to them.

Dennett attempts to prove that memes exist “because words exist”<sup>37</sup> but this too is untenable. In the first place, identifying words with memes does not escape the problems noted above. Furthermore, a word may exist physically as sound or as physical marks on paper or a screen, but the meaning of the word is not inherent in these marks or sounds—and it is precisely the meaning which is the basis for their significance as memes. Therefore, if Dennett is referring to the physical word form, his argument to show memes exist is beside the point since it says nothing about the meaning of the word/meme. If the meme is the meaning, then how is meaning measurable, quantifiable, energetic, or, how is it in time and space? How does it have interests? In short, it is a non-scientific object and for the new atheists to build a theory on them is self-contradictory. Indeed, the meaning of a word is a perfect example of a non-material or non-physical (dare I say

non-positivist?) reality, the existence of which these atheists are eager to deny in any form. The new atheists cannot demand scientific rigour from religions on one hand and then appeal to meme (or HADD) theory on the other.

Like Dawkins' meme theory, Dennett's HADD theory is also beside the point of God's existence or non-existence. In "investigating the biological basis of religion,"<sup>38</sup> Dennett posits the existence of the HADD, the brain's supposed 'hyper-action agent detection device' which attributes agency or intention to events and entities around us.<sup>39</sup> This HADD is the alleged origin of our belief in supernatural phenomenon including God or gods.<sup>40</sup> Even if his hypothesis were true (though Dennett admits it is no more than a convenient supposition or untested theory<sup>41</sup>), a theory to explain the *origin* or *prevalence* of an idea can tell us nothing about the *truth* of an idea. The prevalence of an idea and the truth of an idea are two different things and we cannot prove anything about one from the other. Nor can the historical origin of belief in God or gods be counted as evidence against them without committing the genetic fallacy. The origins of an idea can never prove or disprove the truth of an idea. An idea is true or untrue strictly on its own merits or lack of them.

Furthermore, HADD's, like memes, are no more than reified assumptions and cannot meet the most elementary tests of scientific validity. Yet Dennett, who admits they are no more than suppositions, and Dawkins treat them as established fact. This reveals an enormous self-contradiction in their work: on one hand, they critique religion for its speculations and lack of scientific explicability while at the same time indulging in such speculations in their own theories. We shall have more to say about fallacies involving HADD's later.

### **8. Self-Contradiction: Adopting Eastern Mysticism**

Harris falls into a similar self-contradiction regarding his demand for scientific rigour for all religious claims on one hand and his own



reliance on non-scientific claims on the other. He asserts that eastern mysticism offers a rationally valid alternative to religion. In defence of mysticism he writes,

Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not. The mystic has recognised something about the nature of consciousness prior to thought, and this recognition is susceptible to rational discussion. The mystic has reasons for what he believes and these reasons are empirical. The roiling mystery of the world can be analyzed with concepts (this is science) or it can be experienced free of concepts (this is mysticism).<sup>42</sup>

Harris' initial claim that mysticism is rational is a much debated subject and cannot simply be taken at face value especially in light of his self-contradictory statements about it. First, if mysticism is "consciousness prior to thought," then it cannot be "susceptible to rational discussion" which is entirely dependent on conceptual and rational thought to work. This problem is one of the reasons many mystics resort to metaphor, poetry, story, myth—the content of many religious texts—in an effort to convey in words that which is beyond conceptual thinking. We simply cannot discuss anything that is "prior to thought." Second, how could a mystic justify, i.e. provide "reasons for what he believes" if what he has experienced is "prior to thought"? What reasons could adequately justify that which is beyond all thought? Only the purely subjective experience itself can provide adequate justification. Our third problem is that this necessary subjectivity conflicts with Harris' adherence to the scientific method and its rejection of subjective experience as a valid source of knowledge. Fourth, Harris' phrase "the roiling mystery of the world" is, in light of Harris's advocacy of empirical, scientific knowledge, a prize piece of nonsense. What could this phrase even mean? How could one devise an experiment to determine how mysterious or "roiling" the world is? Harris, in his advocacy of eastern mysticism as a supposed anti-dote to religion is, like Dawkins and

Dennett, in serious contradiction with the scientific premises he supposedly adopts as the basis of his thinking.

### 9. Disproving God's Existence

Because the new atheists realise that atheism requires denial of God's existence, they attempt to refute or dismiss various traditional arguments for God's existence. We shall review and critique a number of them as well as contrast them to the Bahá'í Writings.

Hitchens, for example, tries to disprove the First Mover argument by pointing out that the alleged First Mover or First Cause of all beings, God, must himself have a designer.<sup>43</sup> He asks, 'Who made God?' or as Dennett puts it in launching a similar argument, "What caused God?"<sup>44</sup>

There are at least three logical flaws in this line of reasoning. First, it commits a category mistake, i.e. confuses one kind of object with another. God, as portrayed by religions, is not a natural object subject to physical laws and the conditions of existence such as time, place, contingency or dependence. (SAQ 116, 148, 231) 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that God "*cannot be described in terms which apply to the phenomenal sphere of the created world,*" (PT 50) precisely because God is not a natural object. Dawkins disagrees, holding that God is well within the scope of scientific study.<sup>45</sup> However, to treat Him as if He were, necessarily fails to refute the concept of God that is at the center of the debate. In short, it misses the point completely.

Second, this category mistake leads to a straw-man argument which does not disprove God as understood by religious practitioners but only 'God' as described by the new atheists. This substitution makes their conclusion inapplicable to God as conceived by virtually all religions. The new atheists have, in effect, set up a straw man and, thereby, changed the subject. Indeed, if God were a natural object amenable to scientific study, there is no question that the new atheists would

be right in denying His existence but in the debate with religion they often merely tilt at windmills of their own making.

Third, by asking “What caused God?” Dennett not only makes a category mistake but also initiates an actual infinite regress, which, as already shown, is logically absurd and rejected by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The question assumes that God, like all other natural objects, requires a cause and this in turn leads to an infinite regress of actual causal acts. We have already shown why such an actual infinite regress is impossible in an earlier section of this paper.

Dawkins’ makes the same category mistake although he approaches the problem from a slightly different angle. He specifically rejects the “Unmoved Mover” argument, the “Uncaused Cause” argument and the “cosmological argument”<sup>46</sup> by arguing against the assumption that God is exempt from infinite regress. This assumption, he suggests, is unfounded. If God were a natural object like all others, Dawkins is undoubtedly correct, but religions generally do not propose such a God, and this is certainly not the concept that exists in the Bahá’í Writings. Therefore, unless Dawkins wishes to pursue his straw man argument that God is a natural being, he must show why a God Who is not a natural entity should be subject to infinite regress like all other natural objects. Merely asserting that God is not exempt fails to satisfy when simple logic tells us that God as described by religion as an absolutely independent being is necessarily exempt from infinite regress.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, of course, accepts the argument of the Uncaused Cause, which implicitly accepts God as exempt from infinite regress: “*there must be an independent being whose independence is essential.*” (SAQ 6) The same conclusion follows from the radical contingency of all things. “Nothing is caused by itself.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, the idea is self-contradictory, i.e. literally nonsensical. For a thing to cause itself, it would have to exist before it exists—and this is impossible. Therefore, all phenomenal things are dependent on an external cause i.e. are contingent and this

line of dependence ends with God. We can only avoid this conclusion by positing the existence of an actual infinite sequence and all the associated difficulties to which we have referred.

Dawkins compounds his category mistake of naturalizing God by stating that the universe, or a Dutchman's Pipe plant, is too complex to have been created by a simple being. Thus, God would have to be at least as complex as His creation—and the existence of such a super-complex being is even more “improbable”<sup>48</sup> than the chance developments of evolution. Later he elaborates the idea that God must necessarily be super-complex: “A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe cannot be simple.”<sup>49</sup> He also describes God as a “calculating agent”<sup>50</sup> of improbable complexity. Underlying Dawkins' assertions is the assumption that God is a natural object, composed of matter subject to time, space and causality, and Who reasons discursively in linear logical sequence. But that is precisely what religion says God is not. Once again, Dawkins sets up a straw man—his naturalistic definition of God—and then tries to disprove it. He does not really deal with God as presented by religion.<sup>51</sup>

In contradiction to the new atheists' acceptance of cosmic evolution as a matter of pure chance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá accepts the idea of design.

*This composition and arrangement [of the cosmos], through the wisdom of God and His preexistent might, were produced from one natural organization, which was composed and combined with the greatest strength, conformable to wisdom, and according to a universal law. From this it is evident that it is the creation of God, and is not a fortuitous composition and arrangement . (SAQ 181)*

We need not look far for the reason. The universe evolved in accordance with natural laws. However, as we have already seen, the

existence of natural laws requires a creator, a transcendent entity not itself subject to natural law but which establishes natural laws with all their inherent potentials. When these laws affect matter, they create the order of which we are aware today. (The same has been noted

about the attributes and potentials of matter.) Even moments of extreme disorder—supernovae, volcanic eruptions—happen according to physical laws. Moreover, as the laws of probability tell us, ‘chance’ functions according to rules which, over time, impose a degree of order on seemingly unordered processes. The large scale design we see on earth or in the universe around us is the product of these laws (and their action on matter) over time. There is no rational argument to insist that cosmic design must occur by direct intervention at the macroscopic level when an explanation based on the laws of nature and the attributes of matter provides equally tenable explanations of the order we observe.

Thus, in the Bahá'í Writings, there need be no inherent conflict between the concept of design—in the nature and potentials of laws and matter—and evolution *vis-à-vis* the actualization of these potentials in different forms over time. This weakens the new atheist argument that religion and science are necessarily antagonistic.

Dawkins tries to defuse the traditional argument from degree according to which the degrees of certain qualities such as goodness, perfection or truth require that there be a highest degree as a reference point for the lesser degrees. He replies that there must also be degrees of smelliness and therefore, a final “peerless stinker”<sup>52</sup> must exist. Obviously he does not understand the argument which requires us to distinguish between concrete descriptors (smelliness, redness) and “transcendentals”, i.e. attributes of being itself such as unity, (oneness), goodness (in itself), truth and perfection. These can be applied to all beings—while smelliness or redness cannot. Once again, we observe how Dawkins sets up a straw man argument and

thinks he has demolished the traditional argument when he has not even addressed it in the first place.

In *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advances the argument from perfection as a proof for the existence of God.<sup>53</sup> He says, “*The imperfections of the contingent world are in themselves a proof of the perfections of God.*” (SAQ 5) To say that something is imperfect or approaches perfection more than something else implies the existence of a perfect standard by which to measure degrees of perfection. Such a perfect standard ultimately can only refer to God Who possess all perfections to a supreme degree, including the perfection of existence. God's existence is perfect because it is necessary—there simply can be no greater degree of existence than God's; furthermore, God's existence is fully actual, i.e. God has no potentials left to actualize (otherwise He would be subject to change). God is complete, independent and absolute. On the other hand, the existence of creation is of a lesser order because it is contingent, dependent and to some degree, potential.

Dawkins tries to undermine the ontological argument for God's existence by referring to Kant who identified the “slippery assumption that ‘existence’ is more perfect than ‘non-existence.’”<sup>54</sup> The obvious problem is that it makes no sense to say that ‘non-existence’ is as perfect or as imperfect as ‘existence’ since we cannot ascribe any attributes whatever to ‘non-existence.’ Lacking all qualities and even the potential for acquiring qualities, non-existence is inherently less than existence; it is not even more imperfect—it just ‘is not.’ This understanding of the value of existence over non-existence is the ontological basis for gratitude to God for creation in general:

*All praise to the unity of God, and all honor to Him... Who, out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things, Who, from naught, hath brought into being the most refined and subtle elements of His creation, and Who, rescuing His*

*creatures from the abasement of remoteness and the perils of ultimate extinction... How could it, otherwise, have been possible for sheer nothingness to have acquired by itself the worthiness and capacity to emerge from its state of non-existence into the realm of being? (GWB 64–65)<sup>55</sup>*

An existential retort to Dawkins' position would be to challenge him to choose non-existence for himself or someone he loves. It is a certainty that he will immediately and most personally discover the perfections of existence.

A survey of the new atheist's work shows their handling of the issue of philosophical proofs for God's existence is very weak, and shows little understanding of the subject. Aside from the problems mentioned above it should be noted that no major philosophers, even those with religious commitments, have ever seriously considered the "argument from scripture," the "argument from admired religious scientists," the argument from personal experience," or the "argument from beauty"<sup>56</sup> as proofs for God's existence. Pascal's Wager is, of course, not an argument about God's existence as Dawkins seems to think, but is an argument about belief.

## **10. Morality Versus Religion**

One of the major goals of the new atheists is to separate morality from religion in order to undermine the argument that we need religion to be moral. They argue that enormous harm has been done in the name of religion and do not hesitate to provide exhaustive lists of horrors perpetrated in the name of faith. However, problems arise with their belief that such crimes are less likely to be committed in the name of atheism and that atheism has a more humane record.

In fact, the record of Marxist-Leninism, Communism, in which atheism is a foundational and integral part, shows that such is not the case. In the single century of Communist rule, approximately 100

million people have been programmatically killed in purges, vast slave labour camp systems, and man-made famines not to mention the brutalities of the secret police.<sup>57</sup> Even a cursory examination of the history of Communist countries makes it clear that atheism (which was often taught as a school subject) and atheists have no edge on moral behavior. The notion that the abolition of religion and its replacement by programmatic atheism would bring the end of murderous fanaticism is not borne out by history. Only Harris seems fully aware of this problem—and his response is to say that “communism was little more than a political religion.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, he tries to re-define communism as a religion—despite the fact that atheism is integral to the ontology, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of man, and social and political philosophy of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao. For obvious reasons Harris’ response is not credible. Hitchens admits that “emancipation from religion does not always produce the best mammal either”<sup>59</sup> but this is a statement made in passing and is not explored as to its implications for his indictment of religion.

The new atheists believe that we do need not religion as a basis for our values and the two must be separated. In their view, we can rely on reason as the basis of our morals because we want to “commit ourselves to finding a rational foundation for our ethics.”<sup>60</sup> Says Hitchens: “We believe with certainty that an ethical life can be lived without religion.”<sup>61</sup> For support, he turns to Kant’s categorical imperative (CI) which states “I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”<sup>62</sup> The chief problem with the CI is that it is an empty claim: it gives no specific guidance: a psychopath might very well agree that all people act as he does; Hitler, Stalin, Mao etc. expected them to—and struck first. In fact, by itself, the CI ultimately prohibits nothing and leaves our own subjective tastes as a standard for morals. This is obviously unsatisfactory as a basis for social order which requires unified moral standards. In a similar vein, Dennett writes, “Maybe people everywhere can be trusted and hence allowed to make their own informed choices. Informed choice!



What an amazing and revolutionary idea!"<sup>63</sup> Superficially this sounds good and reasonable, but if we ask 'What principles shall guide these informed choices?' difficulties multiply. Whose principles? What shall ground them? Why should I accept them? What happens if I disagree with them? Moreover, an even deeper question arises for all ethical systems grounded only on reason: 'Why should I be reasonable? What if it's to my advantage to act unreasonably? What if I don't feel like being reasonable to others?'

As 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, ethical systems based purely on human reason can lead us to different, conflicting and even self-contradictory answers. (SAQ 297) Indeed, ethical viewpoints may be little more than rationalized personal preferences. Obviously, such a plethora of competing viewpoints makes society unworkable since the existence of society depends on an objective standard applicable to all. In other words, ethical systems based only on reason lack authority and they lack an objective foundation applicable to all.

### **11. The Need for Absolute Ground in Ethics**

The new atheists reject the necessity of an enforcing authority for morals. Dennett, as we have seen, thinks we can rely on individuals making their own choices,<sup>64</sup> and Harris thinks we can rely on our moral intuitions (more below) as well as Kant's other formulation of the categorical imperative i.e. that we must treat others as ends-in-themselves and never as merely a means to another end.<sup>65</sup> Hitchens, it is fair to say, speaks for these authors when he writes, "there is no requirement for any enforcing or supernatural authority."<sup>66</sup>

There are two problems with this position. First, while it may (or may not) be an ideal to strive for, the practical problem remains that without consequences, without reward and punishment any ethical system becomes a dead letter, a mere set of suggestions that some will follow and others will not. That is why the Bahá'í Writings state "*That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and*

*punishment. These two pillars are the sources of life to the world.”* (TB 27) Bahá'u'lláh also says, *“the canopy of world order is upraised upon the two pillars of reward and punishment.”* (TB 126) There must be consequences to action in order to encourage and reward obedience.

The second problem is that mere human authority, be it of reason or government lacks the authority to make people accept moral precepts; they lack the intrinsic authority of God Who is the author of all that exists. They lack the guarantee of correctness, the certainty, the objective viewpoint and foundation that only God can provide in guiding our actions. Yet this is exactly what people need as the new atheists themselves admit. This is precisely why Kant thought God was necessary as a regulative idea or principle in morals.

As an objective ground for ethics, the new atheists propose either an innate moral sense in all human beings, or in the case of Dawkins and Harris, in biology, i.e. genetics. These provide an absolute ground or absolute reference point needed to make moral choices more than the mere expression of personal preferences. Hitchens tells us that “conscience is innate”<sup>67</sup> and that “Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it.”<sup>68</sup> Harris also asserts the existence of an innate moral sense:

Any one who does not harbour some rudimentary sense that cruelty is wrong is unlikely to learn that it is by reading... The fact that our ethical intuitions have their roots in biology reveals that our efforts to ground ethics in religious conceptions of “moral duty” are misguided.... We simply do not need religious ideas to motivate us to live ethical lives.<sup>69</sup>

Dennett's willingness to trust everyone's informed choices also implies that we all possess an inner moral standard of reasonableness to which we will adhere. Dawkins tries to ground the innate moral sense in our genetic make-up.<sup>70</sup>

From the viewpoint of the Bahá'í Writings, this position is not so much incorrect as incomplete, and, therefore, leads to an untenable conclusion. In the first place, the Writings tell us that humans have the capacity to be moral i.e. learn moral behaviors but that this capacity must be actualized by the teachings of a Manifestation acting through parental and social education. (PUP 400–401) 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that “*man, if he is left without education, becomes bestial, and, moreover, if left under the rule of nature, becomes lower than an animal, whereas if he is educated he becomes an angel.*” (SAQ 7) If our good or bad character is actualized by education, we immediately face questions over what are the particular principles and teachings we shall inculcate—and here again, without divinely grounded guidance, we shall be subject to conflicting opinions and programs. In short, we cannot rely only on the innate capacity to be moral for morality in practice.

This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that humankind has a divine or spiritual aspect, (SAQ 118) that might be compared to the innate moral sense posited by the new atheists. However, the Writings also note that humankind has an animal nature in conflict with our spiritual nature, and may overcome it by force or deception. The new atheists have not taken this animal nature into account in the unfolding of our moral lives and, therefore, have over-simplified the issue of innate moral intuitions. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*The promptings of the heart are sometimes satanic. How are we to differentiate them? How are we to tell whether a given statement is an inspiration and prompting of the heart through the merciful assistance or through the satanic agency? (PUP 254)*

Because this question cannot be answered immanently, i.e. from the standpoint of reason or intuition alone, we require an external guide or objective standpoint by which to evaluate our ethical promptings and decisions. This is precisely the role filled by God and the Manifestation. “*He [man] has the animal side as well as the angelic side, and*

*the aim of an educator is to so train human souls that their angelic aspect may overcome their animal side.”* (SAQ 235) However, if we reject God as the ground of our morality, then all moral systems inevitably fall into relativism and conflict as various moral conceptions compete. This is not conducive to the peaceful world both the new atheists, the Bahá'ís, and all people of good will want to establish.

In other words, the Bahá'í Writings lead us to believe that there is an innate moral capacity in man but that this moral sense needs to be cultivated and developed by education from parents and teachers but above all, by the Manifestations of God. The view that this innate moral capacity may have biological roots is not a problem from a Bahá'í perspective, indeed, is to be expected given that man is an embodied creature. Thus, Bahá'ís may agree that science can study the biological *basis* of ethics, without at the same time succumbing to the reductionist view that all ethics can be reduced to biology.

## 12. Faith Versus Reason

The new atheists also posit an inherent conflict between faith and reason. Hitchens sums up their views when he writes, “All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule.”<sup>71</sup> Harris claims,

Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible.<sup>72</sup>

For his part, Dawkins says, “religious faith is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems to trump all others.”<sup>73</sup> Such sentiments inevitably lead us to questions about the nature and scope of reason.

The new atheists' work makes it clear that in their model of reasoning, they identify reason with science and the scientific method, i.e. with a naturalist view of reason in which reason must function within the limits of nature as understood by science. Any knowledge-claims that transcend the natural realm and therefore cannot meet the standards of scientific knowledge are not genuine knowledge. Consequently, reason is fundamentally incompatible with belief in super-natural or super-sensible beings or realities and is also incompatible with faith which is "simply unjustified belief."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, faith simply shows an unwillingness "to stoop to reason when it [faith] has no good reason to believe."<sup>75</sup> In effect faith is inherently irrational, and, therefore, inherently incompatible with reason. Whatever we designate as knowledge must be rational, i.e. explicable in rational terms, and must fall within the limits of nature as established by science. There is no such thing as knowledge that transcends our natural limits; reason only functions correctly when it limits itself to the natural world. Any attempt to reason beyond physical nature opens the way to theological superstition.

We have already discussed the logical short-comings of this viewpoint, i.e. its inability to meet its own standards for genuine knowledge. Since experiments are limited to the natural realm, no experiment can tell us anything one way or another about the existence or non-existence of super-natural or super-sensible aspects of reality. Consequently, the naturalist viewpoint is itself a form of faith as the new atheists define it, i.e. "belief without evidence."<sup>76</sup>

In contrast to the new atheists who embrace an extreme rationalism which asserts that only positivist or scientifically rational knowledge is true knowledge, 'Abdu'l-Bahá maintains a moderate rationalism. According to moderate rationalism, reason can tell us some things but not everything; it is necessary for the acquisition of knowledge but it is not always sufficient. While reason may prepare the way or lay the foundations for certain kinds of knowledge, there comes a

point in the quest for knowledge, when we must rely on other ways of knowing. That is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that the mind which is "*a power of the human spirit*" must be augmented by a supernatural power if it is to acquire knowledge of super-sensible realities: "*the human spirit, unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities.*" (SAQ 208) Reason alone cannot supply us with certain spiritual truths the knowledge of which requires super-natural guidance or inspiration. Nor can it provide complete certainty which is why other ways of knowing are necessary. 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that

*the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable. This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained.* (SAQ 299)

Similarly, in discussing various proofs of God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

*if the inner perception be open, a hundred thousand clear proofs become visible. Thus, when man feels the indwelling spirit, he is in no need of arguments for its existence; but for those who are deprived of the bounty of the spirit, it is necessary to establish external arguments.* (SAQ 6)

In other words, when the mind is clear and open, we can perceive directly truths which we otherwise must laboriously prove by discursive reasoning. We acquire knowledge by immediate insight because we are enlightened by the "*the luminous rays which emanate from the Manifestations.*" (SAQ 108)

It is clear that one of the functions of reason is to remove the intellectual, attitudinal and emotional impediments that block our direct vision of the truth. Reason, so to speak, clears the path for faith because faith, too, is another way of knowing certain kinds of truth.

Faith need not be 'blind' or 'ignorant.' As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "By the faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds," (TAB3 549) which shows that "conscious knowledge" is an integral part of faith.

Elsewhere he speaks of the kind of faith "*which comes from Knowledge, and is the faith of understanding*" (ABL 64) This latter kind of faith culminates in "*the faith of practice.*" (ibid) He also points out that faith gives us "*the capacity to partake of the lights of knowledge and wisdom.*" (TAB1 166) Furthermore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.*" (PUP 181)

Very obviously, the Bahá'í Writings do not view faith as 'ignorant faith' but see reason and faith working together, two wings of a bird, (TAB1 178) to provide knowledge of both the sensible/physical and super-sensible aspects of reality. Consequently, the clash between faith and reason is not inherent or necessary as the new atheists claim but is a product of unclear thinking.

### **13. Intolerance Against Religion**

One of the areas of major disagreement between the Bahá'í Writings and the new atheism is the latter's emphatic rejection not just of the intolerance shown by religions but also for inter-religious tolerance itself. Sam Harris writes,

religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others. I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every person can believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principle forces driving us toward the abyss.<sup>77</sup>

It is worth pointing out that religious tolerance is demonized—in favour of atheist intolerance, a self-contradiction given the new atheism's attack on intolerance by religion. It is also a case of special pleading insofar as they apparently believe that atheist intolerance is somehow salutary. However, the new atheists go farther. Harris writes, "It is time we recognized that belief is not a private matter ... beliefs are scarcely more private than actions are."<sup>78</sup> If beliefs are as public as actions, then they are subject to law and punishment like actions. Here we observe a more repressive side of the new atheism, which also becomes apparent when Dawkins writes

children have a right not to have their minds addled by nonsense, and we as a society have a duty to protect them from it. So we should not allow more parents to teach their children to believe ... [any more] than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or lock them in a dungeon.<sup>79</sup>

As with Harris's challenge to the concept of religion as a private personal matter, Dawkins' claim suggests the instrument of law may have to be used to "protect them [children] from it [religion]." Hitchens' suggestion that teaching religion is "child-abuse"<sup>80</sup> implies a similar line of action since child-abuse is not something any society should tolerate. He would at the very least forbid religious instruction until a child has attained "the age of reason."<sup>81</sup> Admittedly, Hitchens says he would not ban religion even if he could, but in light of his extreme rhetoric throughout his book, and especially in light of his claim that religious instruction is child abuse, this statement rings hollow. The intolerance of the new atheists—though it must be noted Dennett is largely free of this—also manifests itself in their expressions of contempt, gratuitous insults and other rhetorical theatrics during their discussions. These might make their works more entertaining but they do nothing to strengthen their arguments.



#### 14. Belief in Belief

Perhaps the best portion of *Breaking the Spell* deals with Dennett's concept of "belief in belief,"<sup>82</sup> which he describes not as belief in God but belief that belief in God is a good thing, "something to be encouraged and fostered wherever possible."<sup>83</sup> He points out that "It is entirely possible to be an atheist and believe in belief in God."<sup>84</sup> He also suggests that some individuals who find their faith in God waning, try to restore their faith by enlisting others to believe in God. According to Dennett, while many believe in God, "Many more people believe in belief in God"<sup>85</sup> which he regards as a kind of unconscious or unadmitted atheism. People no longer believe in God but in a concept.

This raises an interesting question: 'Is belief in the belief in God a kind of belief or unbelief?' Can a person who believes that belief in God is a good really be considered an atheist, or is belief in the goodness of the concept of God itself a kind of faith in God? Has such an individual not taken the first intellectual step towards belief in God, i.e. is such a person not already on the road to faith insofar as she/he recognises a unique goodness lies in a certain kind of belief? If, moreover, we combine this belief or faith with action, as required by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then belief in belief may, indeed, be a kind of faith.

The *Bible* also contains a relevant passage on this issue. The father of a child whom Christ was asked to heal said, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."<sup>86</sup> Like Dennett's believer in belief, he, too, suffered from unbelief—yet because he recognised the goodness of belief, Christ accepted his statement as a statement of belief and healed the child. Unlike Dennett, therefore, we may interpret belief in belief as a species of belief in God, at least in principle. Dennett's understanding of belief in belief as a form of atheism does not necessarily follow from such belief itself.

### 15: Literalism

One of the new atheists' major problems from a Bahá'í perspective is their consistent literalism in reading Jewish, Christian and Muslim scripture. They read scripture in its explicit and most obvious sense and reject non-literal understandings. Dawkins rails against theologians who "employ their favourite trick of interpreting selected scriptures as 'symbolic' rather than literal. By what criteria do you decide which passages are symbolic, which literal?"<sup>87</sup> Assuming there is no rational answer, he simply continues his literalism, a practice supported by Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. In this sense, the new atheists resemble their fundamentalist opponents who also have a strong tendency to literalist readings of scripture.

There are two kinds of problems with new atheist literalism. The first concerns their neglect of centuries, indeed, millennia of non-literalist interpretation of scripture. This is not the appropriate place for a survey of scriptural interpretation, so we shall be content with two examples from Christianity. Already as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Augustine in his *"The Literal Interpretation of Genesis"* states that the creation story does not refer to seven actual days and that the time framework is not to be taken literally. The story conveys a spiritual meaning not a scientific account that can be expected to replicate modern cosmological findings. In more recent times, we have developed existential ways<sup>88</sup> of reading scripture as well as Bultmann's demythologizing which understands scripture as dealing with the possibilities and conditions of human existence and decision-making.<sup>89</sup> In addition, we might consider the point that the spiritual teachings are communicated through "symbolic forms... which are designed to reach the more hidden levels in us of instinct, feeling, and intuition."<sup>90</sup> Dawkins seems unaware of these possibilities and gives no reasons why this history should be ignored, i.e. why we should simply accept his unsupported assertion that symbolic readings are all a "trick."

Whether we read symbolically or literally depends entirely on how we understand the intention or main idea of scriptural passage or story. It need not always be to convey actual historical events. It may, for example, function as a 'myth,' i.e. as an account in external worldly terms of inner psychological and spiritual processes. William Blake, for example, thought of the Exodus story as a journey from enslavement to a false notion of self and a struggle to attain a true one. It may be to convey the nature of (an) existential choice, such as Abraham's or to draw attention to our need to recognise overwhelming and mysterious powers in our existence as in Job. In light of the history of scriptural interpretation, we can only conclude that the new atheists adopt literalism because it suits their polemical purpose of presenting religion in its most negative light.

From the viewpoint of the Bahá'í Writings, the second problem with literalism is that it rejects non-literal or symbolic readings of scripture. Perhaps 'Abdu'l-Bahá sums up the Bahá'í position most succinctly when he states "*The texts of the Holy Books are all symbolical.*" (PUP 220) For example, in *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides extensive symbolic interpretations of Biblical books and stories; indeed, of the story of Adam and Eve, he says "*if the literal meaning of this story were attributed to a wise man, certainly all would logically deny that this arrangement, this invention, could have emanated from an intelligent being.*" (SAQ 123) Clearly he recognizes its irrationality at the literal level. Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (*The Book of Certitude*) is a non-literal, symbolic reading of portions of the Qur'án and other Muslim theological statements. Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that those who do not apprehend the inner, symbolic meaning of these terms, will inevitably suffer:

*Yea, inasmuch as the peoples of the world have failed to seek from the luminous and crystal Springs of divine knowledge the inner meaning of God's holy words, they therefore have*

*languished, stricken and sore athirst, in the vale of idle fancy  
and waywardness.* (KI 105)

Insofar as the new atheism has confined itself to the outward, explicit meaning of scriptures, it is, like fundamentalism, lost “*in the vale of idle fancy and waywardness.*” He adds, that “*the commentators of the Qur’án and they that follow the letter thereof misapprehended the inner meaning of the words of God and failed to grasp their essential purpose.*” (KI 115) This would certainly include the new atheists.

The new atheists cling to literal readings of scripture for the obvious reason that many of their complaints about religion would evaporate if scripture were understood symbolically. For example, problems with the Biblical creation account or with the story of Adam and Eve would be resolved in symbolic understandings. This weakens their case against religion.

## **16. Presentism**

The final problem with the new atheism to be discussed is presentism, i.e. the logical fallacy of evaluating past societies which existed in completely different physical, cultural, economic, social and psychological circumstances by the standards of 21<sup>st</sup> century ideals as developed in advanced, post-industrial nations. Presentism is a particular form of the logical flaw known as *anachronism* which distorts our understanding of past societies and actions by introducing incongruous standards into our study of past societies. It is rooted in overlooking, ignoring or misunderstanding the fact that earlier historical circumstances may have required responses that would strike us as immoral.

Hitchens’ discussion of the Old and New Testaments represents the presentism found throughout the work of the new atheists. His discussion of the “pitiless teachings of the god of Moses”<sup>91</sup> shows no awareness of the time-frame he is considering, nor of the cultural conditions and political circumstances with other tribes. The laws

may, indeed, strike us as harsh or odd—but to expect the ancient Jews living in a ‘tough neighbourhood’ to have been governed by laws suitable for 21<sup>st</sup> century post-industrial democracies shows enormous historical insensitivity. Speaking of Christ’s beatitudes, Hitchens writes, “several are absurd and show a primitive attitude to agriculture (this extends to all mentions of plowing and sowing, and all allusions to mustard and fig trees)”<sup>92</sup> Why would he object to the agricultural references in parables delivered in a time when the vast majority of humans were involved in agriculture?

Ironically, the new atheists’ presentism is a failure to adopt an evolutionary viewpoint on human development, a failure to recognise that just as humankind’s body has evolved, so has its capacity to understand moral and religious concepts. For that reason, expecting the same level of moral and religious understanding from ancient peoples living in wholly different circumstances is not a rational response. Furthermore, presentism involves the new atheists in a self-contradiction with their declared evolutionary principles. Consequently, this self-contradiction undermines their claim to base their arguments in strictly rational and scientific principles.

## Part II: Areas of Convergence or Agreement

Despite the significant differences between the Bahá’í Writings and the new atheism, there are at least seven points on which they agree or at least converge.

### 17. The Evolution of Religion

Because of their advocacy of the scientific method, the new atheists agree that religion should be explored and discussed in evolutionary terms. Dennett, for example, says that the super-natural creatures “that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything

puzzles or frightens us.”<sup>93</sup> The HADD, which started out as a coping mechanism, a “Good Trick, rapidly became a practical necessity of human life”<sup>94</sup> and thereby came to control and blind us. Hitchens traces the origins of religion to earliest man’s “babyish attempts to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge.”<sup>95</sup> Now that we have science, we have outgrown it. Dawkins presents two theories about the evolutionary origin of religion. In one, religion’s roots are the evolution-based tendency for children to “believe without question whatever your grown-ups tell you.”<sup>96</sup> The other is that religion “is a by-product of the misfiring of several of these modules”<sup>97</sup>, i.e. data processing units in the brain as it evolved. Thus religion is essentially pathological, “an accidental by-product—a misfiring of something useful.”<sup>98</sup> The time has come to correct this mistake.

From a Bahá'í perspective, there is no inherent difficulty with an evolutionary approach to understanding religion. Indeed, it is amazingly close to the teaching of progressive revelation according to which “*the exoteric forms of the divine teachings*” (SAQ 75) are adapted to physical, historical and cultural conditions that evolve over time, while the inner or “*esoteric meaning*” (SAQ 120) or “eternal verities” (PDC 108) remain constant to meet the universal needs of our human nature. Each Manifestation

restates the eternal verities they [previous religions] enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions. (PDC 108)

By distinguishing the essential from the non-essential and the man-made from the God-given, the Manifestation renews religion, providing it with a new outward form appropriate to new circumstances with new teachings or restatements (ibid) of universal truths suited to a new era. He cleanses religion of that which is

“man-made,”<sup>99</sup> since the Bahá'í Writings agree with Hitchens' point that much of what passes for religion is man-made. Through this process of cleansing reform and augmentation, religion evolves and continues to evolve without any foreseeable end.

Consequently, Bahá'ís are not surprised to find that different—perhaps to us shocking—laws were proclaimed in earlier times, that different practices held sway along with substantially different beliefs. Rather than condemn them from our current viewpoint we should try to understand these laws, practices and beliefs as agents in creating a unified society, often struggling for survival against implacable enemies. What progressive evolution shows is that God, works through history within the limitations of human beings endowed with free will, who often find themselves caught in very difficult circumstances. In these circumstances, it may have been necessary to punish adultery or theft very harshly for the cohesion and well-being of the group. We should also remember that perhaps one people was more receptive to God's message than others and, thereby, became a special vehicle for human religious evolution. Surrounded by mortal enemies, these more receptive peoples may have been forced to take what strikes us now as gratuitously harsh action.

From a Bahá'í perspective, there is no difficulty in saying that religion started with a HADD for example or has roots in a child's trust in its parents. Hitchens informs us there would be no churches “if humanity had not been afraid of the weather, the dark, the plague, the eclipse and all manner of other things now easily explicable.”<sup>100</sup> This may be true, but anyone who thinks this disproves the truth of religion is simply committing the genetic fallacy, a logical error according to which we de-value something on the basis of its origin instead of its present state.<sup>101</sup> HADD, childish trust or childish fear are only the avenues by which religious phenomena may have first appeared in the world—and these avenues of emergence, determined as they are by their cultural circumstances, do not necessarily negate

the truth value inherent in the beliefs that appear. Given the vulnerability of their rather short lives, it makes no sense to expect that our ancestors would have the same sophisticated religious understanding that is available in our day. However, their lack of sophistication does not prove they were not 'onto something' in their intuitions about super-sensible realities. If we demythologize these beliefs, we may indeed find valuable insights.<sup>102</sup>

### 18. Crimes on God's Name

Another area of significant agreement between the Bahá'í Writings and the new atheists concerns the crimes that have often been committed in the name of religion, not to mention injustice and corruption. The Writings make no effort to conceal or sweeten the misdeeds that have been perpetrated under the guise of religious teachings. Frank recognition of these sad developments is integral to the doctrine of progressive revelation since all religions and civilizations follow the seasonal cycle which begins with a pure spring inspired by revelation but ends with a winter in which

*only the name of the Religion of God remains, and the exoteric forms of the divine teachings. The foundations of the Religion of God are destroyed and annihilated, and nothing but forms and customs exist. Divisions appear...* (SAQ 74)

'Abdu'l-Bahá also says,

*The beginnings of all great religions were pure; but priests, taking possession of the minds of the people, filled them with dogmas and superstitions, so that religion became gradually corrupt.* (PUP 406)

These corruptions led to false doctrines that encouraged war and destruction:



*I wish to explain to you the principal reason of the unrest among nations. The chief cause is the misrepresentation of religion by the religious leaders and teachers. They teach their followers to believe that their own form of religion is the only one pleasing to God.... Hence arise among the peoples, disapproval, contempt, disputes and hatred. If these religious prejudices could be swept away, the nations would soon enjoy peace and concord. (PT 45–46)<sup>103</sup>*

In the words of Christopher Hitchens, “religion has been an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred, with members of each group talking of the other in precisely the tones of the bigot.”<sup>104</sup> Overcoming these prejudices and divisions is the purpose of Bahá’u’lláh’s mission:

*The utterance of God is a lamp, whose light is these words: Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship... So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth. (GWB 288)*

The Writings also denounce religion’s attempts to suppress the development of science, the ignorance of the clergy, the undue wealth of the churches compared to the poverty of Christ and the masses, and its interference in politics among other things.<sup>105</sup> Although the Bahá’í Writings do not express themselves as flamboyantly as the new atheists, they are equally clear in condemning the abuses perpetrated by religion and are equally determined to eliminate such practices. Moreover, like the new atheists, the Writings view the elimination of religion as a better alternative to continued division and conflict: “If religion becomes the source of antagonism and strife, the absence of religion is to be preferred.” (PUP 117)

The Bahá’í Faith and the new atheists differ on this issue only insofar as the new atheists want to remedy this problem by abolishing

religion altogether as an irremediable destructive force, while the Bahá'í Faith sees the solution in progressive revelation and above all, in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. In the Bahá'í view, atheism and strictly man-made moral systems will not achieve the desired goal of a world that is at peace with itself and its environment.

However, we must not forget that the new atheists and the Bahá'í Revelation are responses to the same problem, i.e. global disunity, ignorance and the depredations of corrupt religion. This fact forms a basis for positive dialogue with the new atheists despite the difference in solutions. Unfortunately, the dogmatic denial that religion has anything worthwhile to contribute to such a debate tends to inhibit such a dialogue.

### **19. Respecting Science and Reason**

Another significant area of agreement between the Bahá'í Writings and the new atheists is importance of reason and science in human existence. Since we have already explored the new atheism's commitments to reason and rationality in the previous section, we shall point out a few Bahá'í statements on this subject to show that a basis for dialogue exists. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "*in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason.*" (SAQ 7) Elsewhere he proclaims, "*Science is an effulgence of the Sun of Reality, the power of investigating and discovering the verities of the universe, the means by which man finds a pathway to God.*" (PUP 49) He sees no inherent and necessary conflict between reason, science and religion, a concept emphasised in the following:

*The third principle or teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the oneness of religion and science. Any religious belief which is not conformable with scientific proof and investigation is superstition, for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond. (PUP 107)*

Also:

*Material science is the investigation of natural phenomena; divine science is the discovery and realization of spiritual verities. The world of humanity must acquire both.... Both are necessary—one the natural, the other supernatural; one material, the other divine. (PUP 138)*

Finally, he points out the intimate connection between faith and belief and rationality, making clear that irrational faith is not just undesirable but essentially impossible:

*Unquestionably there must be agreement between true religion and science. If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation. (PUP 181)*

These statements demonstrate that according to the Bahá'í Writings, faith is not just “belief without evidence”<sup>106</sup> or ‘blind faith.’ Indeed, in the foregoing quotation, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes it clear that genuine faith in opposition to reason cannot exist since it leads to “*wavering and vacillation.*” Faith must include knowledge and understanding, because without them, even the strongest commitment is bound to weaken.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s pronouncements potentially form the basis for a far-reaching dialogue about the nature, strengths and limitations of reason, as well as the relationship between reason, science and religious faith. However, it must be admitted that such a dialogue will be fraught with challenges given the new atheist’s insistence on a positivist and materialist view of science and reason and the Bahá'í Writings’ allegiance to moderate rationalism and belief in the super-sensible.

## 20. The Independent Investigation of Truth

The new atheists certainly agree that the quest for truth should be independent, i.e. unhindered by religious institutions such as the Inquisition or by religious beliefs. Otherwise, how can we know what the truth is on any subject? As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*The first is the independent investigation of truth; for blind imitation of the past will stunt the mind. But once every soul inquires into truth, society will be freed from the darkness of continually repeating the past. (SWAB 248)*

Elsewhere he says,

*God has conferred upon and added to man a distinctive power, the faculty of intellectual investigation into the secrets of creation, the acquisition of higher knowledge, the greatest virtue of which is scientific enlightenment. (PUP 30)*

Bearing in mind that 'science' here does not refer to naturalistic or material scientism that 'Abdu'l-Bahá rejects elsewhere,<sup>107</sup> we see that the quest for knowledge is one of humankind's distinguishing features. This independent investigation is necessary not just for a few but for "every soul" so that all human beings can take responsibility for what they believe. Consequently, there can be no inherent objection to a Bahá'í investigating the new atheism and testing its arguments by the standards of logic, philosophy, science, history and theology. Nor is there any objection to Dennett's suggestion that we teach children "about all the world's religions, in a matter of fact, historically and biologically informed way."<sup>108</sup> The only stipulation would be that such teaching must be complete, i.e. students must also be equipped with understanding of the inherent limitations of naturalistic science, so that their understanding may be conscious and critical and so that one dogmatic "faith-based" preference is not

simply replaced by another. In that way, each individual will be able to be able to give informed consent to whatever ideas she/he adopts.

## 21. Ethical Realism

Although the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings disagree about the role of religion in ethics, they do agree on ethical realism, i.e. the view that moral beliefs are not simply a matter of individual preference but rather that "in ethics, as in physics, there are truths waiting to be *discovered*—and thus we can be right or wrong in our beliefs about them."<sup>109</sup> This view is already implicit in their belief in some kind of universal ethical intuition which can be applied to all peoples at all times. Leaving aside the issue of how this universal ethical intuition might be manifested in different evolutionary circumstances, the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings can agree that certain ethical virtues are objectively valid, among them compassion and goodwill, (SAQ 301) justice and fairness, tolerance, generosity and a dedication to truth.

An ethical realist position also means that the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings agree on the rejection of relativism in ethics, i.e. they agree that ethical viewpoints are more than reflections of person preferences. They reject the view that we cannot judge ethical viewpoints because we lack an objective, Archimedean standpoint from which to make judgements. For the new atheists, this standard consists in our innate moral intuitions, and for Bahá'ís, this standard is established by God and is sometimes available through the moral intuitions of our spiritual nature.

The issue of ethical realism gives the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings common ground in their opposition to ethical relativism as exemplified in postmodern philosophy.<sup>110</sup> It also provides common ground in regards to the essential unity of human nature, in regards to ethical intuitions and their possible genetic basis, i.e. a universal human nature which provides an objective basis for unity.

## 22. Objective Correspondence Epistemology

The agreement between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings on ethical realism has far-reaching implications, into epistemology for example. If there are universal, objectively knowable (and innate) ethical standards, then it follows that at least some knowledge is objective, that it is possible to evaluate at least some knowledge vis-à-vis truth and falseness. This lays the basis for an objective epistemology, i.e. the claim that all truth-claims are not necessarily mere individual or cultural constructions without correspondence to reality.

The new atheists' adherence to an objective epistemology is self-evident from even the most cursory survey of their books; after all, the whole enterprise of science is predicated on the principle that our discoveries correspond to or tell us something about reality. There may be interpretational differences whether this knowledge is about reality in itself or to reality in inter-action with us, but in the final analysis we gain some testable and objective knowledge about reality itself. This agrees with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "*the rational soul gradually discover[s] ... [and] comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of contingent beings.*" (SAQ 217–18) In other words, the rational soul does not construct these realities, which is to say that these "realities" exist independently of the human perceiver. Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

*the rational soul as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings.* (SAQ 208)

Again, the emphasis is on discovery and on acquiring knowledge, becoming "cognizant" of the attributes of things. These properties are not 'subjective,' i.e. ascribed to things by humankind either as individuals or as cultures. Here is another statement from 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

*The mind and the thought of man sometimes discover truths, and from this thought and discovery signs and results are produced. This thought has a foundation. But many things come to the mind of man which are like the waves of the sea of imaginations; they have no fruit, and no result comes from them. (SAQ 253)*

Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes into more detail. Discoveries lead to "thought [that] has a foundation," i.e. a foundation in reality, i.e. corresponds to reality. This, in effect, asserts an objective, correspondence theory of truth in which correct thought has a "foundation" or basis in reality, which is to say, corresponds to reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also differentiates such thought from imaginations which he says lead to no real results. He also states,

*Reflect that man's power of thought consists of two kinds. One kind is true, when it agrees with a determined truth. Such conceptions find realization in the exterior world; such are accurate opinions, correct theories, scientific discoveries and inventions. (SAQ 251)<sup>111</sup>*

Here he speaks specifically of a knowledge that "agrees with a determined truth," i.e. knowledge that corresponds to reality. He also provides a test for this knowledge: it leads to "accurate opinions" and "correct theories" which conform to reality as well as to discoveries and inventions. In other words, such knowledge has real results testable with the reality in question.

'Abdu'l-Bahá reinforces the correspondence theory of knowledge in a variety of statements. As already noted, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things as they exist, according to the capacity and the power of man." (SAQ 221) To comprehend the reality of things "as they exist" is nothing other than to have one's knowledge correspond to reality. Naturally, this comprehension is limited by our station and capacities but this does not mean that

what we do in fact comprehend does not correspond to reality. For example, the statement that the interior angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees is true—but only in plane geometry. This statement is true but limited. The same holds for our true but limited knowledge of reality.

### 23. Realist Ontology

Along with a realist ethics and a realist epistemology, the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings share a realist ontology. In its simplest terms, ontology is one's theory of reality, its nature and modes of being. Although ontology seems far removed from ordinary human concerns, all human beings and cultures possess an ontology, although it is usually unconscious. For example, the simple statement, 'I shall walk the dog' assumes (a) that 'I' exists in some way, (b) that 'I' have could make such a decision, (c) the dog exists in some way, (d) that 'I' and the dog are distinct and separate entities, exterior to each other, (e) that motion is possible and real and that (f) the city street outside also exists. While this may seem self-evident to some, to others, such as those who believe the world is an illusion or *maya*, or who believe that the self is an illusion, none of these points are necessarily obvious.

It is undeniable that the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings disagree about the ontology in regards to the existence or non-existence of any super-sensible reality. Naturally, the new atheists reject the super-natural. However, they do agree with the Writings that the world is real in its own right i.e. exists independently of human perception and possess some "*principle, foundation, or reality*" (SAQ 278) which gives it existence in itself. In SAQ, 'Abdu'l-Bahá flatly rejects the view that reality is a phantasm created by humankind:

*Certain sophists think that existence is an illusion, that each being is an absolute illusion which has no existence—in other words, that the existence of beings is like a mirage, or like the reflection of an image in water or in a mirror, which is only an*



*appearance having in itself no principle, foundation or reality.  
This theory is erroneous. (SAQ 278)*

It is noteworthy that 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to those who maintain that the world is an "absolute illusion" as "sophists," a term traditionally associated with flawed and deceptive reasoning. Use of this term signals his rejection of 'illusionism' or 'phenomenalism' which is confirmed by his statement that "[t]his theory is erroneous."

Further support for ontological realism is found in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "each being" in the exterior world is real, i.e. possesses some "principle, foundation, or reality" which give it some degree of existence "in itself." (SAQ 278) In other words, "each being" has at least some degree of innate existence, is individual, is distinct and possesses some detachment or independence from other beings and is, in that sense, unique. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá' says in a later section of this passage, "*in their own degree they [things in the exterior world] exist.*" (SAQ 278) Each thing "*in the condition of being...has a real and certain existence.*" They are not mere "appearances" of something else, i.e. epiphenomena, passive side-effects or by-products that possesses no "principle, foundation or reality" of their own. This idea is re-enforced by the following statement:

*for though the existence of beings in relation to the existence of God is an illusion, nevertheless, in the condition of being it has a real and certain existence. It is futile to deny this. For example, the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence...; but the mineral has existence in the mineral world...Then it is evident that although beings in relation to the existence of God have no existence, but are like the mirage or the reflections in the mirror, yet in their own degree they exist. (SAQ 278)*

This statement makes it unequivocally clear that according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá while degrees of reality differ, every being is, in its own degree, undeniably real. It is worth noting that he flatly rejects any contradictory viewpoint: "It is futile to deny this," he says, thereby foreclosing any argument to the contrary. He emphasises the reality of creation elsewhere by stating "*Now this world of existence in relation to its maker is a real phenomenon.*" (SAQ 280) In other words, it has its own, undeniable degree of reality.

The new atheists also accept the objective reality of the exterior world, which they understand as being purely material or physical and amenable to adequate study by the scientific method. Of course, where the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings differ is whether the objectively known reality which exists independently of human perception and possesses its own degree of reality, is limited to the physical or includes the super-sensible. This is a serious difference but it should not blind us to the fundamental agreement about ontological realism. Ironically on this, and the previously noted fundamental philosophical issues, the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings share more common ground with each other than they do with postmodernist philosophy.

## Conclusion

As is to be expected, there are far more differences than similarities between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings—though the extent of the similarities and their foundational nature is surprising. The question remains, however, 'Are these similarities enough to allow a meaningful dialogue between the two?' Can the differences between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings be bridged? In other words, is there anything the two can build on together?

On the foundational issues there is no common ground: they cannot agree on

1. the existence or non-existence of super-natural or super-sensible beings (God) or realities (Abhá Kingdom, Holy Spirit). [ontology]
2. the adequacy or inadequacy of the scientific method and reason as the sole determinants of what constitutes genuine knowledge. [epistemology]
3. the new atheist belief that religion is inherently pathological and no longer as a part in humankind's future evolution.

Change on any of these issues would undermine their core identities.

On the accidental or non-foundational level, there are several bases for dialogue and building together.

1. the evolutionary outlook on religion: the Bahá'í doctrine of progressive revelation can help the new atheists sharpen their analysis to avoid the problem of presentism.
2. the need to eliminate religious prejudice and a frank recognition of the crimes committed in the name of religion.
3. respect for science and reason and a continued dialogue about their nature.
4. the independent investigation of truth.
5. ethical realism, ontological realism and correspondence epistemology. In this the new atheism and the Bahá'í Writings are joined in opposition to various forms of contemporary philosophy which reject realism in these areas.

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### NOTES

- 1 A 42 page catalogue specifically detailing these errors in each text is available upon request from the author by emailing [iankluge@netbistro.com](mailto:iankluge@netbistro.com)
- 2 *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02040a.htm>
- 3 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232.
- 4 Nietzsche, "The Madman" in *The Gay Science*; see also sections 108 and 343.
- 5 Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Pt.1, XXII, 3.
- 6 Ted Honderich, editor, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 604.
- 7 Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 233.
- 8 Steven Schaferman, "Naturalism is a Essential Part of Scientific and Critical Enquiry" (Presented at the Conference on Naturalism, Theism and Scientific Enterprise, u of Texas, Austin, 1997) <http://www.freeinquiry.com/naturalism.html>
- 9 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.57.
- 10 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 311–312; emphasis added. Note this reference to ontological materialism.
- 11 W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many*, p. 217.
- 12 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281. This 'nothing' should not be confused with the vacuum potential in nuclear physics which is not an absolute nothingness.
- 13 This is not an example of the fallacy of composition which obviously does not apply to existentially constitutive parts. We cannot say that the whole plant continues to exist even though we have destroyed all of its cells and that my house continues to exist after the wreckers have hauled all its parts away
- 14 Leibniz, "Nothing can be true or real or existing unless there is a sufficient reason that makes it so and not otherwise." *Monadology*, par. 32.
- 15 see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.
- 16 Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 8.
- 17 Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 7, 198a.
- 18 W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many*, p. 201.
- 19 Aristotle: *A Modern Appreciation*, 48; italics added. See also R. J. Hankinson, "Philosophy of Science" in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, p. 128
- 20 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 80.

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- 21    *ibid.*
- 22    Ted Honderich, editor, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 604.
- 23    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 57.
- 24    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232.
- 25    Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p.65; emphasis in original.
- 26    Mark Twain quoted in Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 321.
- 27    Christopher Hitchens , *god Is Not Great*, p.150.
- 28    Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 131.
- 29    Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 45 – 46.
- 30    Christopher Hitchens , *god Is Not Great*, p. 41.
- 31    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 96.
- 32    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 72.
- 33    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 223; also Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 78.
- 34    Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 84.
- 35    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.223.
- 36    Also known as the sentimental fallacy or the anthropomorphic fallacy.
- 37    Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 80.
- 38    Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 71 – 72.
- 39    Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 109 – 115.
- 40    Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 123.
- 41    Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 310.
- 42    Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 221.
- 43    Christopher Hitchens , *god Is Not Great*, p. 71.
- 44    Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 242.
- 45    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 96.
- 46    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.100 – 102.
- 47    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 100.
- 48    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 146; see also 176.
- 49    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 178.
- 50    Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 176.

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- 51 Editor's note: It is worthwhile to note that the author is speaking here of all religion, and the concept of God as defined in the Bahá'í teachings. These conceptions are rejected by many, if not most religionists in the world today including virtually all of those whom the new atheists are reacting against. To take one example, many Christians insist on the literal physicality of God and it is a tenet of most fundamentalists that scripture must be understood literally, by which they often mean, specifically, in physical, materialistic terms rather than metaphorically or symbolically. If such beliefs and practices are considered to be real religion, which is a proposition that most people would agree with, then many of the criticisms of the new atheists have validity within those contexts and are not merely "straw man" arguments. From a Bahá'í perspective however, such irrational and dogmatic ideas are actually irreligion masquerading as religion and condemned as harmful superstition.
- 52 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 102.
- 53 The chapter is entitled "Proofs and Evidences of the Existence of God."
- 54 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 107.
- 55 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 64 – 65. The statements about "nothingness" must be understood in light of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's clarification in SAQ p. 180.
- 56 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 110 – 132.
- 57 *The Black Book of Communism*, London: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- 58 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 79.
- 59 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 250.
- 60 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 177.
- 61 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 6.
- 62 Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/metaphys-of-morals.txt>
- 63 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 327.
- 64 *ibid.*
- 65 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 186; this is another formulation of the categorical imperative in Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/metaphys-of-morals.txt>
- 66 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 266.
- 67 Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great*, p. 256.
- 68 Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great*, p. 266.
- 69 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 172.

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- 70 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Chapter Six.
- 71 Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great*, p. 64.
- 72 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 25.
- 73 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 346.
- 74 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 65.
- 75 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 66.
- 76 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232.
- 77 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 15.
- 78 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 44.
- 79 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 367.
- 80 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 217.
- 81 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 220.
- 82 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 200.
- 83 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 221.
- 84 *ibid.*
- 85 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 222.
- 86 Mark, 9:24
- 87 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 280.
- 88 For example, *An Existential Theology* by John Macquarrie.
- 89 *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, "Rudolf Bultmann," p. 424.
- 90 Jacob Needleman, *Why Can't We Be Good?*, p. 10.
- 91 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 100.
- 92 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 118.
- 93 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 123.
- 94 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 116.
- 95 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 64.
- 96 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 203.
- 97 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 209.
- 98 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 218.
- 99 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 99.



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- 100 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 45–46; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 265.
- 101 Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 36.
- 102 see *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 104, 135–137.
- 103 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232;
- 104 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 262, 311.
- 105 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 327.
- 106 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 181.
- 107 See Ian Kluge, “Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings,” and “Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings,” in *Lights of Irfan*, Volume 9, 2008.
- 108 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 251; see also 3, 9.

## The Choice of the West for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Epoch-making Trip

Baharieh Rouhani Maani

A child born in Tehran in 1844 had to leave His homeland at the age of nine and live the rest of His life in exile. Fifty-five years later the political landscape in Iran and Turkey, the countries responsible for His exile and confinement, changed and sealed the fate of the despotic regimes in those countries. As a result, He gained his freedom and undertook a long and arduous journey to lands far beyond His familiar environs. He traveled to areas spread over three continents of the globe, crossed seas and oceans, and used various modes of transportation to visit souls longing to see Him and to speak to people eager to hear His message. He embarked on the trip despite His old age, the risk to His failing health, a lack of material means, and the need for hasty preparations for His colossal undertaking. Although legally free, His traditional enemies watched Him closely, monitored His every movement, and did what they could to frustrate His plan. The trip, a precursor to the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, described by Shoghi Effendi "the birthright of the North American Bahá'í community"(CF 7) could not be postponed. The time was short, the project had to be accomplished regardless of the obstacles in His way and the formidable circumstances that prevailed.

The child Who spent almost all His life in exile was 'Abbás Effendi, the eldest Son of Bahá'u'lláh. In His Writings Bahá'u'lláh bestows upon Him many titles descriptive of His unique station, such as the Master, the Mystery of God, He Round Whom Revolves All Names, He Who Sprang from the Ancient Root, and so forth. After

Bahá'u'lláh passed away, 'Abbás Effendi chose 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Servant of Bahá) as His title and required His followers to address Him as such. This is the name by which He has become known throughout the Bahá'í world and in outer circles, and that is how He is addressed in this article.

The reason 'Abdu'l-Bahá went into exile at the age of nine had nothing to do with what He had done, or failed to do. His Father had accepted the Claim of the Báb, Who in 1844 declared in Shiraz that He was first of the two Manifestations of God expected in Scripture. The Báb's mission was to prepare the way for the coming of the next Manifestation of God, the Promise of All Ages. The Báb was executed in Tabriz in 1850 by firing squad. His execution, demanded by the religious establishment and government authorities in Iran, was expected to extinguish the light of His Cause, diminish the influence of His teachings, root out the new Order He had brought and intimidate those who promoted the new Faith He had authored. Mirzá Husayn-'Alí, entitled Bahá'u'lláh (Glory of God) was the Manifestation of God the Báb had preceded and Whose coming he had heralded. Bahá'u'lláh embraced the truth of the Bab's Revelation in 1844. He was the most prominent of the Báb's followers and actively promoted the Bábí Cause. His activities made Him a target for the wrath of those who were intent on eradicating the Cause of the Báb.

An attempt on the life of Nasiri'd-Din Sháh in 1852 by three Bábí youth who held him responsible for the atrocities perpetrated against their loved ones, provided the authorities with the pretext to imprison Bahá'u'lláh in mid-1852. After four months imprisonment in the Síyáh-Chál (Black Pit) of Tehran, He was ordered to leave Iran. Accompanied by the members of His immediate family, He left Iran for Baghdad, which was then under the Ottoman rule. The reason for the banishment was the perception of those in charge of the country's affairs that Iran could not enjoy rest and tranquility

while Bahá'u'lláh lived there, for prominent Bábís rallied around Him, sought His guidance and followed His advice.

When Bahá'u'lláh left Iran, He had not yet made publicly known His own Claim of being the one for whom the Báb had come to prepare the way and for whose sake He had sacrificed His life. Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of His Mission occurred ten years later in Baghdad in 1863 just prior to the time when He and His family were forced to leave Baghdad to yet another place of exile. The successive banishments imposed on Bahá'u'lláh and His family by the Ottoman Rulers, who acted under intense pressure from the Persian government to send Him ever farther away from the Iranian border, culminated in His imprisonment in the walled city of 'Akká, then a desolate city and penal colony where He lived the rest of His life.

### **The Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant:**

Before Bahá'u'lláh passed away on 29 May 1892, in a document known as the Book of the Covenant written from beginning to end in His own hand and bearing His seal, He outlined the salient features of His revelation, specified unity as the purpose of religion, and stipulated that the object of the verses He had revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas two decades earlier about the One to Whom all His followers were to turn after His Ascension and the One authorized to interpret His writings, was none other than His eldest son, the Most Great Branch, Who later adopted 'Abdu'l-Bahá as His title. In the same document He appointed his second son, Mirzá Muḥammad 'Alí, titled the Greater Branch as a successor to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and specified that his station was beneath that of the Most Great Branch.

Hoping to have a leading role in directing the affairs of the Bahá'í community, Mirzá Muḥammad 'Alí soon realized that the contents of Bahá'u'lláh's Testament made his aspiration untenable. He resented

being overshadowed by the luminosity of his half-brother, Who was ten years his senior. Recognizing the futility of contesting the authenticity of his Father's Book of the Covenant, he outwardly accepted its provisions without abandoning the claim of being 'Abdu'l-Bahá's equal and of sharing with Him the leadership of the Bahá'í world. His ambitious and feeble attempts at seeking recognition and exerting his influence among the believers did not come as a complete surprise. As far back as 1867 he had exposed his unbridled ambition by claiming to enjoy a station on par with Bahá'u'lláh. He clandestinely wrote to some believers in Iran claiming to be the recipient of direct revelation from God. The confusion occasioned by his claim angered Bahá'u'lláh, Who clarified the station of His sons and emphasized that steadfastness in His Cause was the cardinal prerequisite for attaining His good pleasure. He further stated that if any of His sons stepped out from beneath the shadow of the Tree of the Cause of God, their doings would be brought to naught.<sup>1</sup>

When Bahá'u'lláh's Book of the Covenant was unsealed and read to the assembled believers, Mirzá Muḥammad 'Alí realized that he could not openly dispute the contents or contest the authenticity of that mighty Document. However, he vainly argued that safeguarding the unity of the Bahá'í community, so emphatically stressed by Bahá'u'lláh, required that he and 'Abdu'l-Bahá lead it jointly. He also denied that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the authorized Interpreter of all of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings. This was crucial to his argument, for otherwise he could not interpret the Writings as he pleased and confuse the minds of the people he wanted to influence. When he failed in his attempts to undermine 'Abdu'l-Bahá's authority, he teamed up with like-minded people within and outside the community. Together they stopped at nothing to discredit 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to cause Him suffering, even to endanger His life.

Opposition to 'Abdu'l-Bahá started immediately after Bahá'u'lláh's Ascension. Its scope widened rapidly, and the campaign of slander

aimed at rendering Him ineffective grew in seriousness and intensity. At the instigation of His half brothers and their supporters who worked in conjunction with hostile and corrupt local officials, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was incarcerated, His movements and the people with whom He associated were kept under surveillance and His activities severely restricted. The concerted efforts of His opponents were aimed at removing Him from the scene and having Him sent to a faraway place, out of the reach of His family and faithful Bahá'ís. He was accused of building a fortress on Mount Carmel,<sup>2</sup> of having contrived a new standard used to invite support and incite revolt,<sup>3</sup> and of meeting foreigners in 'Akká.<sup>4</sup>

Alarmed by the startling accusations, the central government dispatched a commission of enquiry to investigate the charges. The falsified evidence prepared by Mirzá Muḥammad 'Alí and his collaborators, despite the cooperation he received from the Commission, did not achieve what he had fondly hoped: That of removing 'Abdu'l-Bahá from the scene, which would have enabled him to do as he pleased. The incessant mischievous activities of the Covenant-breakers and their supporters continued until 'Abdu'l-Bahá was incarcerated within the city walls of 'Akká in August 1901.<sup>5</sup>

Greatly distressed by the news of fresh restrictions on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's activities and movement, some western believers consulted together and made a plan: They raised a considerable sum of money and decided to send a delegation to Constantinople to meet the Sultan, explain 'Abdu'l-Bahá's innocence and arrange His release.<sup>6</sup> Prominent believers, such as Mrs. Jackson, Hippolyte Dreyfus and Lua Getsinger were involved. Lua Getsinger and Hippolyte Dreyfus had, at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's behest met Muzaffari'd-Din Sháh and his Prime Minister in Paris in 1901, and pleaded for justice on behalf of the persecuted Bahá'ís in Iran. Encouraged by the success of their meeting with the Shah, they seem to have conceived a plan to meet Sultan 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd of Turkey in 1902 and to plead with him to

order the release of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. When informed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá strongly advised against the plan and asked that it be abandoned.

Another Commission of Enquiry headed by a man heavily influenced by intrigues employed by Mirzá Muḥammad 'Alí arrived in late 1907. This Commission was determined to succeed where the previous one had failed. The presentation of the elaborate report prepared over months of collaborative efforts between the Commission and Mirzá Muḥammad 'Alí and his partisans aimed at justifying the recommendation that 'Abdu'l-Bahá be sent to "the landlocked sandy wastes of Fizan"<sup>7</sup> coincided with the attempt on the life of Sultan 'Abdu'l-Ḥamid. Upon receipt, he is reported to have pushed it aside and said: "Another time will do."<sup>8</sup> That time never came, for in July 1908 the Young Turks Revolution gained ascendancy and months later the Sultan was deposed.

The principle aim of the Covenant-breakers was to have 'Abdu'l-Bahá removed from the nerve Centre of the Faith and to take control of the affairs of the Bahá'í community. In the darkest hours of His ministry, when the danger to His life seemed real and imminent, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote His Will and Testament. In it He explained how Mirzá Muḥammad 'Alí had disqualified himself as His successor, and appointed his grandson Shoghi Effendi, then a child of tender years, as the Guardian of the Cause of God. To keep the document safe, He buried it underground in an unsuspected spot in the basement of His residence in 'Akká, the House of 'Abdu'lláh Pashá. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sister, the Greatest Holy Leaf, knew of the appointment of Shoghi Effendi as the Guardian of the Faith, (PP 11) and surely of the whereabouts of His Testament.

## The Young Turk's Revolution Leads to Freedom from Oppression

Corruption, oppression and lack of concern for the welfare of the people living under their rule marked the reign of the last Ottoman emperors. It was during the Caliphate of Sultan 'Abdu'l-'Azíz that Bahá'u'lláh was banished from place to place within his domain, and endured untold hardships. Sultan 'Abdu'l-'Azíz surrounded himself with ministers who followed "*the desires of a corrupt inclination*" and "*cast behind their backs that which had been committed into their hands and manifestly betrayed their trust..*"(GWB 232) Bahá'u'lláh counseled the Sultan: "*Be bounteous to others as God hath been bounteous to thee, and abandon not the interests of thy people to the mercy of such ministers as these.*" (ibid) He promised the monarch that if he inclined his ear unto His speech and observed His counsel, God would exalt him "*to so eminent a position that the designs of no man on the whole earth can ever touch or hurt thee.*"(bid 234)But, as anticipated, the Sultan did not heed Bahá'u'lláh's loving counsel and warning. The excesses characterizing his rule, the injustices perpetrated by officials who served in his court, the hardships suffered by his people, and the sense of hopelessness that gripped the population continued during the reign of his successor, Sultan 'Abdu'l-Hamíd, and caused widespread resentment.

The situation in Turkey worsened steadily. Acute dissatisfaction with the status quo and the ruler's lack of response to the needs of the people under his rule caused the population, especially the younger generation, to arise against him. The Young Turks Revolution gained momentum and in 1908 ushered in an era of social and political change. One of the demands of the Revolution was the restoration of the constitution which Sultan 'Abdu'l-Hamíd had suspended, and the release of all political prisoners. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not a political figure, but the trumped up charges against Him were deliberately designed to have political implications. He had been falsely accused of involvement in



subversive activities against the central government. When political prisoners were freed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gained freedom as well. Had there been a delay, He would not have been able to achieve the work that He was destined to do, including the completion of the original structure of the Báb's Mausoleum, the interment of the remains of the Báb, which had arrived in the Holy Land ten years earlier, in their permanent resting place on Mount Carmel, and undertaking His momentous trip to the west, especially to North America.

### The Choice of the West for An Epoch-making Trip

Much had occurred during the fifty-five years intervening between the time 'Abdu'l-Bahá was exiled from the land of His birth, and 1908 when He gained freedom from the shackles of confinement. He left Iran as a child accompanying His Father, spent the rest of His childhood, youth and adulthood moving from land to land, undertaking responsibilities and challenges in service to Bahá'u'lláh and His mighty Cause. By the time Bahá'u'lláh passed away, His Faith had spread not only in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey where He had lived, but also to other Middle Eastern countries, as well as to far away areas; the Indian sub-continent, China, some central Asian countries and parts of North Africa. The sovereigns and rulers of the world had been addressed by Him, His Most Holy Book, as well as major Tablets revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, had been published, and the tenets of His Faith had been set out in more than one hundred volumes and major works revealed from His Pen.

The pace of progress accelerated during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's Successor and the Centre of His Covenant. He consolidated the Cause of God where Bahá'ís lived, and established it in new territories. One area of the globe where the light of Bahá'u'lláh penetrated shortly after His Ascension was North America and from there it spread to Europe. The spread of the Faith

to the western hemisphere has been described by Shoghi Effendi as “the most outstanding achievement that will forever be associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry.” (GPB 279)

The activities of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s opponents that had caused Him untold suffering during the first sixteen years of His ministry had been frustrated, but the agitation they fomented continued into the ministry of the one He appointed as the Guardian of the Cause of God. As the Covenant-breakers witnessed the fading of their reputation and the loss of their status among the believers, their clandestine activities increased. They stopped at nothing to discredit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Whose main aim was to spread far and wide the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, unite the believers under the banner of His Cause, and help them to work toward an ever-advancing civilization.

During the first decade of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry, the remains of the Báb Who had been martyred fifty years earlier, arrived safely in the Holy Land. Shortly after the arrival of the remains, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laid the foundation stone of the Báb’s Mausoleum, in a groundbreaking ceremony held in 1900 on Mount Carmel. The original structure, which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá built at the instruction of Bahá’u’lláh for the interment of the remains of the Báb, took nine years to complete.

Almost simultaneously with the arrival of the remains of the Báb in the Holy Land, and while preparations were being made for the construction of the Báb’s Mausoleum, a significant event with far-reaching consequences took place: Western pilgrims, eager to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and visit the Sacred Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh, set sail in 1898 and arrived in ‘Akká in several small groups. When restrictions intensified, there was a halt, but when the rigors of confinement eased, the numbers increased once again. However, many believers did not have the means to embark on a transatlantic voyage. For them the only hope of meeting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was if He visited their country.

The returning pilgrims and those who could not make the trip to the Holy Land sent petitions to 'Abdu'l-Bahá pleading with Him to honor their land with His presence. They even raised funds for His trip, which He gently declined.<sup>9</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá received invitations not only from the believers but also from religious leaders, political figures, organizers of peace conferences, and groups concerned with the status of the world and its future stability. They longed to meet and hear the "Prophet of the East", despite His insistence that He was not a prophet but simply 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Servant of Bahá.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's advanced age, failing health, the pressing matters that He had to deal with and the world situation made it impossible for Him to undertake trips to all of the different parts of the globe, where the Light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation had penetrated and which enjoyed religious freedom. In some of His Tablets, He expressed the wish to visit India, Japan and China, but knew the wish would remain unfulfilled. When He was in Chicago, members of the Society of Indians resident in that city attained His presence and read Him an address of welcome. In it they called His visit to the United States "a source of honor and grace" to them. In the same address, they said:

[W]e believe that our country, India, will greatly benefit from a visit from your Excellency. The lack of unity between the Hindus and Muslims has kept them in the utmost contention and strife. As your Excellency's teachings are very much like the teachings of our religious leaders, they will undoubtedly unite them and make these contending nations one. We are certain that you will receive the same warmth and honor in India as here in America... We pray to God to give your Excellency long life so that you may be enabled to convey your message to all mankind.<sup>10</sup>

The prevailing circumstances were such that 'Abdu'l-Bahá could make only one trip far away from the Headquarters of the Faith. He chose a trip to the West, a trip Shoghi Effendi has described as "the culmination of His ministry". (GPB 295) Bahá'u'lláh had anticipated this priceless opportunity during His lifetime, when all worldly forces were leagued against Him: "*In the East the light of His Revelation hath broken; in the West have appeared the signs of His dominion.*" (TB 13) He further prophesied: "*Should they attempt to conceal its light on the continent, it will assuredly rear its head in the midmost heart of the ocean, and, raising its voice, proclaim: 'I am the life-giver of the world!'*" (WOB 78–79. These momentous utterances found fulfillment with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's trip to the west, particularly His transatlantic voyage.

The opportunity to make the trip had to be seized immediately, or it would have been lost forever. Aware of the upheavals in the making that threatened international peace, and the short years during which He could make the trip, He decided the time had come for Him to take action and fulfill a preordained mission, but did not divulge His intention regarding a specific time or the places He wanted to visit aforesaid.

In response to invitations from the friends in the United States, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stipulated one condition: "*My invitation to America will be the unity of the believers.*"<sup>11</sup> Differences of opinion among the friends had led to disunity. The cause of the differences was directly linked to the misdeeds and intrigues of an ambitious person who had taken the message of Bahá'u'lláh to the United States of America, and taught many to enlist under the banner of His Cause. His name was Ibrahim Kheiralla, who, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "blinded by his extraordinary success and aspiring after an uncontrolled domination over the beliefs and activities of his fellow-disciples, insolently raised the standard of revolt."<sup>12</sup> He "dreamt of sharing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's authority."<sup>13</sup>

Of Syrian origin and Christian evangelical background, Kheiralla became a Bahá'í in Egypt in about 1888. In 1894 he migrated to the United States where he began teaching the Bahá'í Faith with great success. In 1900 he joined an early group of pilgrims to 'Akká, stayed in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's house as a guest, was received warmly by Him and praised for the services he had rendered. Acknowledging his outstanding success in teaching the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh to so many souls, 'Abdu'l-Bahá conferred upon him "the titles of 'Bahá's Peter,' 'Shepherd of God's Flocks,' and 'Conqueror of America.'" However, Kheiralla wanted much more. When he realized that "[t]he integrity of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's stewardship could not be breached,"<sup>14</sup> he rose in opposition to Him, determined to form a following and exert influence on the Bahá'í community in the west. If rising to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's stature was not in the equation, discrediting Him through false accusations and slander could go a long way to fulfill that intention, especially if he joined hand with those who had a similar aim. To achieve the purpose, he worked in conjunction with other Covenant-breakers. He launched "a campaign of unrelenting vilification against the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to undermine the faith of those believers whom he had during no less than eight years, so strenuously toiled to convert." (WOB 82)

Kheiralla defected at a crucial juncture in the fortunes of the Faith in the West. His collaboration with the traditional enemies of 'Abdu'l-Bahá within and outside the United States, his working in concert with them to propagate calumnies and the misleading material he published in English confused the minds of some of the people he had taught. The believers were divided in their understanding of Kheiralla's true standing in the Faith and in the way he comported himself. 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent Tablets emphasizing the importance of unity. He also dispatched outstanding Bahá'í teachers to the West, such as 'Abdu'l-Karím Tihrání, the man who had taught the Faith to Kheiralla, Siyyid Asadu'llah Isfahani, and Mirza Abu'l-Fadl who spent nearly two years in the United States at the beginning of the

twentieth century. The purpose of his long sojourn was to deepen the understanding of the believers in the tenets revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and to allay the doubts that still lingered in the minds of some believers. As His own station had become a controversial subject and a matter of contention, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized servitude as His glorious crown and strongly urged the believers to see and refer to Him as 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Servant of Bahá), and to follow His example. These efforts were successful to some degree, but restoring health to the ailing body of the community that had suffered the malady of disunity, required a powerful antidote. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had addressed the believers' concerns through correspondence and had dispatched emissaries to help them overcome the stumbling blocks in the way of achieving unity, but nothing short of a visit from Him could arouse them to scale the heights that they achieved after His historic trip, described by Shoghi Effendi as "a turning point of the utmost significance in the history of the century. (GPB 279–280)

'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke of the crucial importance of His trip to the United States when He was on His way to Kenosha, Wisconsin, a stronghold of Kheiralla's activities:

*I am bearing the discomforts of this journey with stopovers so that the Cause of God may be protected from any breach. For I am still not sure about what is going to happen after me. If I could be sure, then I would sit comfortably in some corner; I would not leave the Holy Land and travel far away from the Most Holy Tomb. Once, after the martyrdom of the Báb, the Cause of God was dealt a hard blow through Yahya. Again, after the ascension of the Blessed Beauty, it received another blow. And I fear that self-seeking persons may again disrupt the love and unity of the friends. If the time were right and the House of Justice were established, the House of Justice would protect the friends.<sup>15</sup>*

He then spoke of the devastating effects of disunity at the beginning of the Islamic dispensation: "Because of certain people who sought to fulfill their personal desires and who yet counted themselves among the supporters of the religion, the foundation of Islam was completely uprooted."

### **The Genesis of the Spread of the Bahá'í Faith in the West**

In his message of Naw-Ruz 110 BE to the friends in the East, Shoghi Effendi refers to the astonishing phenomenon of the spread of the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Cause to the West. He says the light which blazed in the midmost heart of a storm in Tihiran, emerged from behind the veils in Baghdad, glowed in the clear glass of Adrianople, and shed its light on the western hemisphere from the horizon of the prison city of 'Akká, the qiblih of the people of Bahá.<sup>16</sup>

The western world first heard of the Bahá'í Faith through press reports and the writings of Orientalists, such as Edward G. Browne<sup>17</sup> and Alexander Tumansky.<sup>18</sup> Edward Browne had an audience with Bahá'u'lláh in 'Akká in 1890, and left to posterity his matchless description of the Person he had met. But the person who actively promoted the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States was Ibrahim Kheiralla. He set foot there shortly after Bahá'u'lláh's Ascension, and began in earnest to teach the Cause. When success crowned his efforts, he was tempted by insatiable ambition and desired to be the recognized leader of Bahá'ís in the West. When that dream proved unattainable, he turned against 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, and rebelled against His authority. His rebellion caused a breach of short duration in the community he had helped establish, and temporarily halted the pace of progress he had set in motion.

Kheiralla is not the first or only person in the history of the Bahá'í Faith whose success in the teaching field became a grievous test, exposed his ambition and caused his downfall, while the Faith he was using for his own selfish ends emerged triumphant and forged ahead without his presence. It was through Kheiralla's initial efforts that the Cause of God was established in several parts of the United States and through his rebellion and defection that the unity of the believers was threatened. To receive 'Abdu'l-Bahá in their midst, the greatest gift they could imagine, the faithful believers united under the banner of the Covenant. His visit galvanized them to arise in service to the Cause of the Blessed Beauty, the purpose of which is to unite humankind, and made them worthy of being the recipients, together with the believers in Canada, of *The Tablets of the Divine Plan*, a mandate for the spiritualization of the planet. These Tablets were revealed while World War I was raging, a war that began shortly after 'Abdu'l-Bahá returned to the Holy Land from His visit to North America and Europe, and ended three years before His Ascension.

### **A Pre-ordained Trip**

'Abdu'l-Bahá had accompanied His Father into exile when Iran was in the tight grip of a dictatorial Qajar Shah,<sup>19</sup> and the Ottoman Empire was ruled by a despotic Sultan.<sup>20</sup> Fifty-five years later, the Qajar dynasty and the Ottoman Empire were under seige by devastating adversities. The Constitutional Revolution was gaining strength in Iran and the Revolution of the Young Turks was weakening the foundation of the Ottoman Empire. While those regimes were in the twilight years of their existence, 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the age of sixty-four was freed from five and half decades of exile and confinement. Those long years of immense hardship and suffering had taken their toll on his health and sapped His strength. Nonetheless, when freed, He wasted no time in putting into action the plan that diffused the



light of Bahá'u'lláh's Cause in the West and awakened the conscience of the world to the urgent need of pursuing practical solutions for overcoming deep-rooted differences and the establishment of peace.

Bahá'u'lláh was born and raised in Iran, but lived most of His life as exile in areas under Turkish rule. Turkey and Iran, although political rivals, had the religion of Islam in common, however each pledged allegiance to a denomination which the other abhorred: The state religion of Iran was Shi'ih Islam, while in Turkey and in the Arab world Sunni Islam was predominantly adhered to. The Shi'ih of Iran traveled freely to Iraq, then a part of the Ottoman Empire, where their twin holy cities of Karbila and Najaf are situated. When the government of Iran decided to exile Bahá'u'lláh from His homeland in the hope of curbing His influence, it left the choice of a place to Him. Bahá'u'lláh agreed to go to Baghdad. After nearly ten years in that city, the two neighboring powers, seeing that His influence had actually widened, conspired to further curb His freedom by sending Him and His family to areas farther away from the Persian border. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh and His family were exiled to Constantinople (Istanbul) and then Adrianople (Edirne in modern Turkey). Finally they were sent to the Penal colony of 'Akká as prisoners, where the exiles were closely watched and expected to perish. However, they survived and multiplied, albeit with great difficulty and hardship. As stated earlier, Bahá'u'lláh passed away in 1892 and His body was laid to rest at Bahjí, His last place of residence, just outside the city of 'Akká.<sup>21</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá continued to live in the citadel of 'Akká until orders were received for His release from confinement.

When freed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was eager to visit the West before His health condition deteriorated further, and world events interfered, making it impossible for him to undertake the trip. When the appointed time came, all forces worked together to bring about the realization of His plan. 'Abdu'l-Bahá embarked on His momentous journey two years after He was released from years of incarceration.

Two kings, Muhammad 'Alí Qájár, the Shah of Iran, and Sultan 'Abdu'l-Hamíd, the Ottoman Caliph, were dethroned that He may be freed. Without freedom, He would not have been able to fulfill His predestined trip to the West. This highly significant remark He made during His visit to the United States. "*Think of it,*" He said, "*Two kings were dethroned in order that I may be freed. This is naught but pure destiny.*"<sup>22</sup>

Before embarking on His long and arduous journey, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was intent on completing the Báb's Mausoleum and on interring His remains in their permanent Resting Place, as had been envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh. The mission was finally complete when on Naw-Ruz 1909, in the presence of pilgrims and resident Bahá'ís, 'Abdu'l-Bahá placed with His own hands the inner casket containing the remains of the Báb and the disciple<sup>23</sup> who had been martyred with Him, in the marble sarcophagus offered for the purpose by the Bahá'ís of Rangoon, Burma. The sarcophagus had reached the Holy Land in good time and been placed in the vault of that Mausoleum, ready to receive the sacred remains of the Báb.<sup>24</sup>

To embark on a protracted journey to lands far away from the Holy Land in fulfillment of a mission decreed by Providence at a time when means of communication between countries, let alone continents, were primitive and painfully slow, 'Abdu'l-Bahá needed a dependable and trustworthy person to serve as His deputy at the nerve Centre of the Faith. That person was none other than His beloved sister, Bahá'íyyih Khánum, known in the West as Bahíyyih Khánum, entitled the Greatest Holy Leaf. Shoghi Effendi says:

And when in pursuance of God's inscrutable Wisdom, the ban on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's confinement was lifted and the Plan which He, in the darkest hours of His confinement, had conceived materialized, He with unhesitating confidence, invested His trusted and honoured

sister with the responsibility of attending to the multitudinous details arising out of His protracted absence from the Holy Land.<sup>25</sup>

Preparations for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey and arrangements for the affairs in the Holy Land to function smoothly during His absence, were all made quietly. If plans were disclosed prematurely, the Covenant-breakers would have done their utmost to cause disruption and frustration. Therefore, when on a September afternoon in 1910, 'Abdu'l-Bahá left for Egypt, everyone was taken by surprise. A Tablet revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in honor of the Greatest Holy Leaf, when He was either about to leave the Holy Land or possibly already on His way to Egypt, reads:

*O thou my sister, my dear sister!*

*Divine wisdom hath decreed this temporary separation,<sup>26</sup> but I long more and more to be with thee again. Patience is called for, and long-suffering, and trust in God, and the seeking of His favor. Since thou art there, my mind is completely at rest.*

*In recent days, I have made a plan to visit Egypt, if this be God's will. Do thou, on my behalf, lay thy head on the sacred Threshold, and perfume brow and hair in the dust of that Door, and ask that I may be confirmed in my work; that I may, in return for His endless bounties, win, if He will, a drop out of the ocean of servitude.<sup>27</sup>*

When it became known that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had left Haifa, Sydney Sprague<sup>28</sup> disclosed the news in a letter to Isabella Brittingham:

I have a very big piece of news to tell you. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has left this Holy Spot for the first time in forty-two years, and has gone to Egypt. Think of the vast significance and importance of this step! By it many prophecies of the sacred Scriptures are fulfilled... Everyone was astounded to hear of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's departure, for no one knew until the very

last minute that he had any idea of leaving... The afternoon of the day he left, he came to Mírzá Asad Ullah's home to see us and sat with us a while beside a new well that has just been finished and said that he had come to taste the water. We did not realize that it was a good-bye visit. Then he took a carriage and went up the hill to the Holy Tomb (of the Báb). That night, as usual, the believers gathered before the house of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to receive that blessing, which every day is ours, of being in his presence, but we waited in vain, for one of the sons-in-law came and told us that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had taken the Khedivial steamer to Port Said.<sup>29</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá's absence from the Holy Land was soon felt by everyone. The friends of the family who were not Bahá'ís enquired about His whereabouts. In a Tablet revealed in honor of His wife, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*Should people enquire about My whereabouts, tell them that certain prominent Americans and Europeans have repeatedly sought and received promises that I would make a trip to those areas... be evasive as much as possible... The less said the better it would be. Tell Dr. Fallscheer also not to divulge the truth, and thou shouldst not divulge either as far as possible.<sup>30</sup>*

Dr. Fallscheer was the family doctor who lived in Haifa. She was a close friend and confidant. She knew of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's trip to Egypt and of His plan to travel to Marseille, where He was to meet "a man of stature." In fact, she served as intermediary between 'Abdu'l-Bahá and that person.<sup>31</sup> It was a highly confidential meeting. The name of the person and information about the meeting, whether it took place and what the outcome was, remained undisclosed.

Egypt was the starting point of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's epoch-making trip, during which He shed the brilliance of the Light of Bahá'u'lláh's

revelation on the western world. Juliet Thompson records in her Diary something 'Abdu'l-Bahá said to her when she was on pilgrimage in 1909, the year of the entombment of the remains of the Báb. That statement brings to focus the connection between Bahá'u'lláh's utterance about the Light of His Revelation breaking in the East and the signs of His dominion appearing in the West, also confirming that if attempts were made to conceal that Light on the land, it would raise its head in the midmost heart of the ocean. She says: "I was on the roof of the House in 'Akká with the Master and Munavvar Khanum.<sup>32</sup> The Master was pointing to the moon. "The East. The moon. No!" He said. "I am the Sun of the West."<sup>33</sup>

Speaking of the Light of the Kingdom shedding greater illumination upon the West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "*The East hath verily been illumined with the light of the Kingdom. Ere long will this same light shed a still greater illumination upon the West. Then will the hearts of its people be vivified through the potency of the teachings of God and their souls be set aglow by the undying fire of His love.*" (WOB 79)

Successive attempts over decades at suppressing the Light of Bahá'u'lláh's Advent in the land of its birth and in countries under the Ottoman rule provided the moving force to cause it to appear in promising lands in North America, whence it spread to the rest of the western hemisphere. During His travels, 'Abdu'l-Bahá met people of all ranks and backgrounds. With the luminosity of His unique personality, divine love, wisdom, compassion and understanding He transformed many souls and opened before them the gates of everlasting felicity and salvation. We have on record the accounts of many converts who have recorded their impressions of meeting Him face to face. There are also many comments by those who were not listed among His followers but perceived with their inner eyes the Light that shone through Him:

Diya Pasha, the Ambassador of Turkey, the country that had persecuted Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá most unjustly and for so long, gave a dinner at the Turkish Embassy in honor of the Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant. After dinner, he "made a thrilling speech. Rising and turning a lover's face to the Master, he called Him 'the Light of the world, the Unique One of the age, Who had come to spread His glory and perfection amongst us.'"<sup>34</sup>

At a meeting of the New York Peace Society, held at the Hotel Astor, New York, "Mrs. [Anna Garland] Spencer introduced 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Prophet of the East and the Messenger of Peace."<sup>35</sup> "The Consul General of Persia [Mr. Topakyan] referred to 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Beauty of God and the Glory of the East."<sup>36</sup>

The governor of Lahore, Khan Bahadur Allah-Bakhsh, called on the Master at the Hudson Apartment House one early morning in mid-May 1912. Three days later, Juliet Thompson had a note from him. It read: "'Abdu'l-Bahá is the Divine Light of today."<sup>37</sup>

Mr. Lee McClung, the Treasurer of the United States, met 'Abdu'l-Bahá at Mrs. Parsons'. In response to Juliet Thompson who asked how he felt when he saw the Master, said: "Well, I felt as though I were in the presence of one of the great old Prophets: Elijah, Isaiah, Moses. No, it was more than that! Christ... no, now I have it. He seemed to me my Divine Father."<sup>38</sup>

Lawrence White, a friend of Juliet Thompson's, had come to New York from Utica to meet the Master. After seeing 'Abdu'l-Bahá at Mount Morris Baptist Church, he whispered: "Look at Him and see the Christ."<sup>39</sup>

In his review of the history of the first century of the Bahá'í Era (1844–1944), Shoghi Effendi has drawn a parallel between the summit reached during Bahá'u'lláh's ministry, when He proclaimed

His Message to the rulers of the earth, and that of the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when He blazoned "the glory and greatness of His Father's Faith among the peoples of the West." He says:

As the day-star of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation had shone forth in its meridian splendor at the hour of the proclamation of His Message to the rulers of the earth in the city of Adrianople, so did the Orb of His Covenant mount its zenith and shed its brightest rays when He Who was its appointed Center arose to blazon the glory and greatness of His Father's Faith among the peoples of the West. (GPB 295)

### **The Ascendancy of the Covenant Empowered 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Undertake His Historic Trip**

Shoghi Effendi refers to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's three-year trip to the West as a mission and explains how the ascendancy of the Covenant made the fulfillment of that mission possible:

That divinely instituted Covenant... had manifested... before all mankind, with a force in a measure hitherto unapproached, its vast potentialities when it empowered Him in Whom its spirit and its purpose were enshrined to embark on a three-year mission to the West—a mission so momentous that it deserves to rank as the greatest exploit ever to be associated with His ministry." (ibid)

Confirming the ascendancy of the Covenant by the time 'Abdu'l-Bahá embarked on His trip to the West, H.M. Balyuzi says: "Mirzá Muḥammad 'Alí and his partisans were now thoroughly discredited. In the absence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá from the Holy Land the violators would have the field entirely to themselves, but their utter inability to make any move to impair the unity of the Bahá'ís would set the

final seal on their downfall. 'Abdu'l-Bahá particularly stressed this fact in a Tablet addressed at the time to a Bahá'í in Iskandarún (Alexandretta).<sup>740</sup>

The early signs of the triumph of the Covenant were discernible when the western pilgrims arrived in 'Akká, spent a few glorious days in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's presence, and left completely transformed. By the time the first group of western pilgrims reached the shores of the Holy Land, almost all members of Bahá'u'lláh's family had arisen in opposition to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The coming of the pilgrims cheered the heart of the Greatest Holy Leaf and other members of His family who had for long been deeply concerned for His safety. In the words Shoghi Effendi:

It was through the arrival of these pilgrims, and these alone, that the gloom which had enveloped the disconsolate members of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's family was finally dispelled. Through the agency of these successive visitors the Greatest Holy Leaf, who alone with her Brother among the members of her Father's household had to confront the rebellion of almost the entire company of her relatives and associates, found that consolation which so powerfully sustained her till the very close of her life. (IWOB 81–82)

When the western pilgrims arrived in 'Akká in the concluding years of the nineteenth century, the stage was set for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America and Europe some twelve years later:

It was through these pilgrimages, as they succeeded one another in the years immediately following the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, that the splendor of the Covenant, beclouded for a time by the apparent ascendancy of its Arch-Breaker, emerged triumphant amidst the vicissitudes which had afflicted it... By the forces which this little band of returning



pilgrims was able to release in the heart of that continent the death-knell of every scheme initiated by the would-be wrecker of the Cause of God was sounded. (ibid)

The returning pilgrims ignited the spark of longing for meeting 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the hearts of the believers, most of whom could not attain His presence due to lack of means. Many of them communicated with Him and received His Tablets. Many had heard from the returning pilgrims accounts of the transformation they had experienced. These believers, unlike many who lived in the Middle East and other Islamic countries, enjoyed the blessing of freedom and could receive 'Abdu'l-Bahá in their midst. Therefore, repeated petitions were sent beseeching Him to honor them with a visit. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America made firmer the steps of the faithful in the Cause of God, removed doubts from the hearts of the confused in areas where Covenant-breakers had penetrated, and emphasized the vital importance of unity and concord among the friends.

### The Treatment of the Qajar Princes Responsible for the Massacre of Bahá'ís in Iran

Among the people 'Abdu'l-Bahá met during His first visit to Europe was a prince who was personally responsible for the massacre of Bahá'ís in Isfahan, Iran. Zillu's-Sultan,<sup>41</sup> the eldest son of Nasiri'd-Din Sháh, and his two sons attained 'Abdu'l-Bahá's presence in Thonon on Lake Geneva. Juliet Thompson describes the meeting:

In the suite of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a distinguished European<sup>42</sup> who had visited Persia and there met Zillah Sultan. One day when the European was standing on the balustraded terrace of the hotel in Thonon and 'Abdu'l-Bahá was pacing to and fro at a little distance, Zillah Sultan approached the terrace. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was wearing, as always, the turban, the long

white belted robe and long `aba of Persia. His hair, according to the ancient custom of the Persian nobility, flowed to His shoulders. Zillah Sultan, after greeting the European, immediately asked:

“Who is that Persian nobleman?”

“`Abdu'l-Bahá.”

“Take me to Him.”

In describing the scene later, the European said:

“If you could have heard the wretch mumbling his miserable excuses!”

But `Abdu'l-Bahá took the prince in His arms.

“All that is of the past,” He answered, “Never think of it again. Send your two sons to see me. I want to meet your sons.”

They came, one at a time. Each spent a day with the Master. The first<sup>43</sup> though an immature boy, nevertheless showed Him great deference. The second,<sup>44</sup> older and more sensitive, left the room of `Abdu'l-Bahá, where he had been received alone, weeping uncontrollably.

“If only I could be born again,” he said, “into any other family than mine.”

For not only had many Bahá'ís been martyred during his uncle's reign (upwards of a hundred by his father's instigation), and the life of `Abdu'l-Bahá threatened again and again, but his grandfather, Nasir'd-Din Sháh, had ordered the execution of the Báb, as well as the torture and death of thousand of Bábís.

The young prince was “born again”—a Bahá'í.<sup>45</sup>

Another prince who attained `Abdu'l-Bahá's presence in Britain during His second visit to that country was Mahmud Mirza, the

Jalalu'd-Dawlih. It was during his governorship of Yazd, Iran, that the Bahá'ís of the area suffered unprecedented atrocities in 1903 and many were martyred. "He was now a broken man and an exile, seemingly contrite, asking for forgiveness. He threw himself at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's feet, but 'Abdu'l-Bahá would not permit him to humiliate himself."<sup>46</sup>

### **The Reaction of Persian Diplomatic Representatives**

In the United States of America and in Europe 'Abdu'l-Bahá met Iranian officials and potentates who spontaneously expressed their pleasure and appreciation for what His visit had done for their country. Several years earlier such meetings would have been unthinkable, for Bahá'ís were relentlessly persecuted in that country as a matter of state policy, dictated by the clergy.

The Iranian dignitaries in the United States witnessed with delight the admiration and respect for 'Abdu'l-Bahá among the inhabitants of that country. They were proud that His visit was the cause of great glory for Iran and the East. The Consul-General for Persia in New York, Mr. Topakiyan invited Him and His retinue to luncheon in his New York home, and "arranged as well, for some notabilities to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá and some newspapermen to interview Him."<sup>47</sup>

The Persian Minister in London, Mushiru'l-Mulk, visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá shortly after He arrived there in December 1912, and heard from Him "of His work in America—'winning everlasting victories which will bring unfading glory to the peoples of the East.'"<sup>48</sup> A few weeks later, the same Minister "gave a dinner party for 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the Legation. The Minister and his staff rejoiced over the news of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Scotland, the reception accorded to Him in Edinburgh." The press reports were clear proof that He "had indeed brought glory to the people of the Orient...even as He had described

it to the Minister, in their first meeting."<sup>49</sup>

The Persian Minister in Paris, 'Abdus-Samad Khan, the Mumtazu's-Saltanih "called on 'Abdu'l-Bahá a week after His arrival. A number of noted Easterners were also present, who were united in saying that they felt very much at home in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá."<sup>50</sup>

A prominent member of the Iranian aristocracy, Dust-Muhammad Khan, the Mu'ayyiru'l-Mamalik, son-in-law of Muzaffari'd-Din Shah (1896–1907), "had become so attached and devoted to the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that he was always seeking His presence, and could almost be counted a member of His retinue."<sup>51</sup>

These and other examples of unhindered association, based on mutual respect and friendship, between 'Abdu'l-Bahá and officials of the Persian government make one wonder if the same would have been possible, had He travelled to any other part of the globe.

### **'Abdu'l-Bahá's Public Addresses**

By personally addressing large gatherings of eager seekers in the free world, 'Abdu'l-Bahá proclaimed what His Father had revealed several decades earlier. He explained how the ultimate goal of the unity of humankind and universal peace could be achieved. He conveyed Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings in their purest form to those who were hearing it for the first time. He also corrected the misunderstandings and misconceptions that had crept in through self-seeking individuals who promoted their own interests in the guise of teaching the Bahá'í Faith. This priceless opportunity, had it been missed, would have not come about again, for World War I broke out shortly after He returned from His trip to the Holy Land, and three years after the end of the war He passed away in November 1921. With His visit to the West, for the first time in the annals of religious history, the

light of the Sun of Truth, which had risen in the east, illumined the West by the One whom Bahá'u'lláh had appointed the Centre of His Covenant and the infallible Interpreter of His Words.

'Abdu'l-Bahá had also received invitations from organizations that were eager to meet and seek enlightenment from Him. The world was moving toward a conflict that would engulf many countries. The threat of World War I was looming high. Many organizations were hard at work to promote goodwill among people and raise consciousness regarding the perils of war. Their ideas often revolved around the economic, social and political ills afflicting people of diverse backgrounds. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stressed the pivotal principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh; that the oneness of humanity was the basic prerequisite for addressing the ills afflicting humanity, that prejudices of all kinds had to be eliminated, that education had to become universal and compulsory, that preferences accorded people on the basis of gender and color of skin had to give way to equal rights for all. His message was spiritual in nature. He advocated a civilization in which the material and spiritual aspects were well balanced.

Among the conferences 'Abdu'l-Bahá attended in the United States was Lake Mohonk International Peace Conference. It was one of the most prestigious organizations searching for peaceful solutions to the problems assailing humanity. The eighteenth annual session of the conference on international arbitration was held 15–17 May 1912 at Lake Mohonk, New York. The attendance included delegates and visitors from many countries. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been invited and accepted to participate. Announcing the Conference, the "Evening Sun" of New York City, the 8 May 1912 issue, number 25068, wrote:

The eighteenth annual Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration will meet by invitation of Albert Smiley at Mohonk Lake, New York, May 15–17, the members of which will include distinguished men from many countries.

## The Choice of the West

Prominent among these speakers from abroad will be...  
Abdul Baha Abbas of Persia, leader of the Bahai movement.

Under the headline "ABDUL BAHÁ LECTURES ON THE RELIGION OF PEACE", the Pittsburgh Press on 8 May 1912 reported on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talk on the night of 7 May in the Hotel Schenley "to an attentive audience of about 400 persons":

He is of absolute simplicity of manner, is unostentatious and unpretentious and delivered his message cheerfully, earnestly and quickly. The Bahai religion emanates from Persia and is promulgating an era of peace, and unity in language, politics and spiritual creeds. The Universal Brotherhood of man is the doctrine of this religion... Abdul Baha is the son of Baha-O'llah, who founded the religion. He is venerable in appearance, with long white hair and beard, and with strong, kindly, peaceful expressive features...

Abdul-Baha said the Bahais believe in the equality of women with men, for until women have an equal voice in the affairs of the world, war will not be abolished. They believe in the harmony of science and religion; in the oneness of life with all good; in religious adjustment of political economical conditions; in temperate, reasonable living; in being happy and contented; and in following the teachings of the founder of the religion of love, Jesus of Nazareth.

Various churches and societies of Pittsburg were represented in audience. New Thoughtists, Theosophists, Christian Scientists and Unitarians met with the most orthodox of religious denominations...

He also will address the Mohonk Peace conference in New York State this month.

Under the heading "JERSEY CITY TO HEAR A PEACE MISSIONARY" , The Urban Gazette, number 25104, wrote on 16 May 1912:

Famous Abdul Baha Will Talk at Brotherhood Church Sunday Night

There seems to be one man who has succeeded in impressing the world with his disinterested sincerity, as well as with his practical and spiritual power in the advocacy of international peace and the universal brotherhood of man. That man is 'Abdu'l-Bahá, of Persia. The history of this man is one of the remarkable things of all history. In exile and prison under the tyranny of the Turkish Government on account of his own and his father's religious convictions, since he was nine years old, these two men have attracted to their prison in Acca, Syria people from all over the world to get the wonderful inspiration of their message.

In an article headed: "PERSIAN TO EXPLAIN HIS CULT," the Evening Transcript of Boston, number 25114, dated 18 May 1912, wrote:

...Far from being a poetical presentation of new Oriental mysticism or the principles of a new cult, the Bahai movement's principles are disclosed to be the last word in the most advanced social, economic, educational, political and religious thought of the day. The keynote of the utterances of the Persian who for half a century has been known to the East, but little known in Western Europe, or America, is unity and universalism.

Abdul Baha declares that over fifty years ago one of the chief lessons his father sought to impress upon his followers was the necessity for world peace through the instrumentality

of arbitration treaties. He develops this idea to the extent even of providing for the terms of a treaty for international arbitration, international police and a gradual disarmament. He also advocates the blending of the world's religions, protesting against differences of creeds. "The true foundations of all faiths must be established," he writes. "There must be a oneness of faith."

Even a universal language is advocated. "The differences of languages cause disunion between nations," reads another paragraph. "There must be a universal auxiliary language."

Equality of the sexes is maintained to be the proper condition. The only reason why woman is not so advanced as man is given as a lack of education.

With religion, morals, education, work, government and other subjects the writings deal, yet pervading them all is the ideal of unity and a common world family.

Speaking of the general theme of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discourses and the influence He had exerted on the public, "The World" as established by Joseph Pulitzer, wrote on 13 July 1912 in the section "Notes and News of the Churches":

Everywhere his addresses have been followed by a strong wave of influence toward Christian harmony and Christian recognition of a wider unity which is to comprise a real brotherhood and reconciliation among all religious systems of East and West.

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá reached London, after His visit to North America, reporters asked Him about the purpose of His visit. He said:

*I have come from America where I travelled for nine months. I went to every city, spoke in their churches and meeting places.*



*I was invited to many conferences, such as the Lake Mohonk, visited universities. Everywhere I was invited to speak. My talks were based on Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings. Based on those Teachings, I called everyone to universal peace, peace among religions, peace among nations, governments, regions. I set forth arguments about the necessity of peace. I proved, based on rational proofs, that in this day the greatest and most essential of all affairs is universal peace. It is the cause of comfort for the world of humanity, the most effective means for the resolution of problems. This is the century of light, the century for the advancement of mental faculty and thoughts... It is befitting that in a century such as this all nations become united, all religions come together in unity, all regions become one, for the world of humanity is like a single tree, religions and nations are like its branches and boughs....*<sup>52</sup>

He was again asked on 27 December about the purpose of His visit. He said: *"I have come to promote divine civilization, the civilization that Bahá'u'lláh has established in the east, the civilization that would promote good character, the civilization that is the cause of universal peace, the civilization that promotes the unity of humankind."*<sup>53</sup>

## Reflection

'Abdu'l-Bahá's childhood journey in the mid-1800's was arduous and fraught with hazards. It was intended to root out the influence of His Father's Teachings and extinguish the Light of His Cause. It was a journey imposed on Him by temporal tyrannical authorities, a journey that presaged no return to His homeland. That journey involved a sojourn of ten years in Baghdad, four months in Constantinople (Istanbul), five years in Adrianople (Edirne), and ultimately consigned Him to spend the rest of His life in a penal colony of the Ottoman Empire, which is a part of Israel today. Bahá'u'lláh and His

family reached the shores of the Holy Land in 1868. The imperial decree, issued under pressure from Persian authorities, which brought Bahá'u'lláh and His family to `Akká, fulfilled scriptural prophecies about the Lord of Hosts appearing in the Promised Land.

`Abdu'l-Bahá's journey to the West was also arduous and fraught with hazards. However, unlike His childhood journey, it was initiated without the intervention of any temporal power. It was a journey undertaken when He was finally free to go where He pleased and over which He had full authority, a journey that blazoned the name of Bahá'u'lláh and spread the Light of His Revelation far and wide. It was the exact opposite of what the adversaries had hoped to achieve. The scheme of sending Bahá'u'lláh to a place where His followers could not reach Him, resulted, sixty years later, in the Centre of His Covenant appearing in the western world, where He raised the banner of His Cause among the people eager to hear His message, and won the admiration of those genuinely interested in the oneness of humanity and the establishment of an enduring peace.

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NOTES

- 1 Abdulhamidi Eshraghekhavar, Mayidiy-i-Asmani, Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, , 128 b, (1971) vol. 4, p. 361. also The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, A Compilation. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1963, p. 126–27
- 2 Juliet Thompson, `Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1948, pp 113 and 121.
- 3 *Ibid* 113

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- 4 *Ibid* 114
- 5 *Ibid* 114, 129
- 6 *Ibid* 107
- 7 *Ibid* 119, 122
- 8 *Ibid* 123
- 9 Maḥmoud-i-Zarqání, *Maḥmud's Diary*, trans. by Mohi Sobhani. Osford: George Ronald, 1998, p. 8.
- 10 *Ibid* 75
- 11 Juliet Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*. Los Angeles: Kalímát Press 1983, p 177.
- 12 *Ibid* 82.
- 13 Thompson 1948 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh p 85.
- 14 *Ibid* 85
- 15 *Mahmud's Diary*, p. 268
- 16 *Tawqí'at-i-Mubarakih Hadrat-i Valyy-i Amru'llah*, addressed to the believers in the East, p. 470.
- 17 A British scholar, who visited 'Akka and Iran and published material about the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths in English.
- 18 A Russian scholar, who lived in Iran for some time, was in touch with Mirza Abu'l-Fadl, translated and published the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and other Writings of Bahá'u'lláh in Russian.
- 19 Nasiri'd-Din Shah
- 20 Sultan 'Abdu'l-'Aziz
- 21 Bahá'u'lláh's resting place is the Most Holy Spot in the Bahá'í world, it is the qiblih, and a place of pilgrimage.
- 22 *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, p. 292
- 23 The body of Mirza Muhammad-'Aliy-i Zunuzi, a young disciple who insisted on being executed with the Báb, was mangled with that of His beloved Master. The remains were interred together in the vault of the Shrine of the Báb on Naw-Ruz 1909.
- 24 The remains of the Báb and His disciple were rescued from the moat where they were placed after execution, and kept safe for fifty years in different places in Iran until they were sent to the Holy Land. The remains reached the Haifa/'Akka area before the end of the nineteenth century. Shortly after their safe arrival, 'Abdu'l-Bahá began the construction of a mausoleum in the heart of Mount Carmel. It is known as the Shrine of the Báb.

## Lights of 'Irfán Book Thirteen

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- 25 *Bahiyih Khanum, the Greatest Holy Leaf*, p. 39.
- 26 The use of the term “divine wisdom” in this Tablet indicates that a force beyond personal choice prompted ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to make the trip.
- 27 *Bahiyih Khanum, the Greatest Holy Leaf*, p. 13, also *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees*, pp. 171–172
- 28 Sydney Sprague was married to Farangís Khanum, daughter of Siyyid Asadu’llah Isfahani and Raziyih Khanum, Munirih Khanum’s sister. Farangís Khanum is the sister of Dr. Amin (Ameen) Fareed who later broke the Covenant and caused the downfall of the immediate members of his family. Sydney Sprague later realized his mistake, sought pardon, and his membership in the Bahá’í community was reinstated.
- 29 Thompson 1948, p. 134
- 30 *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees*, p. 344
- 31 *Ibid*, p. 343
- 32 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s youngest daughter.
- 33 *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, p. 232.
- 34 *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, p. 276.
- 35 *Mahmud’s Diary*, p. 99
- 36 *Ibid*
- 37 *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, pp. 285–86
- 38 *Ibid*, p. 280
- 39 *Ibid*, p. 296
- 40 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *the Centre of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant*, p. 133
- 41 During his governorship of Isfahan, the King of Martyrs, the Beloved of Martyrs, and a large number of Baha’is were brutally killed.
- 42 Mr. Hippolyte Dreyfus, a distinguished European lawyer and a prominent Baha’i.
- 43 Prince Bahram Mirza.
- 44 Sultan Husayn Mirza
- 45 Thompson, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh*. pp. 19–20.
- 46 *Ibid*, p. 346
- 47 *Ibid*, p. 226
- 48 *Ibid*, p. 347
- 49 *Ibid*, pp 368–369

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- 50 *Ibid*, p. 374
- 51 *Ibid*, p. 347
- 52 Maḥmud Zarqání, *Badayi`u`lathar* (Maḥmud's Diary), vol 2. Langenheim: Bahá'í Verlag, 1982, p. 39, (paraphrased by this writer).
- 53 *Ibid*, p. 44

# Apocalyptic Thinking and Process Thinking: A Bahá'í Contribution to Religious Thought

Moojan Momen

*The key feature of classical religious apocalyptic thinking is that affairs are static until they are suddenly moved from one state to another by God. Thus the change in affairs is sudden and immediate and it is supernaturally directed and actioned. Human beings are passive participants in this in that although the change usually affects them they play no part in bringing the change about. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh initiated a change in this type of religious thinking. They initiated the idea that religious change is a process not a jump from one state to another and that it is to be brought about through human effort and not by a magical Divine intervention. In this paper, this change in religious thinking will be examined in relation to Bahá'í expectations of the peace, about which there was a great deal of apocalyptic thinking in the years prior to 2000. The main features that are a precondition or accompaniment of peace as described in the Bahá'í texts are listed and then the extent to which these have come to pass in the course of the twentieth century is considered. From this, a sequence of four stages for the fulfillment of these features is delineated. It is furthermore suggested that all of these features reached the third stage during the twentieth century. It is therefore for this reason that the Universal House of Justice was able at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to confirm 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of this century as the "Century of Light".*

There are a number of ways in which the religion initiated by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh produced a major change in structures of religious thought. One of these is the change from what I will for the purposes of this paper call apocalyptic thinking to process thinking.

In classical religious apocalyptic thinking, affairs are static until they are suddenly moved from one state to another by God. The key features of this then are that the change is sudden and immediate and it is supernaturally directed and actioned. Human beings are passive participants in this in that although the change usually affects them they play no part in bringing the change about. This type of thinking tends to see matters in black-and-white terms and favours the literal and physical interpretation of texts.

The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh initiated a change in this type of religious thinking. They initiated the idea that religious change is a process not a jump from one state to another and that it is to be brought about through human effort and not by a magical Divine intervention. This type of thinking favours the spiritual and metaphorical interpretation of texts and texts to see matters as a rainbow of colours or shades of grey—rather than black-and-white. Thus for example, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh came to a world that was expecting, as a result of their reading of their scriptures, that the Promised One would arrive and within a short space of time defeat the forces of evil and establish justice throughout the world. After this would come the Day of Judgement or Day of Resurrection. All of these were events that would happen by Divine intervention suddenly and within a short space of time. Humans would for the most part, especially in relation to the events of the Day of Resurrection, be passive participants.

The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh spent much of their ministries and much of their writings with interpreting these religious expectations. They explained that these passages of scripture are metaphorical and spiritual descriptions, not intended to be taken literally. God does not work in this magical interventionist way. The scriptures of the past do write of a Day of God but they also write that a day of God is as one thousand years in human reckoning. The promised saviour will establish his sovereignty and will establish justice in the world but it will be a slow process taking one thousand years. Furthermore, it will be



the actions of human beings that will bring about this transformation. This may be described as a change from static, magical or apocalyptic thinking to process thinking.

However, this change in religious thinking is not just confined to interpretation of the prophecies of the past. It also applies to the vision that the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith present about the future direction of the world. While the interpretations of past prophecies have been comparatively easy for the Bahá'í community to accept and internalize, this application of the new way of thinking has been more difficult to adopt when projected forward to future events. In this paper, I want to examine this change of religious thinking by examining an example that demonstrates this.

### The Bahá'í Teachings about Peace

One of the main features of the vision of a future society that Bahá'u'lláh brings is that there will be peace. This peace is envisaged as occurring in two stages: The Lesser Peace (which is how Shoghi Effendi translates both *ṣulḥ-i-aṣḡhar* and *ṣulḥ-i akbar*), a political peace brought about by the governments of the world and needing to be enforced; a Greater Peace or Most Great Peace (*ṣulḥ-i a'ẓam*), an enduring more deeply-rooted peace brought about by the widespread acceptance of the Bahá'í teachings. Although many Bahá'ís think of these two as successive events, first the Lesser Peace and then the Most Great Peace, it will appear from the evidence I cite in this paper that the authoritative Bahá'í texts see these two processes as intertwined and evolving together. Among the features and necessary pre-conditions for peace found in the writings of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith it is sometimes not clear whether the feature refers to the Lesser Peace or the Most Great Peace, but since these are concurrently developing and inter-twined processes, the

difference need not concern us here. The following is a list of these features and pre-conditions:

1. The need for a world assembly of leaders and governments that would confer for the purpose of establishing peace. (GWB 249), (ESW30–31), (SDC, 64–5) This would be a feature of the Lesser Peace.
2. The establishment by the world's leaders of arrangements about collective security—an agreement made that if any government later violate any one of the provisions of these treaties, “*all the governments on earth should arise to reduce it to utter submission.*” (GWB 249; ESW 31; SDC 65). This would be a feature of the Lesser Peace.
3. The establishment of the World Commonwealth, Shoghi Effendi says that this ‘momentous and historic step’ will involve the ‘reconstruction of mankind, as the result of the universal recognition of its oneness and wholeness’ (PDC 122).
4. Another key feature of peace described by Shoghi Effendi, is that of ‘some form of a world superstate’ that must needs be ‘be evolved’ (WOB. 40), although this would appear to be more of a feature of the Most Great Peace than of the Lesser Peace.
5. The general features of this world commonwealth and world superstate should include:
  - + “This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples.

## Apocalyptic Thinking and Process Thinking

- ✦ A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth.
  - ✦ A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system.
  - ✦ A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity.
  - ✦ A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate.
  - ✦ A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue.
  - ✦ A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind.”(WOB 203–4)
6. Among the characteristics of the world society in which this super-state will operate as described by Shoghi Effendi as being:
- ✦ ‘all economic barriers will have been permanently demolished’
  - ✦ ‘the interdependence of Capital and Labour definitely recognized’

- ✦ 'the clamour of religious fanaticism and strife will have been forever stilled'
- ✦ 'the flame of racial animosity will have been finally extinguished'
- ✦ a single code of international law—the product of the considered judgment of the world's federated representatives—shall have as its sanction the instant and coercive intervention of the combined forces of the federated units'
- ✦ 'the fury of a capricious and militant nationalism will have been transmuted into an abiding consciousness of world citizenship' (WOB 41)

7. The presence of peace should allow nations to disarm and reinvest their expenditure on armaments into constructive developmental activities. This principle was first stated by Bahá'u'lláh (TB 165)

To this list should also be added the Seven Candles of Unity that 'Abdu'l-Bahá lists and links to peace:

*Hence the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved. Verily this is none other but one of the wonders of this wondrous age, this glorious century. Of this past ages have been deprived, for this century—the century of light—hath been endowed with unique and unprecedented glory, power and illumination. Hence the miraculous unfolding of a fresh marvel every day. Eventually it will be seen how bright its candles will burn in the assemblage of man.*

*Behold how its light is now dawning upon the world's darkened horizon.*

- ✦ *The first candle is unity in the political realm, the early glimmerings of which can now be discerned.*

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- *The second candle is unity of thought in world undertakings, the consummation of which will ere long be witnessed.*
- *The third candle is unity in freedom which will surely come to pass.*
- *The fourth candle is unity in religion which is the corner-stone of the foundation itself, and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendour.*
- *The fifth candle is the unity of nations—a unity which in this century will be securely established, 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.*
- *The seventh candle is unity of language, i.e., the choice of a universal tongue in which all peoples will be instructed and converse.*

*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. (SWAB 32)*

In all, from these passages, a list of about 25 points related to the coming of peace can be drawn up.

### Bahá'í expectations of the Lesser Peace

It is clear that many Bahá'ís, locked into the older static pattern of religious thought were expecting the Lesser Peace to arrive through a miraculous Divine intervention. From as early as the start of the twentieth century, Bahá'ís were speculating as to the date that it would arrive. One of the first to set a date for the arrival of peace

was Ibrahim Kheiralla, who interpreting a prophecy in Daniel, concluded that peace would come in 1917. Although Kheiralla was discredited and expelled from the Bahá'í community, his idea about the "time of the end" and the dawn of peace occurring in 1917 lived on in the Bahá'í community and was referred to by other Bahá'ís.<sup>1</sup> Even after this date passed, however, the expectation of a sudden advent of world peace continued. The Second World War obviously made some think that this was the calamity that should precede the advent of peace. Some focused on the year 1957, because of their understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words regarding a prophecy in the Bible, others looked to 1963 as the fulfilment of that same prophecy. The centenary of the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh to the kings and leaders of the world excited attention because the Universal House of Justice, in referring to this wrote that "the hundred years' respite" has ended and "the struggle between the forces of darkness—man's lower nature—and the rising sun of the Divine teachings which draw him on to his true station, intensifies day by day." (The Universal House of Justice, Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 113). The centenary of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1992 was another occasion when expectations heightened. Up to the year 2000, it was not unusual to find Bahá'ís stating that the Lesser Peace would come by the year 2000.<sup>2</sup> Evidence of the continuing speculation among Bahá'ís regarding this matter can be found in the need that the Universal House of Justice felt to issue letters trying to play down these expectations among Bahá'ís.<sup>3</sup> The significant aspect of these predictions was that those Bahá'ís who were most involved in these speculations usually expected peace to arrive out of thin air, with no human effort required. They were, thus, caught up in what I have named above as an apocalyptic mode of thought.

This mode of apocalyptic thought existed despite the fact that the authoritative Bahá'í texts say something different. What is clear from texts that we have from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi is

that the coming of the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace is a slow evolving process:

*Gradually whatsoever is latent in the innermost of this Holy Cycle shall appear and be made manifest, for now is but the beginning of its growth and the dayspring of the revelation of its Signs. Ere the close of this Century and of this Age, it shall be made clear and manifest how wondrous was that Springtide and how heavenly was that Gift! (BA 15–16)*

*The kingdom of peace, salvation, uprightness, and reconciliation is founded in the invisible world, and it will by degrees become manifest and apparent through the power of the Word of God! (BWF 409)*

To the general character, the implications and features of this world commonwealth, destined to emerge, sooner or later, out of the carnage, agony, and havoc of this great world convulsion, I have already referred in my previous communications. Suffice it to say that this consummation will, by its very nature, be a gradual process.... (PDC 122–3)

## Peace as a Process

I now propose to show how process thinking has been applied by the Bahá'í leaders to these 25 points related to the coming of peace. When at the end of World War I, Woodrow Wilson drew up his 14 points to be the guiding principles for an enduring peace and established the League of Nations, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported by Shoghi Effendi to have declared that these achievements signalled the "*Dawn of the Most Great Peace*". (CF 36). This points to the fact that the developments towards the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace are intertwined and occurring together not successively.

Similarly, Shoghi Effendi, writing in 1936, hailed a decision by the League of Nations in October 1935 to sanction Italy for an act of aggression towards Ethiopia as “one of the most distinctive milestones on the long and arduous road that must lead it to its goal, the stage at which the oneness of the whole body of nations will be made the ruling principle of international life.” ( WOB 193).

This quotation establishes an important point of principle in this way of thinking about world events. Even though that particular action of the League of Nations was unsuccessful, the important point for Shoghi Effendi was that the principle had been established—for him this was an important step—it would only be a matter of time before the principle would be universally enforced. In other words that things progress by a number of steps: that first a principle is established in one particular case then gradually it becomes more universally acknowledged.

Writing in 1941, and despite being in the midst of World War II, Shoghi Effendi commented on yet further progress along the path towards peace:

The world is, in truth, moving on towards its destiny. The interdependence of the peoples and nations of the earth, whatever the leaders of the divisive forces of the world may say or do, is already an accomplished fact. Its unity in the economic sphere is now understood and recognized. (PDC 200)

This points to another principle that: that there may be what appear to be major reverses at the hands of the “leaders of the divisive forces of the world” but that such reverses are only temporary and may even be necessary steps in the long-term evolving process described in the Bahá'í texts. This fact is more clearly enunciated in the following quotation:



Whatever the present status of the League or the outcome of its historic verdict, whatever the trials and reverses which, in the immediate future, it may have to face and sustain, the fact must be recognized that so important a decision marks one of the most distinctive milestones on the long and arduous road that must lead it to its goal, the stage at which the oneness of the whole body of nations will be made the ruling principle of international life. (WOB 193)

### Features of the Processes leading to Peace

We can now look at the various features that are necessary preconditions or accompaniments of the process towards peace and see how far the process leading to this progressed during the twentieth century.

A. The first element of the Lesser Peace that we can look at is the need for a world assembly of leaders and governments that would confer for the purpose of establishing peace. (Bahá'u'lláh GWB 249; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, SDC 64–5)

Now it is clear that the convocation called for by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá has not occurred but it is equally clear that the establishment of the League of Nations, the United Nations and particularly the round of major summits that occurred in the last decade of the twentieth century, bringing together world leaders to discuss such subjects as sustainable development, the position of women, the environment and particularly the Millennium Summit that brought the world leaders together to review the past and look forward to the future—these are all important advances towards that process.

B. Among the items that the Bahá'í writings state that the world's leaders need to agree about are arrangements about collective security—an agreement made that if any government later violate any

one of the provisions of these treaties, "*all the governments on earth should arise to reduce it to utter submission.*" (SDC 65)

Such arrangements have existed in theory ever since the establishment of the League of Nations. Indeed when in October 1935, the League decided to impose sanctions on Italy over its invasion of Ethiopia, Shoghi Effendi acclaimed this:

For the first time in the history of humanity the system of collective security, foreshadowed by Bahá'u'lláh and explained by 'Abdu'lBahá, has been seriously envisaged, discussed and tested. For the first time in history it has been officially recognized and publicly stated that for this system of collective security to be effectively established strength and elasticity are both essential strength involving the use of an adequate force to ensure the efficacy of the proposed system, and elasticity to enable the machinery that has been devised to meet the legitimate needs and aspirations of its aggrieved upholders. For the first time in human history tentative efforts have been exerted by the nations of the world to assume collective responsibility, and to supplement their verbal pledges by actual preparation for collective action. And again, for the first time in history, a movement of public opinion has manifested itself in support of the verdict which the leaders and representatives of nations have pronounced, and for securing collective action in pursuance of such a decision. (WOB 191192.)

Again the principle was invoked in the United Nations when communist forces invaded Korea just after the second World War. After that however, the world appeared to forget about it until 1992 when Iraq invaded Kuwait and the Gulf War was launched again invoking and re-awakening the awareness of this principle. Now of course the energetic response of the USA was not pure altruism and a sense of

global responsibility on the part of the USA and was much more concerned with protecting its sources of oil, but nevertheless an important principle has been established. The Universal House of Justice in message of Ridván 1991, referred to the importance of this event in the process: "The forces which united the remedial reactions of so many nations to the sudden crisis in this region demonstrated beyond any doubt the necessity of the principle of collective security prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh more than a century ago as a means of resolving conflict. While the international arrangement envisioned by Him for the full application of this principle is far from having been adopted by the rulers of mankind, a long step towards the behaviour outlined for the nations by the Lord of the Age has thus been taken."

The agreement by Indonesia to pull back from its occupation of East Timor in 1999 is another example of this principle gradually coming to the fore.

C. Regarding the establishment of the World Commonwealth, Shoghi Effendi says that this 'momentous and historic step' will involve the 'reconstruction of mankind, as the result of the universal recognition of its oneness and wholeness' (PDC 122). And the Universal House of Justice has stated that "Acceptance of the oneness of mankind is the first fundamental prerequisite for reorganization and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind. Universal acceptance of this spiritual principle is essential to any successful attempt to establish world peace." (PWP 10)

At first glance, it would appear that the world is a long way away from acknowledging this principle. But if we consider more closely, we can see that enormous strides have been made in this direction during the twentieth century. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights all mark

major steps forward from the situation earlier in the twentieth century when large parts of the human race were considered inferior and not deserving of any rights by other parts. All these steps have been taken in the last fifty years or so.

D. A third feature of the peace described by Shoghi Effendi, is that of 'some form of a world superstate' that must needs be 'be evolved' (WOB 40). Our first reaction may be to think that we are a long way away from such a world government. But Shoghi Effendi says that this is something that will evolve and not something that will suddenly appear and if we have this long-term evolutionary vision of Shoghi Effendi and we look around us, we can see much evidence of its evolving presence in our midst. At the United Nations, a report on global Governance was commissioned and there has been talk of convening a summit to consider this report.

The first step towards the creation of a true world government is, Shoghi Effendi says, 'the inevitable curtailment of unfettered national sovereignty'. Those features of sovereignty which will need to be curtailed are:

- ♦ 'every claim to make war,
- ♦ certain rights to impose taxation and
- ♦ all rights to maintain armaments, except for the purposes of maintaining internal order within their respective dominions'. (WOB 40)

Now we do not see much evidence of this happening in the world at large, but if we look at what is happening within the European Union, then we see a group of nations which throughout the twentieth century went to war twice with each other in a major way—and they have agreed to curtail their unfettered national sovereignty, they have agreed to limit certain rights to impose taxation, and they are in the process of co-ordinating their foreign policies which would inevitably

lead to a curtailment of their right to make war and therefore logically also of their right to maintain independent armies.

So on a smaller scale, the very conditions that Shoghi Effendi sets are being put into effect—the principle of putting limits on unfettered national sovereignty are being accepted. And it should be born in mind that until fifty years ago this principle was considered sacrosanct and unassailable.

Furthermore, we have seen an international example of the refusal of the world's governments to allow the principle of unfettered national sovereignty to over-ride concerns about human rights abuses in the example of what happened in Kosovo in 1999. The world refused to allow a national government to do whatever it liked within its own internationally-recognized borders. More recently, this has happened again in the case of Libya in 2011.

E. Let us look at the accessories that Shoghi Effendi said would have to exist alongside this “world super-state”:

Such a state will have to include within its orbit

- ♦ an international executive adequate to enforce supreme and unchallengeable authority on every recalcitrant member of the commonwealth;
- ♦ a world parliament whose members shall be elected by the people in their respective countries and whose election shall be confirmed by their respective governments;

and a supreme tribunal whose judgement will have a binding effect even in such cases where the parties concerned did not voluntarily agree to submit their case to its consideration. (WOB 40–41)

Elsewhere he says that this world super-state will be 'backed by an International force' (WOB 203)

Again all of these things may on the one hand be considered to be very remote from the present situation of the world. But, if we look with a long-term evolutionary vision, we can see the seeds of them already present.

We have an international executive in the office of the secretary-general of the United Nations. It does not yet have the power "to enforce supreme and unchallengeable authority on every recalcitrant member" of the United Nations but at least it exists. In the case of the European Union, we even have the beginnings of a supra-national executive with limited powers to enforce itself upon its member states. We also have "a world parliament" in the United Nations General Assembly. It is not yet one "whose members shall be elected by the people in their respective countries," but the European Parliament is. Again, an International Court of Justice exists based in the Hague. It does not yet have the right to intervene in cases where either part has not agreed to submit to its jurisdiction, but other supra-national courts, such as the European Court of Human Rights, do have this right. The establishment of the International Criminal Court was a further major step in the movement towards having a world legal system that over-rides national sovereignty. And with respect to an international force that will back up the world super-state, we can again see the seeds of this in the various United Nations forces that are operating in different parts of the world.

Other elements in this statement of Shoghi Effendi include:

- ✦ A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity.

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- ✦ A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate.
- ✦ A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue.
- ✦ A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind.” (WOB 203–4)

The first of these can be said to have been achieved with the advent of the internet, which occurred during the last decade of the twentieth century. There are no signs of the second occurring at the world level although on a continental level, Brussels and Strasbourg are competing to become the “nerve centre” of the European Union. The development of a world language is identical to ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s seventh candle and is discussed below. There have been a few developments in the fourth point above with the kilogram and kilometre being increasingly the world system of weights and measures, while a European currency has emerged in the course of the twentieth century.

F. We can also examine some of the characteristics of the world society in which this super-state will operate, as they have been described by Shoghi Effendi:

- ✦ ‘all economic barriers will have been permanently demolished’
- ✦ ‘the interdependence of Capital and Labour definitely recognized’
- ✦ ‘the clamour of religious fanaticism and strife will have been forever stilled’

- ✦ 'the flame of racial animosity will have been finally extinguished'
- ✦ a single code of international law—the product of the considered judgment of the world's federated representatives—shall have as its sanction the instant and coercive intervention of the combined forces of the federated units'
- ✦ 'the fury of a capricious and militant nationalism will have been transmuted into an abiding consciousness of world citizenship' (WOB 41)

We can see that gradually all of these elements are falling into place: economic barriers are collapsing—we already have a globalized economy (the main area which is not yet globalized is that of the protectionist policies of the United States and Europe towards their agriculture and heavy industries); the interdependence of Capital and Labour are largely already recognized; the clamour of religious fanaticism and strife cannot be said to be stilled but at least they are widely recognized as undesirable; a single code of international law cannot yet be said to have been put into place, but there is a growing body of international law which is acknowledged as binding by the nations of the world.

G. The presence of the Lesser Peace should allow nations to disarm and reinvest their expenditure on armaments into constructive developmental activities

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been considerable talk of a "peace dividend". Numerous US and other military bases around the world have been closed down and military expenditure was cut back. Again I know that there has been a reversal of this process in the last few years but again the principle has been established, the idea implanted and eventually it will lead to fruition.



H. With regard to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Seven Candles of Unity, a number of significant advances have been made:

### **1. Unity in the Political Realm**

It is not immediately obvious what 'Abdu'l-Bahá means by this until we look at some other quotations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Promulgation of Universal Peace* talks of “national unity where various peoples live under one form of government such as French, German, British, etc.; and political unity, which conserves the civil rights of parties or factions of the same government.” (PUP 191) Thus this level of unity may imply the achievement of a situation where the various racial, political and social groupings within a country feel that they are being treated justly and therefore able to unite politically. We will consider this candle again when we come to the 5th candle.

### **2. Unity in World Undertakings**

The Universal House of Justice in its letter to the Bahá'ís introducing the document *The Prosperity of Humankind* in 1995, sees the recent round of United Nations conferences as ‘capstones to the myriad activities taking place in different parts of the world involving a wide range of non-governmental organizations and networks in an urgent search for values, ideas and practical measures that can advance prospects for the peaceful development of all peoples’ and it considers that in these conferences and activities can be discerned ‘the gathering momentum of an emerging unity of thought in world undertakings, the realization of which our sacred scriptures describe as one of the lights of unity that will illumine the path to peace’. Shoghi Effendi has also commented on this second candle that it might also involve the development of a universal culture. (CC2, no. 1628, 195)

### **3. Unity in Freedom.**

During the twentieth century, we saw a number of important developments. At the time that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was writing, most of the world was either under colonial control or under despotic and

authoritarian governments. There could be no real unity when such inequalities and lack of freedom exist. The twentieth century saw the emergences of new states out of colonial control. Similarly, the twentieth century saw many other nations emerging from centuries of authoritarian monarchical structures into freer democratic ones. Not all of the peoples of the world can yet be said to be free but it is a process that is well under way.

Other aspects of this unity in freedom are of course freeing of women from centuries of oppression under male-dominated societies, the freeing of the working and agricultural classes from the oppression of the ruling classes and feudal social structures, and the freeing of ethnic minorities and castes from subservience to the upper echelons of society.

#### **4. Unity in Religion.**

Arguably, this is the area of these seven candles of unity in which humanity has achieved the least progress. The Universal House of Justice has acknowledged this in its letter to the world's religious leaders issued in 2002, calling upon them to take a lead in this sphere. There was however, in 1992, a revival of the Parliament of the World's Religions and there have been a number of other initiatives such as the World Conference on Religions and Peace (since 1970) and the Summit on Religions and Conservation (1993).

#### **5. Unity of Nations.**

The achievement of the unity of nations is what 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated would be achieved in the course of the twentieth century—not the Lesser Peace as many have thought.

In relation to the decision of the League of Nations to impose sanction on Italy in 1935, referred to above, Shoghi Effendi asserted that “the fact must be recognized that so important a decision marks one of the most distinctive milestones on the long and arduous road that

must lead it to its goal, the stage at which the oneness of the whole body of nations will be made the ruling principle of international life.” (WOB 193.)

Since then we have seen the United Nations emerge with much stronger powers than the League of Nations had and several bodies coming together forming regional unities of nations. All of these are steps along this pathway. However, the union of nations seems to point to something more than just political union which is the first candle. Shoghi Effendi was asked by Marion Hoffman about the difference between the first (which was unity in the political realm) and the fifth candle, and he replied:

With reference to your question concerning ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to “*unity in the political realm*”: this unity should be clearly distinguished from the “*unity of nations*”. The first is a unity which politically independent and sovereign states achieve among themselves; while the second is one which is brought about between nations, the difference between a state and a nation being that the former, as you know, is a political entity without necessarily being homogeneous in race, whereas the second implies national as well as political homogeneity. (CC no. 1623 194)

Thus it would appear that unity in the political realm is one that is achieved at the governmental level while unity of nations is a unity that is achieved by the peoples of the nations of the world. Thus ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is here pointing to a deeper underlying consciousness of the oneness of humanity. This consciousness can be discerned to be slowly emerging. We saw it for example in the response that ordinary people made to the famine in the Sudan and to disasters elsewhere. People are increasingly gaining a consciousness of themselves as members of a single human family and the feeling that what happens

to people on the other side of the world is happening to members of their family.

## 6. Unity of Races

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was, among the European nations, a general acceptance of the idea that the white races were superior to the other races. Racist ideologies were widely accepted and very fashionable. The last part of the twentieth century saw the discrediting of these racist ideas and the relegation of racism to an intellectual back-water. Politically, racism survives in many parts of the world but is under increasing pressure even in these parts.

## 7. Unity of Language

This is a principle which was enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh (TB 22) and also mentioned in the lists of Shoghi Effendi (see above). The concept was widely discussed during the twentieth century and Esperanto was widely advocated for this purpose. Again while on the surface, not much progress has been made in this area, in fact, the last few decades have seen the establishment of English as the international language in the areas of business and finance, science and the academic world, and in youth culture.

## The Calamity

With regard to apocalyptic thought in the Bahá'í community, it is also necessary to deal with the points made by those who object to these arguments against apocalyptic thinking and point to the fact that far from speaking of the future as a process, Bahá'u'lláh has clearly stated that a calamity will precede the coming of peace and that this will occur suddenly, apocalyptically:

*And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly (baghtatan) appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankind*

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*to quake. Then, and only then, will the Divine Standard be unfurled, and the Nightingale of Paradise warble its melody.*  
(GWB 118–9)

Such a quotation strengthens the conviction of many Bahá'ís that there will be some apocalyptic event—a calamity followed by the advent of peace. If we read the letters of the Universal House of Justice, however, we find that this institution has indicated that we have already passed through the calamity.

The calamity is a feature of the Age of Transition and, as long ago as October 1967, we find the Universal House of Justice indicating that the calamity had begun:

As humanity enters the dark heart of this age of transition our course is clear. (MUHJ63 114)

For the next few years, there are indications that humanity continued to be in this dark heart; see the following example from June 1983:

The dark horizon faced by a world which has failed to recognize the Promised One, the Source of its salvation, acutely affects the outlook of the younger generations. (WH 158)

And even more clearly in a letter from February 1984, the fact that humanity is in the midst of the calamity is stated:

...the believers should understand that a catastrophic breakdown of human society as a result of mankind's ignoring His Message has been clearly foretold by Bahá'u'lláh, and that we are, indeed, in the midst of such a breakdown.<sup>4</sup>

Then in its Riḍván message of 1988, the Universal indicated that we were through the worst part of this calamity and able to see the silver lining at the end of the cloud:

A silver lining to the dark picture which has overshadowed most of this century now brightens the horizon. (WH 54)

Although even two years later in Riḍván 1990, the Universal House of Justice was warning that reverses could still occur, nevertheless, their language was such as to indicate that the worst was over:

Hopeful as are the signs, we cannot forget that the dark passage of the Age of Transition has not been fully traversed; it is as yet long, slippery and tortuous.<sup>5</sup>

Thus it appears that the Universal House of Justice thinks that the calamity was a process that has been going on for several decades and the worst of which is now behind us—although there is still a possibility for reverses. Thus this “suddenly” of Bahá’u’lláh would appear to be similar to the Divine “Day” and consists of an extended period of time and this calamity is seen in Bahá’í terms as a process and not an apocalyptic event.

## Summary

In summary, this process way of thinking in relation to the progress made towards peace reveals the following features:

A. The Bahá’í Faith holds that God does not usually intervene in the world in dramatic miraculous ways (or only rarely) forcing His will upon humanity, rather He works by slowly evolving processes over long periods of time, inviting human beings to participate in these processes.

B. With regard to the establishment of the features of the vision of the Bahá'í Faith for the future of humanity, this process can be said to consist of a number of stages:

1. The enunciation of a principle in the writings of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith.
2. The independent enunciation of the principle by a government or inter-governmental body and its insertion into international treaties or declarations.
3. The partial implementation of the principle, thus establishing it as a reality on the international stage. This may involve an unsuccessful attempt to implement the principle (as in the case of the response to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia or the United Nations as an implementation of a World Commonwealth) or an implementation that is geographically circumscribed and does not yet involve all nations (as in the steps towards the creation of a super-state within the European Union).
4. The general and full implementation of the principle such that it becomes regarded as the norm in world politics.

Only a few of the features of peace, as delineated in the authoritative Bahá'í texts can be said to have achieved stage 4 (for example the Internet can be said to be the fulfilment of the need for a "mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity"). Most of the features of peace delineated in the text above did however reach stage 3 during the course of the twentieth century.

C. The process of the implementation of these features is not smooth and there may be set-backs on the way.

Seen in this light, one can recognize all of the features of peace delineated in the authoritative Bahá'í texts achieved up to the third stage in the process of implementation during the course of the twentieth century. Some even reached stage 4. Thus it can be said that if the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace are seen as processes rather than apocalyptic events, then the prerequisites and accompanying features of these two categories of peace developed greatly and were securely established by the end of the twentieth century. It is therefore for this reason that the Universal House of Justice was able at the close of the twentieth century to confirm 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of this century as the "*Century of Light*".



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### NOTES

- 1 For Kheiralla's interpretation, see Browne, *Material for the Study of the Bábí Religion* 139; Kheiralla, *Behá'U'lláh* 480. This date was arrived at by taking Daniel 12:12 which refers to 1335 days and converting it to the relevant year of the Islamic calendar. For later Baha'is promulgating this idea, see for example, Nathan Ward FitzGerald, *The New Revelation* 192, quoting a newspaper report of what Baha'is had told a newspaper reporter in about 1902–4. Smith cites an article by a non-Bahá'í who attended the Bahá'í Convention in 1917 and found that the “war proved the leading topic of discussion” and that the Bahá'ís were confident that the war would end within a year and “the foundations of Peace laid”. P. Smith, “The American Bahá'í Community,” p. 159, citing Eric Dime, “Is the Millennium upon us?” *Forum* 58 (1917) 167–80
- 2 See reports collected by David Piff, *Bahá'í Lore* 365–7
- 3 The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, p. 281 and letters written in July 1974, April 1976, December 1981, and February 1984, cited in International Teaching Centre, 1 July 1984, Concerns about Retributive Calamity
- 4 From a communication dated 20 February 1984 written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre and cited in International Teaching Centre, 1 July 1984, Concerns about Retributive Calamity.
- 5 The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván* 147, 1990.

## 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Encounter with Modernity During His Western Travels

Wendi Momen

Having spent almost his whole life as a prisoner and an exile in the Middle East, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, was set free in 1908. He travelled from the Middle East to Europe in 1911 and to Europe and North America in 1912–13, taking his father's message of the renewal of religion and how to build a new civilization based on the spiritual principles of peace, justice and unity to a western audience.

On his travels 'Abdu'l-Bahá encountered developments in material civilization—steam travel, the skyscrapers of New York, his first telephone call, the bright lights of cities—and modern social movements such as suffragettes, socialist politics, new religious thought. This paper looks at his response to these phenomena.

### The Person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

'Abdu'l-Bahá left Iran when he was nine years old. He lived in Baghdad until he was 19, then lived in Constantinople (Istanbul) and Adrianople (Edirne) until he was 24. He lived for most of his life in 'Akká, initially in the prison citadel there and later often under house arrest. After the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá was 64 years old, he moved to Haifa, where he lived for the remainder of his life. He travelled briefly to Beirut, probably in 1878, when he was 34, and to Egypt (Alexandria and Ramleh)

in 1910 when he was 66 years old. It was only in 1911, when he was 67, that he left the Middle East and travelled to Europe and later, in 1912, when he was 68, to North America. Hence 'Abdu'l-Bahá's direct experience of modern technology and western developments came fairly late in his life.

'Abdu'l-Bahá is described by western observers as having a "commanding presence", with those meeting him the first time describing feelings of awe. However, he was "intensely approachable". He had a sense of humour and in many of his encounters with people of importance he poked gentle fun at them, for example, saying to Admiral Peary, who had 'discovered' the North Pole, at a reception held by Ali Kuli Khan and his wife, that the world had for a long time been much concerned about the North Pole, where it was and what was to be found but now that Admiral Peary had discovered it and that there was nothing there, he had relieved the public mind and therefore rendered a great service to humanity (*Diary* 272–3).

'Abdu'l-Bahá was modest but not an ascetic, sensitive to others and truly compassionate. He travelled first class on the *Cedric*, while the rest of his party travelled in second class (Mahmúd 13). However, it seems he did not take advantage of the privileges of first class other than to make contacts with people for the purpose of teaching them about the Bahá'í Faith (Mahmúd 20) and for inviting his entourage to eat in the dining area (Mahmúd 13) —he himself frequently ate only a little cheese and bread (Mahmúd 339) or even just "a milk and a piece of bread", which he described as a "healthy meal" (Balyuzi 392), and, of course, none of them drank the plentiful alcohol available. He told his travelling companions that they should leave second class, as their cabins were 'not good' (Mahmúd 18). Similarly, when he was staying with the Maxwells in Montreal, the number of visitors increased hugely such that after four days he felt his presence had become a problem for them. He insisted that he move into a hotel, choosing a suite at the Windsor Hotel, then the

most expensive and luxurious in the city (Balyuzi 263; Nakhjavani 280–1).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he had very few clothes, as he was wont to give any extra away to the poor, for example giving a tramp in Dublin, New Hampshire, his own trousers that he was wearing at the time, wrapping his *‘abá* about him after he had stepped out of them. (Balyuzi 239; Ives 129). Even when travelling in Europe and North America he always wore the clothes of a 19th century Persian gentleman, which, together with his long white beard gave rise to descriptions of him being a prophet from the East (Balyuzi 264; SW15, 363; SW23, 80; Mahmúd 245, 252).

## The Middle East in 1911

### Travel

The technological advances that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encountered in the West came more slowly to the Middle East but were established in embryo by 1910 so would have been familiar to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to some degree. The railway had come to Alexandria in 1852. But in general trains came late to the Middle East—one of the first in the Middle East was built between Tehran and Rayy in Iran in 1881, too late for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to have used it. The Orient Express between Istanbul and Paris opened in 1883. A train between Damascus and Medina was built under the Ottomans from 1908 to 1916 with a side track to Haifa and ‘Akká, for Muslims to travel to the Hajj. The extra distance to Mecca was not completed. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá travelled to Beirut, probably in 1878 (Balyuzi 38), he travelled by foot. When he left for Egypt in 1910 he went by steamer.

However, for daily travel in the Holy Land in the early years of the 20th century, most people rode horses or used carriages, if they had money, or walked or rode on donkeys if they did not. Several years later, as if to underscore the difference in transport systems,

'Abdu'l-Bahá remarked that he never saw donkeys in the United States (Balyuzi 415).

### **Sanitation**

Sanitation in the Middle East was not so well established in private homes as it was in the West. Although in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Bahá'u'lláh warned against the use of public baths that were dirty, such as the ones in Iran, both he and 'Abdu'l-Bahá used public 'Turkish bath', where one's hair and nails were cut and which were as much a social meeting place as a place of hygiene, being very much a feature of life in 'Akká.

By the turn of the century Jerusalem was well on its way to becoming a modern city. There were luxury hotels with hot, running water (the King David Hotel was the first), telephone lines and modern hospitals. But some areas of the city still remained unchanged and looked as they had a hundred years before.<sup>2</sup>

### **Communications**

The telegraph had reached Iran in 1859 and Syria in the 1860s. 'Akká was added to the network in 1865. The line to Haifa came later—even in 1875 people had to use the telegraph office in 'Akká.<sup>3</sup>

By the turn of the century, Jerusalem had telephone lines but most of the people had no access to telephones. It seems unlikely that there were telephone lines to 'Akká when 'Abdu'l-Bahá left there in 1909 when he moved to Haifa. It is reported that 'Abdu'l-Bahá received his first telephone call while he was in Paris, at the flat at 4 Avenue de Camoens.

### **Lighting**

The production of electricity for lighting public spaces dates from the last quarter of the 19th century. It was soon available in Palestine on a small scale, using batteries and generators. By the time 'Abdu'l-Bahá

left on his western travels small generators were providing the power for the first cinemas in Palestine (between 1910 and 1912). However, in the Bahá’í properties, electricity was not installed until just before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá passed away and was ‘not connected until after his ascension’ so ‘the family used lamps’, probably meaning oil lamps (Rabbaní 13). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá commissioned American electrician and Bahá’í Curtis Kelsey to install AC electrical lighting in the Shrines of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, and on the path leading up to the Shrine of the Bab on Mount Carmel, as well as at the HaramiAqdas in Bahjí, including lighting generators at three sites (Rutstein 38). Kelsey arrived in 1921, just before the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and completed the task in 1922.

### **Tall Buildings**

The tallest building in Haifa in 1900 was one of the 100 clock towers built in that year by Sultan ‘Abdu’l-Hamíd II to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his reign. Erected in front of the AlJarina mosque, it had six floors, with a clock on each side of the fourth floor.<sup>4</sup>

### **Social Developments**

Turning to social developments in the Middle East in the early 20th century, we can look at two areas which may serve as indicators of social progress and modernization: education of the masses and particularly the education of girls; and public participation in government/governance at any level.

### **Education**

Looking at Iran with regard to the education of the masses, during the latter part of the 19th century, a number of Iranian intellectuals concerned with Iran falling behind Europe called for formation of modern educational facilities in the country. By the turn of the century a number of more modern schools were established in Tehran and other major cities, although many soon closed in the face of opposition. Schools for girls faced even stronger opposition.

The earliest attempt to establish a Bahá'í school was probably in Mazandaran in the late 1870s, where both a boys' school and a girls' school were founded, although not for long. The Tarbíyat School for Boys in Tehran was founded about 1899 and was the first modern Bahá'í school in Iran. In 1905 it was the only school in Tehran where mathematics was studied every day and students were separated by ability. The Tarbíyat School for Girls was established in 1911 and offered gymnastics and outdoors breaks to girls more than 15 years before government schools allowed physical education for girls.<sup>5</sup>

In Palestine, schools for girls were set up, often by Christian groups, in Palestine in the 19th century. For example, Quakers established a school for girls and later a boys' school in Ramella in the 19th century. The equivalent school for Muslims girls, the Islamic Girls' School in Jerusalem, had to wait until 1925, when it was established by the Supreme Muslim Council. It had a westernized curriculum for elementary aged girls (Greenberg 36).

### **Popular Government and Participation in Governance**

The Middle East, even today, is not known for participatory government and it was no different in the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Within the Ottoman Empire, governance was undertaken by hereditary rulers and a ruling class, the *askerí*, including the noblemen, court officials, military officers and the religious class of *'ulamá*.<sup>6</sup> Concepts of democratic elections did not exist. The system was open to abuse but also to having weak leaders who gave much power to ambitious underlings.

In Iran, the birthplace of the Bahá'í Faith and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, western science, technology and educational methods were introduced during the reign of Násir-i-Dín Sháh and with these the country's modernization was begun but soon abandoned. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's treatise, written anonymously to the Iranian people and government in 1875, when he was only 31, known as *The Secret of Divine Civilization*,



focused on the social and economic development of Iran. Written at the behest of Bahá'u'lláh, it challenged the Sháh and the Iranian people to reform and take advantage of certain elements of western civilization as well as to introduce good governance and to educate the people to participate in it. That this went unheeded is no great surprise.

Shortly afterwards, probably in 1878, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was invited by the liberal reformer Midhat Pasha to visit Beirut. A brilliant statesman, Midhat Pasha, as grand vizier, was instrumental in persuading the Sultan to grant a constitution to his people. This did not last but was a sign of the sort of political modernization that was beginning to take root in the Middle East (Balyuzi 37–8). When the Iranian Constitutional movement began in Iran in 1905, 'Abdu'l-Bahá initially encouraged the Bahá'ís to involve themselves in this and even to stand for parliament. This came to nothing but is an indication of the interest 'Abdu'l-Bahá had in modern politics and governance.

### **Advancement of Women**

There is currently much controversy over what the status of women in the Middle East was in the 19th century. Western observers point to the veiling of women, their lack of participation in society and decision-making, their seclusion within the home, and laws permitting men to marry more than one wife as indicators of the oppression of women, or at the very least their lack of status compared to men. Present-day Muslim women researchers have begun to question this analysis. They point to the fact that although many Muslim girls were home-schooled, they could both read and write because of the emphasis placed on reading the Qur'án. By the mid-19th century in some parts of the Muslim Middle East, girls were going to schools outside the home, as foreign missionaries established schools for girls as early as the 1830s. Muslim researchers also point to the emergence of a middle class in the Middle East in the last decades of the 19th century that was more closely aligned with Europe. Members of this

middle class wanted more women to train as teachers to educate girls, as they felt that it was not appropriate for girls to have male teachers. Thus in 1872 the Women's Teachers' Training School was founded in Constantinople and by 1900 another had been established in Cairo.<sup>7</sup>

It is suggested that it is a myth that women did not work outside the home: they were, for example, carpet makers. Author Asli Sancar in her book *Ottoman Women: Myth and Reality* argues that it is also a myth that women under the Ottomans had no legal status of their own and were completely under the control of their fathers or husbands. Ottoman women, she says, had for centuries a broad range of legal rights.<sup>8</sup> Annemarie Schimmel agrees: 'Compared to the preIslamic position of women, Islamic legislation meant an enormous progress; the woman has the right, at least according to the letter of the law, to administer the wealth she has brought into the family or has earned by her own work' (Schimmel). That is, the personhood of women is recognized legally. Nevertheless, the vast majority of women in the Middle East in the first half of the 20th century were not middle class and did not have actual access to their own legal status, no matter what the Qur'án said. And in many ways this was also true for many thousands of women in the West, witness their need to agitate for the franchise to be extended to them.

### In the West

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá first arrived in the West in August 1911, he stepped off the SS *Corsica* in Marseilles. It must have seemed slightly familiar to him, with the huge Fort Saint-Jean built on Knights Hospitaller crusader foundations overlooking the harbour, just as the citadel at 'Akká, also built on Hospitaller crusader foundations, overlooks the harbour there. So 'Abdu'l-Bahá's first experience of the West was very possibly one that demonstrated the unity of the East

and West, united, at least, in this way. The interplay of history and the present—old civilizations and new learning from one another—is a theme running throughout the visit of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the West.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá travelled to Thonon-le-Bains where the Bahá’ís met him, including Hippolyte and Laura Dreyfus-Barney, Lady Blomfield, Ethel Rosenberg and other American and British Bahá’ís. Many of them he had met before, in the Holy Land, and so he was among devotees. Juliet Thompson’s diary records many small incidents of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s stay, including a car trip to see the magnificent scenery. On the way back they saw a waterfall, which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spent some time contemplating (*Diary* 176). He similarly contemplated the Niagara Falls when he visited Buffalo, New York, in September 1912, mentioning that Bahá’ú’lláh enjoyed the waterfalls of Mazandaran so much he used to camp near them (Balyuzi 266, Mahmúd 252–3). This interplay of the modern world, nature and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá poignantly recalling the life of his father is also echoed throughout his travels.

### Transportation

While travelling in the West ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encountered a large number of new inventions and technologies, many of which he appreciated and was fascinated to see, others he did not care for. One of the latter was the underground train. In the very year of his father’s public declaration of his mission, in 1863, the first underground railway using adapted steam engines—the four-mile (6.2 km) Metropolitan Railway—opened in London, giving rise to a whole new mode of subterranean urban transit. In 1890 the first electric London underground railway opened in London and soon all other subway systems followed suit. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encountered the ‘underground’ or ‘subway’ in Paris, London and New York but he was not convinced of its value. While travelling on a subway in New York he remarked:

*In man's nature there must be a desire to ascend and not to descend. The underground air is suffocating. It would have been better if we had gone by road above. The Blessed Beauty used to say that it is even a pity that the dead body of man should be buried under the ground (Mahmúd 156).*

Of course, many of the short journeys 'Abdu'l-Bahá took in the West were in cars. Automobiles had been developed by the end of the 19th century and were becoming popular in North America, such that by the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit in 1912 there were over 75 different manufacturers.<sup>9</sup> In 1908, the year of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's release from house arrest in 'Akká, the first Model T Ford became available (27 September 1908, at the Piquette Plant in Detroit, Michigan).<sup>10</sup> Though certainly not yet within the grasp of everyone, many middle class people in North America owned a car and 'Abdu'l-Bahá travelled frequently in automobiles from one meeting to the next, or on visits to the countryside.<sup>11</sup>

For many, driving was still a novelty and a pleasure, especially when it was to show off to guests such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá. One of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's first car trips was in Thonon in August 1911, when he travelled with Juliet Thompson and Laura and Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney (*Diary* 79). From her description, Juliet was more excited by it than was 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who was more taken with the environment through which they passed (*ibid.* 81). For 'Abdu'l-Bahá was ever thinking not of the technology itself but of its emblematic role as an indicator of the power of Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this day, making all things new. Hence while he was riding in Mountford Mills's car in New York on 20 May 1912 he remarked to him, "*You will learn of the value of this automobile later because it will be said that the servants of the Blessed Beauty sat in it*" (Mahmúd 105–6). And, as now, technology did not always work well. When in Chicago on 4 May 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wanted to walk and take the tram from his host's house to the public meeting at a hotel but his host dissuaded

him, saying that as it was too far away and he had a car, 'Abdu'l-Bahá should take that. Mahmúd himself also insisted, so, as he writes, 'Abdu'l-Bahá rode in the car but as it twice punctured its tires, he took the tram' (Mahmúd 77–8).

One or two photographs of 'Abdu'l-Bahá show him sitting in a car, while the motion picture taken of him on 17 June 1912 in the grounds of the MacNutt home in Brooklyn has one scene of him riding in a car (Balyuzi 219, Mahmúd 135).

Despite his frequent use of the motorcar while in the West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not converted to its use once he returned to the holy land. Even as late as April 1920 when he was being honoured by the British government for his humanitarian work during World War I and was sent an 'imposing' and 'elegant' car to take him to the ceremony, he did not use it. His servant Isfandiyar, 'whose joy it had been for many years to drive the Master', suggested on looking at the car that he was no longer needed. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, sensitive to the feelings of his old friend, signed to him to bring the carriage and thus arrived at the garden of the Governorate of Phoenicia in his time-honoured way (Blomfield 214–15). When in London he was offered money to buy a car for his use in the Holy Land, he accepted the cheque but said he would use it for gifts for the poor (Blomfield 157). Later, however, he did take delivery of a car, with Shoghi Effendi taking responsibility for the paperwork.

'Abdu'l-Bahá also used other forms of public transport, including carriages, which were still used widely at the time. In New York, Montreal, Salt Lake City and LA he used taxis,<sup>12</sup> trams and trolleys (Mahmúd 337, 241 252–3, 296; Balyuzi 265, 309) as well as the above mentioned subway, and he took a cable car up a mountain while in Montreal (Mahmúd 243). He did not fly, although he did watch a biplane circling one of Britain's first airfields in Byfleet. (ABL 98). Mary Basil Hall recorded:

I can see 'Abdu'lBahá watching aeroplanes ascend at Brooklands. He would speed them into the sky laughing with pleasure, and making a sweeping upward movement of His arms. The progress of material civilization gave him intense satisfaction, as long as its inventions were not used for the prosecution of war (Basil Hall 13–14).

### **Communications**

Just as improved transportation systems enabled 'Abdu'l-Bahá to travel further more quickly than he could have done at the time of his birth, communication systems were also advancing rapidly, an innovation 'Abdu'l-Bahá welcomed. While the telegraph had come to the 'Akká area in 1865, the telephone was still a novelty at the time 'Abdu'l-Bahá left in 1910. In the West its use was much more widespread. By 1900, the Bell company alone had some 800,000 phones in service while other companies had about 600,000. The first coastto coast telephone line was completed only in 1915, too late for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit.<sup>13</sup> However, by 1911, the 4300km trunk line from New York to Denver was opened,<sup>14</sup> so no doubt some of the arrangements for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travel across North America could have been made by phone. And although from the accounts of those who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá the telephone was used frequently to contact his hosts and hostesses, and from time to time he asked his hosts to telephone someone for him, it seems he did not himself use a telephone personally other than during his visit to Paris in the autumn of 1911.

One night at the flat that was rented for him at 4 Avenue de Camoens he was visited by Siyyid Hasan Taqizadeh, a well-known figure in Iran's political, diplomatic and literary circles. Taqizadeh relates that at one point he and 'Abdu'l-Bahá were alone when the maid came in and said that he had a telephone call. 'Abdu'l-Bahá told her to find his companions and tell one of them to take the call. However, no one was there and eventually 'Abdu'l-Bahá had to take the call himself,

which was, apparently, from an American Bahá'í woman who spoke Persian. Presumably she was one of the Americans in Paris, as there were no transatlantic calls at that time—possibly Laura Dreyfus-Barney or Mary Hanford Ford. After taking the call, 'Abdu'l-Bahá told Taqizadeh: *“That was the first time in My life that I spoke on telephone.”*<sup>15</sup>

### Lighting

Perhaps one of the most obvious differences between 'Abdu'l-Bahá's home and the West was the use of electricity for power, especially for lighting. Edison had perfected the incandescent bulb in 1880 and in the United States electrical wiring for lighting was beginning to be installed in homes about 1900, even though most places would not receive electricity for many years. There were frequent power outages that would last up to a month at a time, so many households continued to use gas lighting, at least as a supplement to electricity until about 1920.<sup>16</sup> Privileged households in England, such as Lady Blomfield's, would have used electrical lighting but most homes were lit by gas for a long time afterwards, and some did not have even this.

But it was outdoor lighting of public spaces that was most impressive. Outdoor lighting by electricity was first used in Paris and then London in the late 1870s. In the US, electric street lighting became widespread and commonplace in 1890. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's chronicler in the United States, Mahmúd Zargání, was particularly taken with the lighting and noted big displays in his diary.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, too, seemed taken with lights at night. When he was in Clifton, near Bristol, on his first visit to England, at the end of a meeting in the home of Wellesley Tudor Pole, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá was staying, he went up onto the balcony and looked out across the city of Bristol, 'a fairylike scene lit up by thousands of lamps' (Anonymous account 5). Mahmúd describes 'Abdu'l-Bahá's response to the lights of San Francisco:

There is a bay between San Francisco and Oakland which can be crossed in 15 minutes by boat. The Master's automobile was being ferried across the channel at night. When it reached midway, we saw a magnificent sight: lighted boats travelling back and forth against the shimmering lights of San Francisco. The splendid buildings and towers adorned with brilliant lights seemed to be golden palaces set with coloured jewels. Lights from the homes crowning the high hills appeared like a string of pearls. The Master enjoyed the scene and whenever He went that way He praised it highly (Mahmúd 302).

'Abdu'l-Bahá's fascination with lights might well be explained by what Bahá'u'lláh had told him. Juliet Thomson records that on the evening of the day 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke at the Bowery Mission in New York, on 19 April 1912, he held a dinner for some of the Bahá'ís.

As we drove up Broadway, glittering with its electric signs, He spoke of them smiling, apparently much amused. Then He told us that Bahá'u'lláh had loved light. *"He could never get enough light. He taught us,"* the Master said, *"to economize in everything else but to use light freely"* (Diary 261–2).

### **Cities and Tall Buildings**

In general, however, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not enamoured of large crowded cities and their very tall buildings. Recall that the tallest building in Haifa at the time was only six stories high and consider the effect of seeing buildings 35 and even 45 stories high for the first time. Just a day after his arrival in New York, as he was travelling in his carriage through the park back to the Ansonia hotel—where he was accommodated on the seventh floor of the 17 story building, he noted: 'America will make rapid progress in the future but I am fearful of the effects of these high buildings and such densely populated cities; these are not good for the public health' (Mahmúd 41).



He found Washington D.C. more pleasant, remarking that 'The city of Washington is better planned and laid out than the other cities of America.' Mahmúd says that

In His view the plan of this city was very pleasing because in other cities the buildings were too high and the population too congested. The buildings in Washington were mostly of four to five stories and its boulevards straight, well-proportioned and exquisitely landscaped. Each house has a front yard with flowers and bushes so that in the springtime the entire city becomes like a beautiful garden. All of the squares there have beautiful parks and gardens. In contrast, some of the streets and boulevards of New York and Chicago, with their tall buildings looming like steep mountain peaks, seem like narrow gorges or deep mountain passes and the crowd of humanity like the files of an army. It is difficult to pass through some of those streets either on foot or in a vehicle (Mahmúd 379).

Comparing the two cities, Mahmúd notes that 'Abdu'l-Bahá "was not pleased with the dense population and the height of the buildings" in New York, saying: "*These are injurious to the public's health. This population should be in two cities, the buildings should be lower and the streets should be tree-lined as they are in Washington. How can these two places compare?*" Mahmúd himself was rather bemused by New York, calling it 'strange' and noting that

its population so large that in addition to surface streets, there are three railway lines running the entire length of the city; one underground, another on the surface and a third above the streets on bridges about two stories high. These railway lines are continuously filled with people and are their mode of transportation. On some of the streets, automobiles and carriages have to stop for some 10 to 15

minutes because of the congestion until the traffic officers give them permission to continue.

Most buildings are from 17 to 18 stories high and each floor has some 20 to 30 apartments, most of which have bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, bathrooms with hot and cold running water and many comforts (Mahmúd 403).

But it was the spirituality of the cities—or the lack thereof—that 'Abdu'l-Bahá particularly noted, saying on 20 October 1911:

*The city of Paris is very beautiful... a more civilized and wellappointed town in all material development it would be impossible to find in the present world. But the spiritual light has not shone upon her for a long time: her spiritual progress is far behind that of her material civilization. A supreme power is needed to awaken her to the reality of spiritual truth, to breathe the breath of life into her dormant soul (PT 26.)*

And to an American audience in New York he said on 15 April:

*Paris is most beautiful in outward appearance. The evidences of material civilization there are very great, but the spiritual civilization is far behind. I found the people of that city submerged and drowning in a sea of materialism. Their conversations and discussions were limited to natural and physical phenomena, without mention of God. I was greatly astonished. Most of the scholars, professors and learned men proved to be materialists. I said to them, 'I am surprised and astonished that men of such perceptive calibre and evident knowledge should still be captives of nature, not recognizing the self-evident Reality' (PUP, 16–17)*

But he did like Chicago, which was to be home to the first House of Worship in the western hemisphere, saying that while he liked D.C.

for its large audiences and the unity of black and white people, he liked Chicago more “because the call of Bahá’u’lláh was first raised in this city” (Mahmúd 67). He also praised his hotel there, the Plaza, saying “*This building commands a good view; most of the parks, streets and the city’s lights can be seen.*” (ibid. 68)

It is probably fair to say that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was not overly taken by large, ornate buildings. When he was in Montreal he was taken to see some of the college buildings. His response was about the quality of education provided:

*As only material education is imparted and only natural philosophy is taught, these universities do not produce highly talented scholars. When both the natural and the divine philosophies are expounded, they will bring forth outstanding souls and evince great advancement. The reason for the success of the Greek schools was that they combined both natural and divine philosophies*(Mahmúd 228).

Then ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was taken to see the ‘huge’ Notre Dame Cathedral. Mahmúd notes that ‘with rapt attention, he gazed at the vast cathedral, its ornamentation and numerous statues and spoke of its grandeur and embellishments’. Then he addressed his companions, as if in admonishment at the elaborate building:

*Behold what eleven disciples of Christ have accomplished, how they sacrificed themselves! I exhort you to walk in their footsteps. When a person is detached, he is capable of revolutionizing the whole world* (Mahmúd 228).

But it was not just material progress, new technology and the effects of migration and population growth on the size of cities that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encountered when he came to the West. He also found social movements that were, in some ways, playing out and developing some

of Bahá'u'lláh's most powerful social teachings—about the oneness of humanity, the equality of women and men, the harmony of science and religion, participative government, education and public welfare.

## Judgement on the West

So what did 'Abdu'l-Bahá think of the innovations, technological, material, social, economic and political that he encountered in the West?

'Abdu'l-Bahá's judgement on the West was grounded in the perspective that Bahá'u'lláh had on the nature of civilization, its direction of travel and the purpose of the Revelation of which he was the bearer. The thrust of this view was two-fold. First that:

*All men have been created to carry forward an everadvancing civilization. The Almighty beareth Me witness: To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth (GWB 214).*

Thus the civilization that is to be advanced is based on spiritual virtues and behaviours drawn from them. The second aspect is that:

*Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation. He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing. The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. 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 342–3).*

This seems to be linked not just to 'amounts' of things people have but again to the activities and behaviours that will tend to uplift their souls rather than mire them in carnal pleasures. Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that although material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind, yet until it becomes combined with Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained. Consider! These battleships that reduce a city to ruins within the space of an hour are the result of material civilization; likewise the Krup guns, the Mauser rifles, dynamite, submarines, torpedo boats, armed aircraft and bombing areoplanes—all these weapons of war are malignant fruits of material civilization. Had material civilization been combined with Divine civilization, these fiery weapons would never have been invented. Nay, rather, human energy would have been wholly devoted to useful inventions and would have been concentrated on praiseworthy discoveries (Tablet to the Hague 8).*

With this lens, then, 'Abdu'l-Bahá viewed the West as well as the East, but this subject is beyond the scope of this essay, except to say that 'Abdu'l-Bahá believed "*The East must acquire material civilization from the West and the West must learn divine civilization from the East*" (Mahmúd 83).

This was an abiding theme in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks. For example, in Los Angeles he said:

*Material civilization is the cause of worldly prosperity but divine civilization is the means of eternal prosperity. If divine civilization, which is all-encompassing, is established, then material civilization will also attain perfection. When spiritual*

*perfection is attained, then physical perfection is a certainty. Material civilization alone does not suffice and does not become the means of acquiring spiritual virtues. Rather, it leads to an increase in wars and disputes and becomes the cause of bloodshed and ruin (Mahmúd 338).*

### **The United States**

'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke specifically about the United States, its achievements in education, agriculture and commerce, the high standard of its government and people, and its role in establishing the sort of civilization Bahá'u'lláh promised, saying:

*Their material civilization resembles a glass of the utmost transparency and purity but divine civilization is like a shining lamp. When these two combine, the utmost perfection will be realized. The light of the oneness of humanity, of universal peace, of equality of human rights and of divine morals will emanate from this country to all the regions of the world and will illumine them all (Mahmúd 122).*

Asked whether Americans could actually achieve this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá provided a link between spiritual behaviour, science and material prosperity:

*Provided they behave moderately, the more people advance in the material realm, the more their capacity for attaining spirituality is augmented. The sounder the body, the greater is the resplendency and manifestation of the spirit. Truly, what impedes spirituality are the dogmas and imitations that are contrary to true science and a sound mind (Mahmúd 122).*

The Master remarked repeatedly:

*The people of America have a great capacity for the acquisition of spiritual qualities but they are immersed in material affairs. They are like machines which move uncontrollably; they move but are devoid of spirit. They will attain perfection when the spirit of divine civilization is breathed into them and this material civilization becomes infused with spiritual refinement (Mahmúd 306).*

On the whole, 'Abdu'l-Bahá seemed to like North America. He saw the great potential of its people to establish peace and to contribute significantly to the material welfare of the planet and to its moral development:

*Although they are engrossed in material civilization and physical pursuits, still, unlike people in some European countries, they are not wholly devoid of spiritual susceptibilities. They are seekers and desire to investigate reality. They wish for peace and tranquillity and they desire fellowship and love among humanity (Mahmúd 413).*

*In New York I find the people more endowed with spiritual susceptibilities. They are not mere captives of nature's control; they are rising out of the bonds and burden of captivity. For this reason I am very happy and hopeful that, God willing, in this populous country, in this vast continent of the West, the virtues of the world of humanity shall become resplendent; that the oneness of human worldpower, the love of God, may enkindle the hearts, and that international peace may hoist its standards, influencing all other regions and countries from here. This is my hope (PUP, 16–18).*

He revealed a prayer specifically for America at the conclusion of the convention of the Bahá'í Temple Unity in Chicago on 30 April 1912:

*O Thou kind Lord! This gathering is turning to Thee. These hearts are radiant with Thy love. These minds and spirits are exhilarated by the message of Thy glad tidings. O God! Let this American democracy become glorious in spiritual degrees even as it has aspired to material degrees, and render this just government victorious. Confirm this revered nation to upraise the standard of the oneness of humanity, to promulgate the Most Great Peace, to become thereby most glorious and praiseworthy among all the nations of the world. O God! This American nation is worthy of Thy favours and is deserving of Thy mercy. Make it precious and near to Thee through Thy bounty and bestowal (PUP 67).*

'Abdu'l-Bahá did not eschew material progress, rather he connected it to spiritual progress and education, explaining that it was the spiritual nature of humans and their education that enabled material progress to be made. So, for example, on 15 April he explained that

*According to his natural power man should be able to communicate a limited distance, but by overcoming the restrictions of nature he can annihilate space and send telephone messages thousands of miles. All the sciences, arts and discoveries were mysteries of nature, and according to natural law these mysteries should remain latent, hidden; but man has proceeded to break this law, free himself from this rule and bring them forth into the realm of the visible. Therefore, he is the ruler and commander of nature (PUP, 17).*

### **Science and Material Progress**

He was himself “greatly interested in modern inventions” and on the ship “spent much of his time standing beside the wireless operator”, saying, “Science is not material; it is Divine ... every other blessing is temporary. Science is a blessing which man does not have to give up.”(SW3(3) 4,17)<sup>17</sup>



However, he rejected that idea that nature is, in itself, perfect:

*In these days there are new schools of philosophy blindly claiming that the world of nature is perfect. If this is true, why are children trained and educated in schools, and what is the need of extended courses in sciences, arts and letters in colleges and universities? What would be the result if humanity were left in its natural condition without education or training? All scientific discoveries and attainments are the outcomes of knowledge and education. The telegraph, phonograph, telephone were latent and potential in the world of nature but would never have come forth into the realm of visibility unless man through education had penetrated and discovered the laws which control them. All the marvellous developments and miracles of what we call civilization would have remained hidden, unknown and, so to speak, nonexistent, if man had remained in his natural condition, deprived of the bounties, blessings and benefits of education and mental culture. The intrinsic difference between the ignorant man and the astute philosopher is that the former has not been lifted out of his natural condition, while the latter has undergone systematic training and education in schools and colleges until his mind has awakened and unfolded to higher realms of thought and perception; otherwise, both are human and natural (PUP 309–10).*

And he also rejected the rather Dawkenesque materialism prevalent at the time, as now:

*One of the strangest things witnessed is that the materialists of today are proud of their natural instincts and bondage. They state that nothing is entitled to belief and acceptance except that which is sensible or tangible. By their own statements they are captives of nature, unconscious of the spiritual world, uninformed of the divine Kingdom and unaware of heavenly*

*bestowals. If this be a virtue, the animal has attained it to a superlative degree, for the animal is absolutely ignorant of the realm of spirit and out of touch with the inner world of conscious realization. The animal would agree with the materialist in denying the existence of that which transcends the senses. If we admit that being limited to the plane of the senses is a virtue, the animal is indeed more virtuous than man, for it is entirely bereft of that which lies beyond, absolutely oblivious of the Kingdom of God and its traces, whereas God has deposited within the human creature an illimitable power by which he can rule the world of nature (PUP 177).*

But he went further than this in explaining the relationship between God and material progress,

*Because it is the will of God in this Greatest Age that this teaching of the union of the East and the West be put into practice, therefore God has made ready the visible and invisible means for its accomplishment. Material means such as steamships, railway trains and aeroplanes, moving swiftly on sea and land, these are but trying to put into practice the will of God. And the electricity of telegraph and telephone, and the wireless, tell us that this is the age of cooperation between East and West (SW14, 59).*

It is the soul of the human that enables scientific discoveries:

*This other and inner reality is called the heavenly body, the ethereal form which corresponds to this body. This is the conscious reality which discovers the inner meaning of things, for the outer body of man does not discover anything. The inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application. It discovers electricity, produces the telegraph, the telephone and*

*opens the door to the world of arts. If the outer material body did this, the animal would, likewise, be able to make scientific and wonderful discoveries, for the animal shares with man all physical powers and limitations. What, then, is that power which penetrates the realities of existence and which is not to be found in the animal? It is the inner reality which comprehends things, throws light upon the mysteries of life and being, discovers the heavenly Kingdom, unseals the mysteries of God and differentiates man from the brute. Of this there can be no doubt (PUP, 464–5).*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also saw the great benefits of material progress, not just for the material advantages that can be had but also because they enable the unity of the world to be established, a primary teaching of Bahá’u’lláh:

*Now for the first time in the history of the world have the mechanical difficulties in the way of the unity of mankind been overcome by railway trains and steamships, tunnels and aeroplanes, post office and printing press, telegraph and telephone (SW8, 84).*

A constant theme of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during his travels in the West was the relationship between science and religion, two linked systems of knowledge required for human progress.

## Social Development

But it was social progress, progress towards world unity and peace and a recognition of the oneness of humanity that seemed to interest ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the most. Race unity, the advancement of women, the education of girls, social justice, the eradication of poverty—these were the interrelated issues that were high on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s agenda

and a constant theme of his talks. His own actions also reflected these concerns: giving money equally to children, taking the clothes from his own back to give to the needy, speaking to the alcoholics at the Bowery Mission not about temperance but about how Jesus and Bahá'u'lláh loved the poor—and then giving them enough money to buy a bed for a night.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was amazingly up to date with current events, commenting on wars in the Middle East, train disasters and of course the sinking of the *Titanic*, a ship he had been urged to travel on. He was aware of the social niceties of both Europe and America and was happy to flout them if they flew in the face of a Bahá'í principle such as the oneness of humankind.

### **Race Unity**

'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to have been most impressed with the social achievements of the Americans, particularly American Bahá'ís, to bring about race unity. Even as late as 1967, it was illegal in 16 states of the United States for members of different races to marry<sup>18</sup> and at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels, 38 states had such laws. Segregation of races in public was common almost everywhere, such that black people were not able to stay in the same hotels as white people, eat in the same restaurants or frequent the same clubs. For example, when the Bahá'ís of New York hosted a reception for 'Abdu'l-Bahá in honour of the day of the Covenant in the ballroom of the Grand Northern Hotel, the proprietor of the hotel refused entry to the black Bahá'ís, saying, "If the people see that one coloured person has entered my hotel, no respectable person will ever set foot in it and my business will go to the winds" (Mahmúd 406–7). The Bahá'ís responded not by cancelling the event but by hosting a separate one the next day, 24 November, at the home of Mrs Kinney, with the white women serving their black guests. 'Abdu'l-Bahá approved of this, saying:

## 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Encounter with Modernity

*Today you have carried out the laws of the Blessed Beauty and have truly acted according to the teachings of the Supreme Pen. Behold what an influence and effect the words of Bahá'u'lláh have had upon the hearts, that hating and shunning have been forgotten and that prejudices have been obliterated to such an extent that you arose to serve one another with great sincerity (Mahmúd 407).*

Similarly when 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in Washington D.C., he was very impressed that at one of the Bahá'í meetings, on 24 April at the home of Mrs Andrew J. Dyer, both white and black people had attended in good numbers. So moved was he at this demonstration of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching of the oneness of humanity that on his way to the next meeting, at the home of inventor of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell, he was "wonderfully exhilarated" and "His voice could be heard, loud and clear, exclaiming: 'O Bahá'u'lláh! What hast Thou done! O Bahá'u'lláh! May my life be sacrificed for Thee! O Bahá'u'lláh! May my soul be offered up for Thy sake! How full were Thy days with trials and tribulation! How severe the ordeals Thou didst endure! How solid the foundations Thou hast finally laid, and how glorious the banner Thou didst hoist'" (Balyuzi 182).

But perhaps the most telling episode was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's treatment of Louis Gregory, a fairly new Bahá'í, a lawyer, who was black, at a luncheon in Washington D.C. on 23 April 1912. It points up the disconnect between what Bahá'ís said they believed and what they actually did. Washington D.C. was a strictly segregated city. Only a decade before, President Theodore Roosevelt had created a scandal by inviting Booker T. Washington to dine with him.

In the morning 'Abdu'l-Bahá had spoken at Howard University, an educational institution for blacks, on the 'harmony between blacks and whites and the unity of humankind' (Mahmúd 55). He then went on to a luncheon at the home of Ali Kuli Khan, the Chargé

d'Affaires for the Persian Legation. Apart from the host and his family, there were 19 guests (Hollinger 31), many of them notables of the city as well as a few Bahá'ís. About an hour before the lunch 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent word to Louis Gregory, who was not invited to the luncheon, to attend a pre-luncheon conference at the house. The conference went on and on but eventually the luncheon was announced and everyone went into the dining room except Gregory, who waited for an opportunity to leave the house. When everyone was seated, 'Abdu'l-Bahá "suddenly stood up, looked all around, and then said to Mírzá Khan, Where is Mr Gregory? Bring Mr Gregory! There was nothing for Mírzá Khan to do but find Mr Gregory... 'Abdu'l-Bahá had by this time rearranged the place setting [which of course have been laid out in strict accordance with social protocol] and made room for Mr Gregory, giving him the seat of honour at his right. He stated he was very pleased to have Mr Gregory there, and then, in the most natural way, as if nothing unusual had happened, proceeded to give a talk on the oneness of mankind" (BW12, 668). It is telling that Mahmúd, who mentions the luncheon, does not mention this incident, yet so unusual was it to have a black man at such a luncheon that Juliet Thompson mentioned it particularly in her diary (*Diary* 270). When 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited Washington for a second time seven months later, the Bahá'ís organized a banquet for 300 people at Rauscher's Hall, the first interracial social event held by Bahá'ís in the city.<sup>19</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá urged Gregory, who had been on pilgrimage in 1911, to consider marrying one of his fellow pilgrims, Englishwoman Louisa Mathew. They were married in New York City on 27 September 1912—not only a cultural taboo but a criminal offence in many states—and were the first interracial Bahá'í couple.

### **The Advancement of Women**

The other area of great interest in the talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the advancement of women. As I have indicated in another paper,<sup>20</sup> as

'Abdu'l-Bahá travelled in the West, he articulated and elucidated the Bahá'í principle of the equality of women and men. This principle although indicated in the Writings of Baha'u'llah, it was not so prominently stated and explained in the English translations of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, certainly not in the books and Tablets that were available at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey in 1911. There is, also, some evidence that his articulation of it was shaped in response to the social movements gaining momentum in the West at the time.

Some of the Tablets in which Bahá'u'lláh discussed this subject were translated into English and published only in the mid-1980s, for example:

*All should know, and in this regard attain the splendours of the sun of certitude, and be illumined thereby: Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God. The DawningPlace of the Light of God sheddeth its radiance upon all with the same effulgence. Verily God created women for men, and men for women (CC2, 379).*

While these Tablets were available to the Bahá'ís in the East, the Bahá'ís in the West relied on 'Abdu'l-Bahá to interpret his father's writings and to bring them to their attention. This he did during his western travels, drawing out from Bahá'u'lláh's writings the most salient and timely of the concepts in them for a western audience.

It is not possible to expand on this theme greatly, other than to give a partial list of what seem to me to be the most significant principles regarding the advancement of women that 'Abdu'l-Bahá articulated in Paris, London and the United States:

1. The rights of all must be respected.
2. Men must recognise the equality of women.
3. Women must spiritualise themselves.

4. Women have priority of education over men because women are the first teachers of humankind.
5. Women must be educated in the same areas as men.
6. Women must be given equal education in order for the world to attain peace.
7. Women must enter the arts, sciences, industry and agriculture and prove their capacity and ability.
8. Women must participate equally in the affairs of law, government and community.
9. Once they are equal participants in world affairs, women will prevent war.
10. Women are exempt from certain areas of service.

*But there are certain matters, the participation in which is not worthy of women. For example, at the time when the community is taking up vigorous defensive measures against the attack of foes, the women are exempt from military engagements (PT 183).*

11. Bahá'í women must teach the Faith.

When he arrived in the West, the big issue in both England and the United States was women's suffrage. 'Abdu'l-Bahá supported this and spoke to suffragists and suffragette meetings on both continents, stating that

*...when perfect equality shall be established between men and women, peace may be realized for the simple reason that womankind in general will never favour warfare. Women evidently [possibly meaning 'obviously'] will not be willing to allow those whom they have so tenderly cared for to go to the battlefield. When they shall have a vote they will oppose any cause of warfare (SW3(10), 24).*



### **The Media**

But there were some features of western society that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá found very challenging. One was the media and the every-present paparazzi. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá travelled in the West he was something of a celebrity and had to contend with the media and paparazzi much as celebrities have to do today. Journalists attended most of his public meetings and had numerous private interviews with him. He was met by reporters even as his ship docked in New York, being asked about social issues such as votes for women. So many photographers wanted to photograph him that while he was in London he decided to have professional photos taken, saying ‘If the photographs must be, it would be better to have good ones’ (Blomfield 64). Therefore a number of studio portraits were taken in London, and again in Paris a month later. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá even signed some photographs to give away (Balyuzi 368).

### **Poverty Eradication**

‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke much about poverty eradication and the alleviation of the suffering of the poor but his actions in this area spoke more loudly than his words. He was, in effect, a one-man social welfare system in ‘Akká. Not only did he feed the poor, clean people’s houses, give them clothes—distributing coats each year—and take care of the ill by paying for doctors and medicine, he stockpiled food against times of famine and even took people into his own house to protect them and give them shelter. When he travelled to the West, he continued his practice of generosity, distributing money to the homeless of New York and other cities of America, literally giving the clothes off his back to those in need, such as homeless tramp in New Hampshire, to whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave his trousers by merely stepping out of them and handing them over.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá arrived in Britain, its welfare system was just emerging. David Lloyd George and his Liberal Party had just enacted the National Insurance Act 1911, which established a

national insurance contribution for unemployment and health benefits for workers, but the effects of this had yet to be felt when 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited London. Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed concern about 'the destitute in the country villages as well as in London' in an 'earnest talk' with a parish rector:

*I find England awake; there is spiritual life here. But your poor are so very poor! This should not be. On the one hand you have wealth, and great luxury; on the other hand men and women are living in the extremities of hunger and want. This great contrast of life is one of the blots on the civilization of this enlightened age.*

*You must turn attention more earnestly to the betterment of the conditions of the poor. Do not be satisfied until each one with whom you are concerned is to you as a member of your family. Regard each one either as a father, or as a brother, or as a sister, or as a mother, or as a child. If you can attain to this, your difficulties will vanish, you will know what to do. This is the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh (ABL 91).*

## Purpose

While 'Abdu'l-Bahá enjoyed his encounter with the West, meeting people and experiencing new technologies, his primary focus was always on bringing the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the people, calling them to the "Kingdom of God", as here, in speaking to an individual in Denver:

*I have come to your city and found tall buildings and advancement in material civilization. Now I will lead you to my own city which is the world above. Its administration is the oneness of humanity, its law is international peace, its palaces are ever*

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*shining with the lights of the Kingdom, its season is always spring, its trees are ever green, its fruits are fresh and sweet, its sun is ever ascending, its moon is always full, its stars are ever brilliant and its planets are ever circling. That is our city and the Founder is Bahá’u’lláh. We have enjoyed the pleasures of this city and now I invite you to that city. I hope that you will accept this invitation (Mahmúd 288–9).*

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## NOTES

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- 3 [http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=LkAvPDl5yfgC&pg=PA151&lpg=PA151&dq=telegram+haifa&source=bl&ots=wLMITAE5s8&sig=CCaNdCJ1O36ji0Vgf2MHQxWTCE&hl=en&ei=ir9Tf7PJIy28QP1bCpCQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CE0Q6AEwBzgK#v=onepage&q=telegram%20haifa&f=false](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=LkAvPDl5yfgC&pg=PA151&lpg=PA151&dq=telegram+haifa&source=bl&ots=wLMITAE5s8&sig=CCaNdCJ1O36ji0Vgf2MHQxWTCE&hl=en&ei=ir9Tf7PJIy28QP1bCpCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CE0Q6AEwBzgK#v=onepage&q=telegram%20haifa&f=false)
- 4 [http://www.virtualltourist.com/travel/Middle\\_East/Israel/Haifa\\_District/Haifa1708915/Things\\_To\\_DoHaifaMISCBR1.html#tip=2137519#ixzz1QbZBPOL](http://www.virtualltourist.com/travel/Middle_East/Israel/Haifa_District/Haifa1708915/Things_To_DoHaifaMISCBR1.html#tip=2137519#ixzz1QbZBPOL)  
[http://www.virtualltourist.com/travel/Middle\\_East/Israel/Haifa\\_District/Haifa1708915/Things\\_To\\_DoHaifaMISCBR1.html#tip=2137519](http://www.virtualltourist.com/travel/Middle_East/Israel/Haifa_District/Haifa1708915/Things_To_DoHaifaMISCBR1.html#tip=2137519)

## 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Encounter with Modernity

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- 5 <http://www.iranpresswatch.org/post/895>
- 6 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/state\\_organisation\\_of\\_the\\_Ottoman\\_Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/state_organisation_of_the_Ottoman_Empire)
- 7 [http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:WDJf2\\_Qut1wj:web.clark.edu/afisher/HIST253/lecture\\_text/WomenMiddleEastNorthAfrica1619c.pdf+19th+century+women+ottomans&hl=en&gl=uk&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESHlZjhEQBRZbxQIqosxPM\\_Knc1PhlzdU1Cq1vuOEfgqTtrckRmcp-biTw1GkmIDqLKVvkKbxwN1HLwZ6Wd\\_ZByaoexgCgXaC6k2Vd8VQqrY0EKvzXT9JvmYjvoN8Qtnp18HmSus&sig=AHIEtbQVfOzAL1vhcIsQdjnHL\\_xunGM6wQ](http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:WDJf2_Qut1wj:web.clark.edu/afisher/HIST253/lecture_text/WomenMiddleEastNorthAfrica1619c.pdf+19th+century+women+ottomans&hl=en&gl=uk&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESHlZjhEQBRZbxQIqosxPM_Knc1PhlzdU1Cq1vuOEfgqTtrckRmcp-biTw1GkmIDqLKVvkKbxwN1HLwZ6Wd_ZByaoexgCgXaC6k2Vd8VQqrY0EKvzXT9JvmYjvoN8Qtnp18HmSus&sig=AHIEtbQVfOzAL1vhcIsQdjnHL_xunGM6wQ)
- 8 <http://www.dunyatimes.com/en/?p=9763>
- 9 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_automobile](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_automobile).
- 10 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ford\\_Model\\_T](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ford_Model_T)
- 11 Balyuzi 183, 238, 240, 251, 266, 274, 281, 312, 370, 380, 389, 393; Blomfield 165; Gail 80, 92, 112, 208; *Diary* 84, 89, 92, 104; Ives 61, 137–8; Mahmúd 111–12, 213, 217, 223.
- 12 One day while he was in Montreal 'Abdu'l-Bahá went out alone and boarded a tram, which took him out of the city. He then changed to another tram, which took him further from the city. He then took a taxi back but did not know the name of the hotel. However, he did point out the direction to the taxi driver and eventually arrived at his hotel. When he told his companions about his adventure he recalled an incident from the Holy Land. When Áqá Faraj, a Bahá'í from 'Akká, had lost his way. 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggested he remove his donkey's halter. The freed animal found its own way to their destination. 'Abdu'l-Bahá laughingly explained that the taxi had also found its own way to the hotel (Mahmúd 241; Balyuzi 265).
- 13 <http://www.telephonymuseum.com/>
- 14 <http://www.birchills.net/19101930telephones/>
- 15 <http://bahailibrary.com/articles/qazvini.html>: 'Abdu'l-Baha Meeting with Two Prominent Iranians; Ahang Rabbani.
- 16 <http://www.craftsmanoutdoorlighting.com/uslightinghistory.html>
- 17 W. P. Dodge, in *Star of the West*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 4, 17.
- 18 See Loving v. Virginia at <http://www.ameasite.org/loving.asp>
- 19 [http://www.bahaiencyclopediaproject.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=63:gregorylouisgeorge&catid=37:biography](http://www.bahaiencyclopediaproject.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=63:gregorylouisgeorge&catid=37:biography)
- 20 'The Two Wings of Humanity: 'Abdu'l-Baha's Articulation of the Equality of Women and Men During His Western Travels', 2010.(to be published soon)

## Interpretation and Elucidation

Ali Nakhjavani

### Introduction

The word 'Interpreter' or the act of 'interpretation' is used sometimes to refer to God's Manifestations. However, it is more commonly used to apply to Appointed Souls who have been specifically invested with the authority to interpret Their Utterances. Such interpretations are regarded authoritative and binding.

Regarding the first usage, we read for example from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh the following: *"He hath in every age and cycle, in conformity with His transcendent wisdom, sent forth...One Who is indeed the Expounder, the true Interpreter"* (TAB 161). A typical example of this kind of function is Bahá'u'lláh's revelation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán where He expounds and interprets the metaphors and mysteries hidden in the scriptures of the past.

The second usage which is in line with the theme of this discussion, applies to the specific authority conveyed by the Manifestation of God to appointed individuals. We find the following, for example, from the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh: *"Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believeth that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted. They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose hearts are the repositories of its secrets, are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom"* (GWB 175).

Of course individual believers can also give their own interpretation and comprehension of the teachings, and these could be interesting, but they can never be binding on the friends. The Universal House of Justice has explained this question very clearly: "A clear distinction is made in our Faith between authoritative interpretation and the interpretation or understanding that each individual arrives at for himself from his study of its teachings. While the former is confined to the Guardian, the latter, according to the guidance given to us by the Guardian himself, should by no means be suppressed. In fact such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings" (MUHJ 88).

## Two Appointed and Authorized Interpreters

In this Dispensation there were two and only two Authorized Interpreters, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

Regarding 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh refers to Him as the "*Mystery of God*", the "*Limb of the Law of God*", He through Whose "*knowledge and wisdom*" the world will be "*illuminated*", and Who is "*an ocean of bounty unto all men.*"(WOB135– 6) In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh clearly enjoins upon His followers: "[R]efer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock" (KA #174). Based on such assertions 'Abdu'l-Bahá declared: "*I am the Interpreter of the Word of God*", He again writes: "*I am the manifest Interpreter of the Word of God*" (WOB 133 & 132).

As to Shoghi Effendi, in His Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to him as the "*Expounder of the words of God*" (WT 11), and the

*“Interpreter”* (WOB 148). And Shoghi Effendi in reference to himself clearly states that “he has been specifically endowed with such power as he may need to reveal the purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Bahá’u’lláh and of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (WOB 151).

In the quotation above, the word “purport” means that which is intended, while the word “implications” means that which is implied but not plainly expressed. Thus the function of an Authorized Interpreter is to unveil for us the intention and hidden meanings of what is outwardly and explicitly revealed. This seems to be why Shoghi Effendi in his *“God Passes By”*, does not only refer to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Interpreter of the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, but the *“Interpreter of His Mind”* (GPB 245).

As stated above such Appointed Interpreters, such Depositories of the hidden secrets of God’s Utterances, and such Disclosers of the Mind of the Author or Authors of revealed words, were confined to two inspired Luminaries, namely ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

### What is Elucidation?

To elucidate is to make clear something which is unclear, or to determine that which is indefinite. We see for example that Shoghi Effendi has written that some of the laws of the Aqdas needed subsidiary “elaboration and elucidation”, and for this purpose Bahá’u’lláh revealed a number of Tablets after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas during the latter part of His life (GPB 216). In their writings both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi had to elucidate certain matters, as was called for.

If their elucidations stemmed from their inner knowledge of the intent of a sacred text revealed, then undoubtedly such pronouncements would fall in the category of interpretations. If however, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi, as Inspired Heads of the



Faith, were clarifying what steps needed to be taken in a situation which was indefinite, then the elucidation or preferably the guidance given would clearly not be a form of interpretation.

The Universal House of Justice has explained the difference between the two situations in one of its letters, from which we quote: “The elucidations of the Universal House of Justice stem from its legislative function and as such differ from interpretation. The divinely inspired legislation of the House of Justice does not attempt to say what the revealed word means—it states what must be done in cases where the revealed Text or its authoritative interpretation is not explicit. It is, therefore, on quite a different level from the Sacred Text and the Universal House of Justice is empowered to abrogate or amend its own legislation whenever it judges the conditions make this desirable” (From a letter to an individual believer dated 15 December 1994).

Among the powers and duties of the Universal House of Justice, in accordance with its Constitution, is “to analyse, classify and coordinate the Writings”(CUHJ 5). The terms as quoted are the exact words used in one of Shoghi Effendi’s letters, explaining the duties of the Universal House of Justice. It is not too difficult to understand that such ‘analysis’ and ‘coordination’ of texts would be necessary for the Universal House of Justice to enable it to take decisions on “*questions that are obscure*” as stated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament, when He was listing the duties of the Universal House of Justice (WT 20).

### Obscure Questions

One of the immediate ‘obscure’ matters that the Universal House of Justice had to elucidate soon after its election was whether the institution of the Guardianship as an on-going institution had terminated or was it to be extended into the future. The House of

Justice's decision was conveyed on 6 October 1963. It read that "there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi" ( MUHJ 14). The decision had a preamble stating that the decision was taken after "prayerful and careful study of the Holy Texts" and consultation with the Hands of the Cause residing in the Holy Land. We could say that this was elucidation through legislation.

In the days of the Guardian the American National Spiritual Assembly asked Shoghi Effendi about the nature of the Court of Arbitration mentioned in the Writings. Shoghi Effendi's reply was as follows: "[R]egarding the nature and scope of the Universal Court of Arbitration , this and other similar matters will have to be explained and elucidated by the Universal House of Justice , to which, according to the Master's explicit Instructions, all important and fundamental questions must be referred" (BA 47). This would certainly be another form of elucidation through legislation.

### The House of Justice Explains

In one of its main messages, the Universal House of Justice dealt with the question of the difference between interpretation and elucidation. It would be best to end this essay by quoting the relevant section of that message on this subject:

There is a profound difference between the interpretations of the Guardian and the elucidations of the House of Justice in exercise of its function to "*deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book.*" The Guardian reveals what the Scripture means; his interpretation is a statement of truth which cannot be varied. Upon the Universal House of Justice, in the words of the Guardian, "has been conferred

the exclusive right of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the Bahá'í writings." Its pronouncements, which are susceptible of amendment or abrogation by the House of Justice itself, serve to supplement and apply the Law of God. Although not invested with the function of interpretation, the House of Justice is in a position to do everything necessary to establish the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh on this earth. Unity of doctrine is maintained by the existence of the authentic texts of Scripture and the voluminous interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi together with the absolute prohibition against anyone propounding "authoritative" or "inspired" interpretations or usurping the function of Guardian. Unity of administration is assured by the authority of the Universal House of Justice. (F64. WOB, p. 153.)

"Such," in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "is the immutability of His revealed Word. Such is the elasticity which characterizes the functions of His appointed ministers. The first preserves the identity of His Faith, and guards the integrity of His law. The second enables it, even as a living organism, to expand and adapt itself to the needs and requirements of an ever-changing society" (Letter dated 21 March 1930, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 23)" (MUHJ 56).

## Bahá'u'lláh's Persian Poems Written Before 1863

Julio Savi<sup>1</sup>

A provisional list of Bahá'u'lláh's Persian poems written before 1863 is provided. These poems are described as an early fruit of the mystical experiences Bahá'u'lláh had in the *Síyáh-Chál* of Teheran in October 1852. Those experiences produced in Him an irresistible 'fire of love' that He sang in those poems. Bahá'u'lláh's love was not a common love, it was "that spiritual attraction and that ecstatic love of the lovers of the Beauteous One for the beauty within their own self"<sup>2</sup>, which later on 'Abdu'l-Bahá described in His 'Commentary to the Tradition of the Hidden Treasure'. Bahá'u'lláh uses in these compositions the language of the ancient Persian mystical poets, but He also introduces new perspectives. Persian ancient mystical poems are mostly pervaded by an incurable feeling of separation and remoteness and by the consequent pain. Bahá'u'lláh also mentions the pains of the lover. They are the pains the lover should be ready to accept if he wants to come closer to his Beloved. The Beloved says to his lover: "If thine aim be to cherish thy life, approach not our court; / But if sacrifice be thy heart's desire, come and let others come with thee". However, whereas the pains of the lover in the ancient Persian poetry were hopeless, Bahá'u'lláh's poems also speak of the joys of nearness and reunion, which are made possible by the presence of the Beloved Himself Who "Like unto Joseph in Egypt, moves now through alleys and bazaars" and "hath renewed the world through His Cause, / And quickened the spirit of Jesus by His breath".

Bahá'u'lláh produced a great amount of Writings, "a hundred volumes" writes Shoghi Effendi (PDC 6). They are the core of Bahá'í Scripture.

Most of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings are in prose, only a few of them are in poetry. All these poetic works were seemingly written in the Iraqi period. Only one of them may have been completed in Adrianople.

### Scripture and poetry

All religions have sacred Texts written in poetry. Some of the poetical passages of the Scriptures of the various religions have become popular even outside the circles of their respective followers. Hindu Scriptures are very rich in poems. The Rig Veda and the Mahabharata (ca.500 BC) are written in poetry. The well-known Bhagavad Gita (Song of God), a part of the Mahabharata, is a poem, comprising 700 verses. As to Buddhism, the Dhammapada, the Theravada Jatakas and the Buddhacharita ('Acts of the Buddha') are poems. As to Zoroastrianism, many scholars think that Zarathustra was a poet-priest. The five Gathas, a word variously rendered as 'Hymns', 'poems', or 'psalms', supposedly composed by Zarathustra Himself (see Boyce, *Textual Sources* 2), and the 24 (Boyd, "Zoroastrianism" 110) or 21 (Gnoli, "La religione zoroastriana" 504) Yashts are poems. As to the Old Testament, three books of the Ketuvim, also known as Hagiographa, that is Psalms, Lamentations and Song of Songs, are grouped by the Jews under the name of 'Poetry Books'. As to the New Testament, although verses are not included in its canonical texts, there are a number of passages of poetical beauty, as for example the so called 'Song of Mary', also known as *Magnificat*, from the incipit of its Latin version (Luke 1:46–54, KJV), one of the eight most ancient Christian hymns. As to Islam, the Qur'án is not versified, but some of its pages sound, to our ears, as highly poetical. The poems written by Imám 'Alí also are part of the religious Islamic tradition. The Bahá'ís are familiar with two verses by Imám 'Alí, because they are quoted at the beginning of *The Secret of Divine Civilization*: "Dost thou think thyself only a puny form, when the universe is folded up within thee?" (SDC 19).

## Poetical Writings by Bahá'u'lláh

The poems written by Bahá'u'lláh, which the present writer has found in the main collections of Bahá'u'lláh's Arabic and Persian Writings available to the general public or whose existence is mentioned in public documents, are as follows.

1. *Rashh-i-'Amá'*:<sup>3</sup> Shoghi Effendi writes that this poem, composed of twenty one-rhymed couplets, was "revealed in Tíhrán," and is among "the first fruits of... [Bahá'u'lláh's] Divine Pen" (GPB 121). Therefore it may date back to His incarceration in the *Síyáh-Chál*. *Rashh-i-'Amá'* was translated by Stephen N. Lambden, an English Bahá'í scholar focusing on Shi'í Islam and Qajar Persia, early Shaykhism, the Writings of the Báb, the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, under the title of 'Sprinkling of the Cloud of Unknowing'.<sup>4</sup> Ramin Neshati, who also translated other Bahá'í Writings, wrote an introduction and translation of this poem, which he called "Tablet of the Mist of the Unknown".<sup>5</sup> Juan R. Cole, American historian of the modern Middle East and South Asia, translated it as 'Sprinkling of the Cloud Beyond Being'.<sup>6</sup> John Wiegley, a former student of philosophy at George Mason University, a poet, and a student of mysticism and of the Seven Valleys (2003), also translated it, as "The pre-eternal Reality poureth forth from Our ecstasy".<sup>7</sup>

2–10. Eight poems, published by the Iranian Bahá'í scholar 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd *Ishráq Khávarí* (1902–1972) in his multi-volume anthology of the Writings of the 'Central Figures' of the Bahá'í Faith *Má'idíy-i-Asmání* (4:176–211). *Ishráq Khávarí* in reality quotes the text of ten poems, because he also gives the texts of the above mentioned *Rashh-i-'Amá'* and of *Qaṣídiy-i-Varqá'íyyih*, an ode of 127 verses written in Arabic. Excerpts from these and other poems of Bahá'u'lláh are also included by the Iranian Bahá'í scholar Mírzá Asadu'lláh Fáḍíl *Mázandarání* (ca.1880–1957), in his *Taríkh Zubúru'l-Ḥaqq* (History of the Manifestation of Truth),

a nine volume history of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions (4:141–42). These poems have been most probably written in Kurdistan, where Bahá'u'lláh remained from 10 April 1854 to 19 March 1856 and, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words, "lived in poverty", wearing the "garments... of the poor and needy" and eating the "food... of the indigent and lowly" (Quoted in GPB 124). The attribution of the drafting of these poems to the years of His stay in Kurdistan, during which He was in touch with the local Sufi communities, seems confirmed by their *takhallus*, the nom de plume introduced in the final verse of the poems according to the use of Persian lyrics. All these poems are signed 'dervish' and in that period Bahá'u'lláh had adopted the surname of Darvish Muḥammad. Three of these poems are mentioned in the *Bahá'í World* volumes among 'Bahá'u'lláh Best Known Writings': Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, Qasídiy-i-Varqá'íyyih, and Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá. A provisional rhyming translation of Qasídiy-i-Varqá'íyyih has been undertaken by Cole, with the title 'Ode of the Dove'.<sup>8</sup> Brian Miller has published an unrhymed poetic version of this Ode in his Ph.D. dissertation (U.C. Berkeley, 2000). Franklin D. Lewis, an expert in Persian Language and Literature, especially Rúmí, has offered three different translations of Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá ('Short Poem' 86–9). Some of these poems, that is Bí jánán ján hamí daryaft, Sáqí bidih ábí, Mast-and bulbulán, are mentioned, and a few of their verses translated, by Lambden in his 'Sinaitic Mysteries' (116–7).

11. Ay Bulbulán:<sup>9</sup> This eleven verses poem, without *takhallus*, is ascribed by Fádíl-i-Mazandarání to the Kurd period (*Taríkh Zuhúru'l-Haqq* 4:142). A partial translation of this poem is authored by Cole.<sup>10</sup>

12. Mathnaví-i-Mubárák:<sup>11</sup> According to Lewis this 318 verses poem "was evidently composed over a period of time, beginning perhaps as early as his retreat to Iraqi Kurdistan, and certainly by his time in Baghdad, but completed only after his arrival in Istanbul" ('Short Poem' 83). He suggests that this work "is apparently the longest

work he composed in verse, and perhaps also one of the last, though the dating of many of his books, tablets, poems and his voluminous correspondence remains rather tentative" ('Poetry as Revelation' 103). A provisional verse translation with annotations of this poem made by the same Lewis and accompanied by an introduction has been published in 2000.<sup>12</sup>

13. The Research Department of the Universal House of Justice mentions in one of its letters a Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh that begins with the words, "In My Name, the Humourist [*al-mazzah*] [provisional translation]". The Research Department clarifies that this Tablet

is a serious mystical poem, revealed in the form of a prayer. The text does not illuminate the reference to the 'Humourist'. It is, however, interesting to note that, while dealing with an exalted theme, the language of expression is, unexpectedly, that of the common people—light, simple, and even colloquial.<sup>13</sup>

This Tablet has been recently published by Vahid Rafati, director of the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre, in his book *Yádnámiy-i-Baydáy-i-Núrá* (171).

14. A poem beginning with the words Sáqí, bi-dih án jám-i-Huva Hú (Quoted in Rafatí, *Yádnámih* 170)

In conclusion we have found 14 poems written by Bahá'u'lláh. Only one of these poems is in Arabic, *Qaṣīdiy-i-Varqá'íyyih*. Only *Mathnaviy-i-Mubárák* was completed when Bahá'u'lláh had already left Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

As to the Writings by Bahá'u'lláh listed by Lewis among those, which "observe some, but not all, of the rules of classical metrics and prosody [and]... transcend the category of rhymed prose [*nathr-i Musajja'*] and



exhibit litany-like features that might be classed as a form of versification [*nāzm*] or quasi-verse" ('Short Poem' 83), they comprise:<sup>15</sup>

1. Subḥana Rabbiya'l-A'lá:<sup>16</sup> This 45 verses Tablet, written in Arabic, part in prose and part in poetry, was composed in Baghdad and translated by Cole as 'Praised be My Lord, the Most High'.<sup>17</sup> Taherzadeh writes about it:

He portrays in dramatic terms the appearance before Him of the 'Maid of Heaven', personifying the 'Most Great Spirit', and alludes to His own Revelation in such terms as no pen can describe. The whole Tablet conveys in symbolic language the joyous tidings of the advent of the Day of God, at the same time warning the faithful to beware of tests which will befall them, causing many to be deprived of attaining to His glory and grace. (*Revelation* 1:212)

2. Lawḥ-i-Ghulámu'l-Khuld:<sup>18</sup> This Tablet, written partly in Arabic and partly in Persian, was written in the early 1860s in Baghdad "to celebrate the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb" (Taherzadeh 1:213) and translated by John Walbridge, an expert of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, as the 'Tablet of the Deathless Youth'.<sup>19</sup>

3. Ḥúr-i-'Ujáb:<sup>20</sup> This Tablet, written in Arabic, was composed in Baghdad "as the year 1863 drew closer" (Taherzadeh 1:210). It was translated by Cole as the 'Hour of Wonder'<sup>21</sup> and by Denis MacEoin, a novelist and a former lecturer in Islamic studies, as 'Litany by Baha'Allah' (*Rituals* 132–3), and commented upon by Walbridge (*Sacred Acts* 239) and Taherzadeh (*Revelation* 1:218).

4. Lawḥ-i-Malláhu'l-Quds, 'The Tablet of the Holy Mariner':<sup>22</sup> This Tablet divided into two parts, one in Arabic and the other in Persian, was revealed in Baghdad just before Naw Rúz 1863 (see GPB 147). The Arabic part has been translated into English by Shoghi Effendi

and originally published in *Star of the West*,<sup>23</sup> with the following note, "received in America in April 1922". Michael W. Sours, who has authored several books dealing with the Bahá'í Faith and Christianity, has published a study of this Tablet.<sup>24</sup>

5. Lawḥ-i-Bulbulu'l-Firáq:<sup>25</sup> This Tablet, written in Arabic and Persian, was composed, according to *Ishráq Khávarí* and Taherzadeh (*Revelation* 1:244–5), in the late period of Baghdad and, according to Cole, in Istanbul. Cole has translated it as 'Nightingale of Separation'.<sup>26</sup> Taherzadeh writes about it: "Bahá'u'lláh reminds His loved ones that the period of union has come to an end, that the Nightingale of Paradise has taken its flight from one branch and is now about to establish its nest on another" (*Revelation* 1:244–5).

6. Az Bágh-i-Ilahí:<sup>27</sup> According to Taherzadeh this ode, composed by 31 couples of verses, one in Persian and one in Arabic, was "revealed not long before the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh" (*Revelation* 1:218).

7. Lawḥ-i-Halih, Halih, Halih, Yá Bishárat:<sup>28</sup> This 26 verses poem was presumably revealed in the spring of 1863 in Baghdad, just a short time before Bahá'u'lláh's declaration in the Garden of Ridván.<sup>29</sup> A provisional translation of this poem was offered by Lambden in 1983.<sup>30</sup> Another more metrical version was made by Sen McGlinn, the author of the so called Leiden list of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets.<sup>31</sup>

8. A "Tablet of the Feast of Ridván":<sup>32</sup> It is an Arabic Tablet translated by Ali-Kuli Khan (ca.1879–1966), eminent Iranian Bahá'í and the first to translate into English some of the most important works of Bahá'u'lláh, and his daughter Marzieh Gail (1908–1993), an eminent Bahá'í writer and translator, who wrote the following note: "This tablet was revealed by Bahá'u'lláh when He Declared Himself to be recited at the Feast of Ridwan".<sup>33</sup>

9. Subhánika-Yá-Hú, known as Lawḥ-i-Náqús:<sup>34</sup> It is an Arabic Tablet “revealed in Constantinople on the eve of the 5th of Jamádiyu’l-Avval 1280 A.H. (19 October 1863), the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb” (Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 2:18). It was translated by MacEoin as the ‘Tablet of the Bell’ (*Rituals* 169–72) and by Lambden as the ‘Tablet of the Bell’.<sup>35</sup>

10. Lawḥ-i-Ru’yá:<sup>36</sup> Described by Shoghi Effendi as the “Tablet of the Vision” (GPB 221), it was revealed in Arabic on the eve of 1 March 1873, in the House of ‘Údí Kḥammár in ‘Ákká, translated by Lambden<sup>37</sup> and Cole.<sup>38</sup> An earlier translation of this Tablet appeared in *Bahá’í Scriptures*, under the title ‘The Tablet of the Virgin’ (249–51, sec. 525). Taherzadeh writes about it:

In the Lawḥ-i-Ru’yá Bahá’u’lláh describes His vision of a Maiden dressed in white and illumined with the light of God. She entered the room in which Bahá’u’lláh was seated upon His throne of Lordship. She displayed an indescribable enthusiasm and devotion, circled around Him, was enraptured by the inebriation of His Presence, was thunderstruck at His Glory. And when she recovered, she remained in a state of bewilderment. She longed to offer up her life for her Beloved and finding Him captive in the hands of the unfaithful, she bade Him leave ‘Ákká to its inhabitants and repair to His other dominions ‘whereon the eyes of the people of names have never fallen’, words which found their fulfilment nineteen years later with the ascension of Bahá’u’lláh. In the absence of a translation it is not possible to convey the beauty of the verses and the mystery of the subject revealed in the Lawḥ-i-Ru’yá. The theme of this Tablet is as enchanting as it is unfathomable and mysterious. (*Revelation* 3:223)

The contents of this Tablet is summarized by Wallbridge as prophesizing “Bahá’u’lláh’s death” (*Sacred* 161).

11. Lawḥ-i Anta'l-Káfi, literally, 'Tablet of "Thou the Sufficing", known as the Long Healing Prayer:<sup>39</sup> The authorized English translation from the original Arabic of this Tablet was published on 13 August 1980.<sup>40</sup>

12. Lawḥ-i-Qad-Iḥṭaraqa'l-Mukhlisún, known as 'The Fire Tablet' (Quoted in *Risáliy-i-Taṣbīḥ va Tablíl* 219–24; *Adí'iy-i-Ḥaḍrat-i-Maḥbúb* 169–79; INBA 30; *Nafahat-i Faḍl* 2): the authorized English translation from the original Arabic of this Tablet was published on 13 August 1980.<sup>41</sup> It is discussed in Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 3:226–30; Balyuzi, *King* 321–22; Cole, 'Modernity' 94.

13. A poetic composition beginning with the words *Shams-i-jamál-i-iláhi* (Quoted in INBA 32:31–4): this Arabic composition in rhyming prose is described by Lambden, who translated a part of it, as possibly "written by Bahá'u'lláh for His disciple Darvish Šidq- 'Alí Qazvíní" ('Sinitic Mysteries' 125) in the Iraqi period. McGlinn mentions it as 'Lawh-i Shajara (Tablet of the Burning Bush)' ('Leiden List', no.270), possibly because it refers to the 'Sinitic Lote-Tree' (quoted in Lambden 'Sinitic Mysteries' 126). It has been provisionally translated by Necati Alkan, an expert in Turkish Bahá'í Studies, in 2003–2007, as 'Tablet on the Daystar of Divine Beauty'.<sup>42</sup>

### Possible reasons why Bahá'u'lláh composed His poems

It is very difficult for us to understand the reasons why Bahá'u'lláh has decided to compose these poems, because it is impossible for us to enter into a Mind so deep and incomparable. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said about it: "This universal mind is divine; it embraces existing realities, and it receives the light of the mysteries of God" (SAQ 218, sec. 58, para.4). The following reflections are purely personal and exploratory.

First of all it seems that Bahá'u'lláh loved poetry very much. We can deduce it from the numerous quotations from ancient poets He introduced into His Works, especially the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys: Faríd ad-Dín 'Attár (1117–1290), whose model of the Seven Valleys He decided to reproduce and whose verses He quoted in the Seven Valleys (SV8) and the Four Valleys (FV64); Khájjih Shamsu'd-Dín Muḥammad Ḥáfiz-i-Shírází (ca.1318–1390), whose famous *ghazal*, “Sugar-shattering... have become all the parrots... of Hindustan” (*Divān* 310, no.158, v.3), He quoted at the beginning of His Tablet known as Lawḥ-i-Shikar-Shikan Shikand; Siyyid Aḥmad Hátif (unknown–1783), whose verses He quoted in the Seven Valleys (SV12, 38); 'Umar Ibn al-Fárid (1182–1235), whose verses He quoted in the Seven Valleys (SV30, 42) and Jawáhiru'l-Asrár (JA67 and 69); Mawláná Jalál ad-Dín Rúmí (1207–1273); Muṣlih ad-Dín Sa'dí (ca.1184–1291), whose verses He quoted in the Seven Valleys (SV24) and the Four Valleys (FV47, 48, 48-9, 55-6, and 65) and upon whose verse, “Wonder not, if my Best-Beloved be closer to me than mine own self; wonder at this, that I, despite such nearness, should still be so far from Him”, He commented in a Tablet;<sup>43</sup> Majdúd Saná'í (ca.1045–ca.1141), whose verses He quoted in the Four Valleys (FV52, 60) and in Lawḥ-i-Ra'ís (SLH 170). It seems that Bahá'u'lláh loved especially Rúmí, considering that He quoted him more often than all the others. Perhaps this love moved Him to write His Own *Mathnaví*, a poem that “in addition to the title and the trope of the reed pipe which opens Rumi's *Mathnaví* and closes Bahá'u'lláh's, shares the same metre” (Lewis, 'Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví*' 116). Besides, He devoted part of His Lawḥ-i-Salmán (see *GWB*, sec. XXI, CXLVIII, CLIV) to a comment upon a verse by Rúmí (*Mathnaví* 1:2466):

When the colourless became enmeshed in colours || a Moses  
came in conflict with a Moses.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover 'Abdu'l-Bahá narrates, in His description of the life of Ustád Ismá'íl, one of the companions who followed Bahá'u'lláh in the Holy Land, that:

At one time, Bahá'u'lláh had written down an ode of Rúmí's for him, and had told him to turn his face toward the Báb and sing the words, set to a melody. And so as he wandered through the long dark nights, Ustád would sing these lines:

I am lost, O Love, possessed and dazed,  
[Ay 'ishq man-am az tú sar-gash<sup>h</sup>tih-u sawdá'í]

Love's fool am I, in all the earth.  
[va andar hamiy-i-'álam mashhúr bi shaydá'í]

They call me first among the crazed,  
[dar námiy-i-majnúnán az nám-i-man ágházand]

Though I once came first for wit and worth.  
[zín pish agar búd-am sar daftar-i-dáná'í]

O Love, who sellest me this wine,  
[Ay bádi<sup>h</sup> furúsh-i-man]

O Love, for whom I burn and bleed,  
[sar máyiy-i-júsh-i-man]

Love, for whom I cry and pine—  
[Ay az tú khurúsh-i-man]

Thou the Piper, I the reed.  
[man náyam-u tú náyy]

If Thou wishest me to live,  
[Gar zindigí-am khwábi]

Through me blow Thy holy breath.  
[dar man nafasí dar dam]

The touch of Jesus Thou wilt give  
[man murdiy-i-šad sálih]

To me, who've lain an age in death.  
[tú ján-i-masíh<sup>á</sup>'í]

Thou, both End and Origin,  
[*Avval-i-tú-vu ákhir tú*]

Thou without and Thou within—  
[*ẓáhir-i-tú-vu bátin tú*]

From every eye Thou hidest well,  
[*mastúr zi har chashmí*]

And yet in every eye dost dwell.  
[*dar 'ayn-i-huvyadá'í*] (MF 30–1)<sup>45</sup>

Thus it is possible that Bahá'u'lláh wrote His poems just because of His love for poetry.

Two other practical reasons could be that in those early years Bahá'u'lláh was mostly addressing Sufi audiences who had a great familiarity with mystical poetry. And moreover poetry is very easy to memorize.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote about poetry in His *Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd*:

Every word of thy poetry is indeed like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion and love thou cherishest for God and His chosen ones are reflected (TB175–6, *Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd*)

He describes poetry as a mirror of the feelings of the heart. We could therefore think that His mystical experiences in the *Síyáh-Chál* aroused in Him the urgency to speak about them to others, as it happens to whoever has a mystical experience, as different as the level of such experience may be for them when compared with the level of that of the Manifestation of God. However, since He perceived that human beings were not yet ready to receive His open Declaration, He preferred to adopt the veiled language of mystical poetry. For the same reason, He seemingly stopped writing poems in later years, when He had already declared and proclaimed His Mission. In

this sense the invitation to keep silence that recurs at the end of a number of His poems could be, not much a mere rhetorical device, but the reflection of an inner tension between the impulse to reveal the secret of the Intimation received in the *Síyáh-Chál*, even at the cost of His life (see *Báz áv-u bi-dih*, v. 12, quoted in MA 4:187), an impulse generated by a great compassion for the world that “is consumed by the flame of the burning Divine Flame [*súkht az in shu'liy-i-ján-súz ilahí*]” (*Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 15, quoted in MA 4:211), and the awareness of the immaturity of the times (see *Sahar ámad bi bistar-am yár*, v. 34, quoted in MA 4:184).

In this respect His poems are as windows opened on His heart and His recent mystical experiences. We can thus expect them to reveal the human aspects of His nature. This expectation is seemingly confirmed by the words of Shoghi Effendi who describes

the odes He revealed, whilst wrapped in His devotions during those days of utter seclusion, and... the prayers and soliloquies which, in verse and prose, both in Arabic and Persian, poured from His sorrow-laden soul. . . [as] initial and impassioned outpourings of a Soul struggling to unburden itself, in the solitude of a self-imposed exile (many of them, alas lost to posterity). (GPB 120, 121, sec. 7, para.36)

His intimist verses, that is His verses that deal “chiefly with intimate and private especially psychological experiences”,<sup>46</sup> are many indeed:

Through the window of the soul I behold the cheek of the Beloved [*Az rawzan-i-ján bínám rukhsáriy-i-Jánán-rá*]. (*Báz áv-u bi-dih*, v. 2, Quoted in MA 4:186)

I have lost the way and Thou art a brilliant Flame [*Man gum-shudih ráh-am, Tú Shu'liy-i-núrání*]. (*Ishq az Sidriy-i-A'lá ámad*, v. 8, quoted in MA 4:179)



I am drunk of Thee, 'cause of Thee I am on everyone's lips  
[*Man khúd zi Tú am makhmúr, ham az Tú shudam mashbhúr*].  
(Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 13, quoted in MA 4:193)

The poem Saḥar ámad bi bistar-am yár, especially verses 19 e 29, is a confession, where Bahá'u'lláh lays bare His heart:

In my love for Thee I have received many an arrow of cruelty, || And I have fallen into the hands of the infidels. [*Gar chih zi 'ishq-at basí tír-i-jafá khúrdam || Ham gashtih asír-i-dast-i-kuffár*]. (Saḥar ámad bi bistar-am yár, v. 19, quoted in MA 4:182)

The Birds of Eternity have returned to their nest, || We have remained downtrodden and abject here on earth [*Atyár-i-Baqá bi-áshyán bar-gashtand, || Má mándih dar ín turáb basí dhalíl u khwár*]. (Saḥar ámad bi bistar-am yár, v. 29, quoted in MA 4:183)

The same thing is true for the poem But-i-má ámad, which from verse 22 on describes a mystical vision of great beauty. Verse 32 is especially intimist:

My mind did not find its way. || My thought stepped back  
[*Dhihn-am na-burdih ráh bi-já'í, || Fikrat-am az sayr basí vámandih*]. (Quoted in MA 4:191)

One gets the impression that Bahá'u'lláh really wanted to show His hidden thoughts. This feature makes those poems especially precious for all them who are eager to become more familiar with the figure of Bahá'u'lláh and with the human aspect of a Personage Who is known especially through Works that He wrote with the majesty and the authority of the “divine teacher” (SAQ 11, sec. 3, para.13).

As to a didactic intent, many passages convey useful advice for whoever wants to tread the mystical path, that in Bahá'í terms is the path of spirituality, that is pursuing the development of the spiritual quality potentially present in each soul. Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá, from distich 4 to distich 9, is an invitation to detachment, in its various forms, detachment from the things of the world, detachment from the self, detachment from anything but Him. There are suggestions for the mystic path in poem But-i-má ámad as well:

First, watch your language. || Then, curb and calm down your fancy [*Avval tu dahán bar-band zi guftár, || Ham zi khayál-at shú sákin u ásúdíh*].

Set thy heart free from exteriority. || Be inwardly pure and excellent [*Ham tu bi-shú díl-rá zán-chih buvad záhír, || Van-gáh zi báṭín shú pák u guzídih*]. (But-i-má ámad, v. 11–2, quoted in MA 4:189)

An echo of these words sounds in the Kitáb-i-Íqán:

He must never seek to exalt himself above any one, must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vainglory, must cling unto patience and resignation, observe silence, and refrain from idle talk. For the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endure a century. (KI 192)

We could finally suppose that Bahá'u'lláh, “the True Educator, and the Spiritual Teacher” (ESW 143), indulged His poetical vein, conscious that future poets and artists may have taken them as models from which they may draw inspiration. His poems are not many, but they

present a great variety of highly inspiring metaphors. His language, enriched by the best images of the ancient Persian mystical poetry, is free from that cloyingness which Persian lyric poetry sometimes conveys in its excessive uses of stereotypes. His images are not lifeless rhetorical devices, but a living and transparent instrument, indispensable to express mystical meanings, which cannot be described with the usual language of doctrinal prose. These images, rich in visual suggestions as they are, will inflame the imagination of future artists, not only of the pen, but also of the paintbrush and of the chisel.

The 'dewdrops of the Realms Above [*Rashh-i-'Amá*], the 'Ocean of purity [*Bahr-i-ṣafá*]' and the 'billow of His Presence [*mawj-i-liqá*]' of *Rashh-i-'Amá* (v.1 and 1.4, quoted in Rafati, *Áthár* 59); 'God's crimson flame that sets the world on fire [*Nára'llah-i-ḥamrá'i kátash zadí imkán-rá*]' of *Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí* (v. 4, quoted in MA 4:187); 'the expanses of the Placeless beneath the shade of the Lord of power [*faḍá'i-lá-makán dar zill-i-Sáhib-i-Iqtidár*]' of *Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá* (v. 14, quoted in MA 4:211); 'the rose-garden of eternity [*gulshán-i-báqí*]' and the 'breeze of forgiveness [*Bád-i-ghaffárí*]', the mysterious 'Lote of the nearness of God [*Sidriy-i-Qurb-i-Ilah*]' and the 'running herd of His gazelles in the desert of Oneness [*davad dar barr-i-Vahdat galliy-i-áhúy-i-ú*]' of *Bi-Jánán ján hamí dar-yáft* (v. 9, 17 and 19, quoted in MA 4:177–78); the 'spark of... [His] face [*shu'lih zi rúy-at*]' that falls on 'the rose-bush of the spirit [*gul-bun-i-ján*]' lighting its beauty 'as a vermilion tulip [*chún láliy-i-nu'mání*]' of *Sáqí, bi-dih ábí* (v. 16, quoted in MA 4:193); the sky that fills a 'skirt with pearls [*dámán-i-gawhar*]' of *Saḥar ámad bi bistar-am yár* (v. 16, quoted in MA 4:186); the 'season of flowers and roses [*Faṣl-i-gul-u gulzár*]', the Beloved that moves 'through alleys and bazaars [*kúchih-u bázár*]', the 'stores of all lovers [*bázár jumlih 'áshiqán*]' turned 'into spice shops [*dakkiy-i-'attár*]' of *Ay bulbulán* (1, 4 and 6, quoted in AA 4:200)—these are but a few examples of images that can stimulate the imagination of an artist and inspire him to express the feelings aroused in his heart through the instruments of his art.

## Love poems

The mystical experiences that Bahá'u'lláh had in the Síyáh-Chál of Teheran in October 1852 kindled in Him an irresistible 'fire of love [*nár-i-'ishqí*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 4) that He sang in the poems He wrote in Iraq. This love that Bahá'u'lláh had conceived in that obscure prison was not a common love, it was that 'essence of love', which He later on described in His Words of Wisdom:

The essence of love is for man to turn his heart to the Beloved One, and sever himself from all else but Him, and desire naught save that which is the desire of his Lord. (TB 155, *Aṣl-i-Kullu'l-Khayr*)

We may find a doctrinal explanation of this 'essence of love' born in the heart of Bahá'u'lláh in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's 'Commentary to the Tradition of the Hidden Treasure [*Sharḥ-i-Ḥadīth-i-Kuntu Kanzan Makḥfiyan*]'.<sup>47</sup> In that treatise 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions five stages of love. The fifth stage as described by Him is not mentioned in the Sufi classical works. He describes this stage as

that spiritual attraction and that ecstatic love of the lovers of the Beauteous One for the beauty within their own self.

It is to be counted as a station and a stage of Affection from the state of unification towards unification.

In this stage the traveller leaves the wilderness of annihilation and perplexed wandering... sees the glimmering of the effulgences of the Beauteous One shining from the dawn of his own beauty... [and] sees his own beauty annihilated in the Beauty of the True One and finds the Beauty of the True One enduring in the beauty of his self. ('Commentary' 18–19, provisional translation)

'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear that the fifth stage of love pertains to the Manifestations of God. However, He explains,

the effulgences of this station shine forth from these Suns onto the mirrors of the realities of the wayfarers and seekers. Thus if the mirrors of the heart be freed from the dust of the worlds of plurality and limitations then the effulgences of this station will be imprinted upon it. And if the window of the soul and the lamp of the heart become purified and refined through the power of holy souls, the light of Divine Bounty will be kindled within it. ('Commentary' 19–20, provisional translation)

The possibility of catching a glimpse of this special love, 'that ecstatic love of the lovers of the Beauteous One for the beauty within their own self', makes these poems very precious, because they may be a source of inspiration for any person who is striving to arise towards His supernal Worlds through her daily actions of service.

The 'beauty within... [His] own self', that Bahá'u'lláh loved so much is variously described in His poems. In *Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá* it is the Cup-Bearer [*Sáqí*] Who offers the 'Wine of Eternal Life [*Khamr-i-Báqí*]' (v. 1, quoted in MA 4:209). In '*Ishq az Sidriy-A'lá* it is Love itself [*Ishq*] that offers 'the cup of affliction [*jám-i-balá*]' (v. 1, quoted in MA 4:179). In *Bi-Jánán ján hamí dar-yáft* it is the Beloved [*Jánán*] Who draws to Himself the lover through the effluvia of His perfume (v. 1, quoted in MA 4:176). In *Sáqí, bi-dih ábí* it is again the Cup-Bearer [*Sáqí*], Who offers a Wine that is of water and of fire (v. 1–2, quoted in MA 4:192). In *Mast-and bulbulán* it is once more the Beloved [*Jánán*], Who sends his lover into rapture with the song of His *Yá Hú* (v. 1–2, quoted in MA 4:194). In *Saḥar ámad bi bistar-am* it is the Friend [*Yár*], Who goes at the bedside of the Lover, thin and pale because of the love sickness that consumes him, and comforts him with His sweet words (v. 1, quoted in MA 4:181). In

But-i-má ámad it is the Idol or Charmer [*But*], so handsome, Who comes and gives His wise advice (v. 1f, quoted in MA 4:188f). In Ay bulbulán it is 'He Who was invisible [*Ghayb*]', come to bring a new springtime (v. 1, quoted in AA 4:200).

Verse after verse Bahá'u'lláh strings the pearls of His images, creating oneiric atmospheres resounding of angelical voices, like 'the warbling of Tíhrán [*ghunniy-i-Tá*]' (Rashh-i-'amá, v. 10, quoted in Rafati, *Áthár* 59); drawing dreamy landscapes like 'the garden's ecstasy [*hálát-i-bustán*]' and 'the rapture of creation [*jadhbiy-i-hastan*]' (Rashh-i-'amá, v. 18, quoted in Rafati, *Áthár* 59). These sceneries are rich in colours, as 'the eye of twilight... turned pomegranate [*chashm-i-shafaq gulnár*]' (Saḥar ámad bi bistar-am yár, v. 9, quoted in MA 4:181), and soaked with perfumes, like the 'stores of all lovers... turned into spice shops [*shikkar-i-la'l-ash, 'iyán chún dakkiiy-i-'attár shud*]' (Ay bulbulán, v. 6, quoted in AA 4:200). They offer a glimpse of a nature translucent with infinite, like the 'running herd of His gazelles in the desert of Oneness [*davad dar barr-i-Vahdat galliy-i-áhúy-i-ú*]' (Bi-Jánán ján hamí dar-yáft, v. 19, quoted in MA 4:178) or the sky that 'has filled its skirt with pearls, || To lay it down at the feet [*dámán-i-gawhar zán girift, || Tá kunad bar maqdam-i-'izzat niḥár*]' (Saḥar ámad bi bistar-am yár, v. 16 MA 4:182) of the Beloved. At the same time His verses give important lessons of life:

If thou art not annihilated to the qualities of existence, O man of the path, || How wilt thou sip the wine of eternal life from that sweet Idol's ruby lips [*Tá na-gardí fání az vaşf-i-vujúd, ay mard-i-ráb, || Kí chashí khamr-i-Baqá az la'l-i-núshín-i-Nigár*? (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 5, quoted in MA 4:210)

or

Purify thyself in the crucible of oneness || And I will give thee two or three glasses of this wine [*Chún kih shudí kháli*

*az bútiy-i-vaḥdat, || Án-gah du sih paymáníh daham-at zín bádíh*]. (But-i-má ámad, v. 13, quoted in MA 4:189)

Bahá'u'lláh draws from the entire repertoire of the ancient Persian poetry, mixing the Anacreontic, love, spring and mystical motifs of the *ghazal* and the didactic themes of the *qaṣídih*. The result is a phantasmagoria of images, colors, sounds, and scents that hushes the mind and touches the heart. Therefore these poems, even if read in a paraphrase and not in an adequate translation, seem an excellent instrument to create that attitude of meditation and prayer which the Bahá'í Writings highly recommend, because, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words

Remembrance of God is like the rain and dew which bestow freshness and grace on flowers and hyacinths, revive them and cause them to acquire fragrance, redolence and renewed charm. 'And thou hast seen the earth dried up and barren: but when We send down the rain upon it, it stirreth and swelleth, and groweth every kind of luxuriant herb'. Strive thou, then, to praise and glorify God by night and by day, that thou mayest attain infinite freshness and beauty. (Quoted in CC 2:232, sec. 1745)

### Love in Persian mystical poetry and in these poems by Bahá'u'lláh

'That ecstatic love of the lovers of the Beauteous One for the beauty within their own self' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Commentary' 18–19, provisional translation), that is Bahá'u'lláh's love for the Most Great Spirit, is described in these poems according to the stylistics of Persian mystic poetry. However, there are great conceptual differences. In the Works He wrote in the Iraqi period, Bahá'u'lláh adopted the ciphers of Sufism and, at first sight, He seems to share its concepts. In reality,

He immediately opened the door to many changes. He already did it in these early poetical compositions. He did it more completely in His two Epistles, the Seven Valleys [*Haft Vádí*] and the Four Valleys [*Chihar Vádí*] that He wrote sometime after His return to Baghdad from Kurdistan in 1856. He did it in the Hidden Words that He composed in 1858, and in the Kitáb-i-Íqán “revealed within the space of two days and two nights, in the closing years of that period (1278 A.H.–1862 A.D.)” (GPB 138, sec. 8, para.25). We will thus briefly illustrate the concepts of love of God, as well as of the Beloved and the lover, in the Sufi literature and in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, and we will try to highlight their similitude and differences.

### **The concept of love**

The concept of love for God has been introduced into the Islamic world as early as the second century of the Hegira by the Iraqi Sufi poet Rábi'a al-'Adawiyya (ca.714–801). At the beginning this concept of the love of God was opposed in the Muslim world, because people thought it to imply an excessive intimacy between human beings, mean creatures, and their Creator, Absolute and Unknowable Essence. However the resemblance between mystical love and human love is such that, finally, this concept took off and many poets sang this feeling. The descriptions of a number of these poets became in the course of time so realistic that, as Schimmel puts it, “one of the questions that has been discussed frequently in connection with Persian lyrical poetry is whether this literature should be interpreted as mystical or as erotic” (*Mystical Dimensions* 288). According to Bausani these two positions can be both acceptable depending on the poet (see *Religion in Iran* 273).

These disquisitions do not apply to the poems by Bahá'u'lláh. It seems very clear today that the Beloved of those poems is the Most Great Spirit. It seems difficult today not to consider *Rashh-i-'Amá* as a joyous announcement of the encounter with the Spirit in an



extraordinary 'divine rapture [*jadhbiy-i-lahúti*]' (v. 7, quoted in Rafati, *Áthár* 59), that draws the Poet to proclaim:

The Era of 'I am He' shone forth from Our Countenance. ||  
 The Cycle of 'He is He' rolls out from the effusion of Bahá  
 [Bá] [*Dawr-i-Aná Hú' az Chihriy-i-Má kardih burúz, ||*  
*Kawr-i-Huva Hú' az tafhiy-i-Bá mí-rízád*]. (v. 8, quoted in  
 Rafati, *Áthár* 59)

The same is true in the case of the poem Mast-and bulbulán (see MA 4:194–6), with its significant *radif, yá Húy-i-ú*. The description of the Beloved in verses 6–19 of the poem Sáqí, bi-dih abí also suggests that the Beloved is a sublime Entity (see MA 4:192–3). Other verses that also seem to announce the descent of the Most Great Spirit are:

Thou art Jesus' breath. Thou art Moses' bush. || Thou art  
 God's crimson flame that sets the world on fire [*Ham nafkhiy-*  
*i-'Ísá'í, ham sidriy-i-Músá'í. || Nára'llah-i-ḥamrá'í kátash zadí*  
*imkán-rá*]. (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 4, quoted in MA 4:187)

Marvel not that the lover fell into His snare, || The necks  
 of the Monarchs of the spirit are caught in His curly locks  
 [*Ín 'ajab níst kih 'áshiq bih kamand-ash uftádih. || Gardan-i-*  
*Sháhán-i-ján andar kham-i-gísúy-i-ú*].

Out of love for His cheek Moses hastened to the Sinai of the  
 inner meaning, || The Jesus of the Spirit was risen by His  
 cheering breath [*Músi az 'ishq-i-Rukh-ash dar Túr-i-má'ní mí-*  
*shítáft, || 'Ísíy-i-ján zindih ámad az dam-i-dil-júy-i-ú*]. (Bi-Jánán  
 ján hamí dar-yáft, v. 6–7, quoted in MA 4:177)

### The image of the Beloved

In Sufi poems the lover yearns to go closer to the Beloved. But the Beloved is the Absolute and thus He is described as aloof,

unapproachable, indifferent to the lover's proffer of love. Therefore the lover laments His cruelty that makes him suffer. Ḥáfíẓ for example asks the Beloved:

O my soul! From stone-heartedness, why shatterest thou ||  
The feeble heart which, through feebleness, is [fragile] like  
crystal. (*Dívān* 233, no.111, v. 6; Persian: *Dívān*, 'Ghazalyát',  
no. 97, v. 6)

The lover also laments the Beloved's changeableness. Rúmí writes in this vein:

One moment you brand me, the next you draw me into the  
garden [*bágh*]. (*Mystical Poems* 2:16, no. 221, v. 8; *Dívān*,  
'Ghazalyát', no. 1786, v.8)

This is *náz*, the coquetry "of the Beloved who pretends to surrender, but never yields, who responds with his whims, his unfaithfulness, his arrogance, and his cruelty to the mercy invoked by his lovers " (Saccone, 'Introduzione' 41).

Bahá'u'lláh also adopts the language of the Beloved's remoteness and cruelty. The Beloved is erratic and plays with the lover, whom He sometimes binds to Himself, sometimes ignores. The Beloved tortures the lover [*áshiq*]: the snake of His tresses sucks the blood of his heart and soul (see *Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí*, v. 10, quoted in MA 4:187). With His 'blood-shedding eyebrow [*abrúy-i-khún-ríz*]' (*Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí*, v. 9, quoted in MA 4:187) He kills the lover and asks him to throw his head at His feet:

If thine aim be to cherish thy life, approach not our court;  
|| But if sacrifice be thy heart's desire, come and let others  
come with thee [*Gar khayál-i-ján hamí hast-at bi-díl, injá*

*ma-yá, || Gar nithár ján va dil dári, bí-á va ham bí-ár*]. (Sáqi az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 7–8, quoted in MA 4:210)

In the poems written by Bahá'u'lláh, however, the Beloved seems more indulgent. The pains He causes to His lover have mystical, rather than earthly, features. His cruelty is but a poetical device. The Beloved Who wants the sacrifice of the lover in reality wants him to renounce the inferior qualities of his material nature, those qualities which in the Bahá'í Writings are described as 'the insistent self [*nafs-i-ammarih*], the evil promptings of the human heart' (SWAB 256, sec. 206, *Muntakhabátí* 247). It is that which Madame Jeanne Marie Bouvier de La Motte Guyon (1648–1717) called 'mystical death'. In her words:

Death has various names, according to our different manner of expression or conception. It is called a *departure*, that is, a separation from Self in order that we may pass into God; a *loss*, total and entire, of the Will of the creature, which causes the Soul to be wanting to itself, that it may exist only in God. ('Concise View', para.43)

Mystical death is the price that should be paid to come closer to the Beloved. The lover's pains are therefore the unavoidable consequence of the intoxication of love, that draws the lover to accept any agony, so that he may come closer to his Beloved. It is the pain of one's struggle against the emotions of the natal self, in order to master them and bend them towards the direction recommended by the Beloved, so that one may fulfill in one's life 'His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue' (AHW).

### **The image of the lover**

In Sufi poems the lover, in his unremitting longing for the Beloved, unapproachable and cruel as He is, is unavoidably overpowered by feelings of remoteness and pain. The Algerian anthropologist and

psychoanalyst Malek Chebel, an archaeologist of the world of the Arabian and Islamic imagination, writes that for those poets love

is experienced as a consuming passion, as remoteness and pain. These three elements pervade the mythology of the chaste love of Platonists [*al-Ḥubb al-'Uḏhrí*], a bitter love, conducive to anguish, nourished by waiting, gnawed by torments of the soul and tortures of the body. (Chebel 204–5)

Ḥáfiz devoted an entire *ghazal* to the leitmotiv of separation:

The reed's tongue hath no desire for the explanation of separation [*faráq*] || If not, to thee, I give the explanation of the tale of separation.

Alas! Life's span, in hope of union || Hath reached to an end; and to an end, hath not come the time of separation (*Dīvān* 603, no. 351, vv.1–2; Persian: *Díván*, 'Ghazalyát', no. 297, vv. 1–2).

As to pain, Ḥáfiz wrote in one of his *ghazals*:

For our pain [*dard*], is no remedy [*darmán*], Justice! || For our separation [*hijr*] is no end, Justice!

Religion and the heart, they ravish; and make design upon our life: || Justice! against the tyranny of lovely ones [*khúbán*], Justice!

As the price of a kiss, the demand of a life, || These heart-ravishers [*dil-sitánán*] make, Justice!

These of Kafir-heart drink our blood: || O Muslims! what remedy? Justice!...

Day and night, self-less, like Hafiz || Weeping and consuming  
(with grief), I have gone, Justice! (*Dīvān* 231, no.110, v. 1–4, 7;  
Persian: *Díván*, 'Ghazalyát', no. 96, v.1–4, 7)

The words more frequently used to describe the pains of the lover's remoteness [*hijrán*] from the Beloved are *ghamm* and *dard*. As to *ghamm*, according to Carlo Saccone, an expert in and a translator of Persian poetry, this word usually denotes "the pain because of a separation or detachment from the beloved, a classical figure of the condition of the mystic" ('Note' 219n14). As to *dard*, the same Saccone writes:

Persian language makes an interesting distinctions of words, whereby the more usual term—"eshq", from an Arabic root—is paralleled by another, strictly Iranian, word, 'dard', which means love seen in the perspective of its 'pain' (which is the etymological meaning of 'dard'), more properly 'pain because of an absence' or because of remoteness from the beloved. This is the reason why 'Attâr said that angels have an experience of "eshq" (the love typical of one who attains the union with his beloved), but only man knows 'dard' (and *ahl-e dard*, 'people of pain' for love, or sorrowful, usually denotes the mystic lovers). ('La "via degli amanti"' 34)

These qualities of the lover are mentioned also in Bahá'u'lláh's poems. The lover wants to be united [*vaṣl*] with his Beloved and therefore yearns after annihilation [*faná*], the one condition that, together with the inevitable pain [*dard*] it implies, enables the lover to be united with His Beloved and to enjoy the vision of His quickening [*jánbakhsb*] splendor [*jilvih*]. The lover yearns after pain and death, because for him existence means remoteness from his Beloved. "Turn my ease into pain [*dard-am dih az ásáyish*]" (*Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí*, v. 3, quoted in MA 4:187), he invokes. He also says:

In Thy pathway I have offered up this world and the world to come. || Come back, that I may lay down my heart and soul for Thee [*Dunyá-u 'uqbá-rá jumlih bi-rah-at dádam || Báz á bi-rah-at rízam ham ján-u raván-rá*]. (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 6, quoted in MA 4:187)

He asks the Beloved: 'Consume this vanishing temple and go away in laughter [*Īn haykal-i-fání-rá bar-súz-u bu-rú khandán*]' (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 2, quoted *ibid.*). And moreover:

Thou didst come with a sword in Thy hand, O Love, || Here is my head, here is my heart, strike, strike hard this lifeless lover [*Shamshír bi-kaff ámadí, ay 'Ishq, inak sar-u inak dil || Zakhmí zan, u muhkam zan in 'áshiq-i-bí-ján-rá*].

With Thy blood-shedding eyebrow shed the blood of this heart-bereft... [*Bá abrúy-i-khún-ríz-at khún-i-man-i-bí-dil ríz...*] (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 8–9, quoted in MA 4:187)

The lover is a derelict, because he is nothing and the Beloved is all. Therefore he invokes:

Deliver me from perpetuity. Release me from eternity. || Shelter this poor headless one 'neath the shadow of evanescence [*Az abad-am bi-rahán, vaz qidam-am bi-jahán || Dar zill-i-faná dih já in bí-sar-u sámán-rá*]. (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 5, quoted in MA 4:187)

The lover is eager, because he is looking forward to being united with the Beloved. He invites the Beloved to lift up 'the veil from... [His] cheek [*burqa'... az 'idhár*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 1, quoted in MA 4:209). He asks Him 'a drop of the mystic flame [*ábí zán shu'liy-i-rúhání*]' (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 1, quoted in MA 4:192). He wishes 'to become informed of the mysteries of love [*kih gardí váqif az asrár-i-'ishq*]'

(Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá, v. 9, quoted in MA 4:219). He is a 'drunkard of the Lord [*makhmúr-i-rabbání*]' (Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá, v. 3).

### **Beyond the pain of the lover**

Beside all these feelings that repeat the classical models of Persian mystic poetry, in the poems of Bahá'u'lláh there is a strong presence of the joy for the splendor or unveiling [*jilvib*] of the Beloved, perhaps a reference to what He perceived during His mystical experiences in the Síyáh-Chál, which He now wants to share with His readers. The description of this reunion suggests to the mystic seekers the certain possibility of definitively closing the 'the scroll of remoteness [*daftar-i-hijrán*]' (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 3, quoted in MA 4:186) from the Beloved.

The concept of reunion is clearly explained in a Tablet, known as Lawḥ-i-'Áshiq va Ma'shúq, that is Tablet of the lover and the Beloved, that could have been written in Edirne in ca.1866–1867 (see Taherzadeh 2:241–5):

Release yourselves, O nightingales of God, from the thorns and brambles of wretchedness and misery, and wing your flight to the rose-garden of unfading splendor. O My friends that dwell upon the dust! Haste forth unto your celestial habitation. Announce unto yourselves the joyful tidings: 'He Who is the Best-Beloved is come! He hath crowned Himself with the glory of God's Revelation, and hath unlocked to the face of men the doors of His ancient Paradise.' Let all eyes rejoice, and let every ear be gladdened, for now is the time to gaze on His beauty, now is the fit time to hearken to His voice. Proclaim unto every longing lover: 'Behold, your Well-Beloved hath come among men!' and to the messengers of the Monarch of love impart the tidings: 'Lo, the Adored One hath appeared arrayed in the fullness of His glory!' O lovers of His beauty! Turn the anguish of your separation

from Him into the joy of an everlasting reunion, and let the sweetness of His presence dissolve the bitterness of your remoteness from His court.

Behold how the manifold grace of God, which is being showered from the clouds of Divine glory, hath, in this day, encompassed the world. For whereas in days past every lover besought and searched after his Beloved, it is the Beloved Himself Who now is calling His lovers and is inviting them to attain His presence. (GWB 319–20, sec. CLI, paras1–2, Lawḥ-i-‘Áshiq va Ma’shúq)

In the light of this explanation the feeling of remoteness is no more a desperate feeling, but a conscious longing of a possible fulfillment.

This changed atmosphere, as a result of the lover's approach to the Beloved, finds an explanation in a number of aspects of the new mystical vision brought by Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh confirms the concept of Islamic orthodoxy whereby God is absolutely unknowable and thus whosoever tries to approach His Essence exerts useless endeavors. He writes:

No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness. No sign can indicate His presence or His absence; inasmuch as by a word of His command all that are in heaven and on earth have come to exist, and by His wish, which is the Primal Will itself, all have stepped out of utter nothingness into the realm of being, the world of the visible. (KI 97, para.105)

Unlike certain Sufis, who thought the direct relation with the Divinity accessible to those few chosen ones who attained the most advanced stages of mystical quest, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that this direct



relation is barred to everyone. The lover can however enter into a relationship with Them Whom God sends to the world as His Vicars,

sanctified Mirrors... Day-springs of ancient glory... Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe, its Essence and ultimate Purpose (KI 99–100, para.106)

They are the Prophet as Lawgivers [*shári'*], the revealers of Scriptures [*kitáb*], as for example Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, and now He Himself. He writes that

These Prophets and chosen Ones of God are the recipients and revealers of all the unchangeable attributes and names of God. They are the mirrors that truly and faithfully reflect the light of God. Whatsoever is applicable to them is in reality applicable to God, Himself, Who is both the Visible and the Invisible... By attaining, therefore, to the presence of these holy Luminaries, the 'Presence of God [*laqá'u'lláh*]' Himself is attained. (KI 141 para.152, KMI 110)

The reunion with the Beloved is realized on earth in the meeting with the Prophet, personally for a few human beings who live in His days and who have the capacity of recognizing the Beauty of the Beloved in Him, or through His Writings for all the others: "Through the window of the soul [*rawzan-i-ján*]' the lover beholds 'the cheek of the Beloved [*rukhsáriy-i-Jánán*]' (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 2, quoted in MA 4:186). This is the real meeting with the Beloved, that brings infinite joy, because He breathes , with His 'soul-stirring lips... a breath of spirit into... [one's] breast [*bá lab-i-ján-bakhsh-at rúhí bi-dam arkán-rá*]' (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 9, quoted in MA 4:187). The meeting with God is now possible through Him, Bahá'u'lláh, 'the Beloved of the hearts which long for Thee [*ḥabíba qulúbi'l-mushṭaqín*]' (PM 209, sec. 124, para.3, *Munáját* 142), He Himself the bearer of sublime attributes and thus the supreme Object of love. He is 'Jesus' breath...

Moses' bush... God's crimson flame that sets the world on fire  
 [nafk<sup>h</sup>hiy-i-'Ísá'í... sidriy-i-Músá'í... Nára'llah-i-ḥamrá'í kátash zadí  
 imkán-rá'] (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 4, quoted in MA 4:187):

A glimmer of His image fell on the page of the spirit, || A  
 hundred Hellenic wisdoms were thereby confounded [Yik  
 jilvih zi 'aks-ash bar ṣafḥiy-i-ján uftád, || Válih shud az án  
 jilvih ṣad hikmat-i-yúnání].

A spark of that flame touched the Sinaitic tree, || A hundred  
 Imranite Moses fell into a swoon [Yik jad<sup>h</sup>vih az án shu'lih bar  
 Sidriy-i-Síná zad, || Madhúsh az án jad<sup>h</sup>vih ṣad Músíy-i-'Imrání].

A flame burst out from that fire and Love pitched || Its tent  
 in the water and clay of man and in his heart [Yik shu'lih az  
 án átash shud, 'ishq bi-zad khar-gáh || Dar áb u gil-i-ádam ham  
 dar dil-i-insání]. (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 3–5, quoted in MA 4:192)

The lover can only yield to Him, against any logic—'Love becomes  
 a slave and the Intellect a porter [ham 'Ishq shudih bandih, ham 'Aql  
 kunad darbání] (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 19, quoted in MA 4:194)—in a  
 total amorous commitment which has no other aim than finding a  
 shelter "neath the shadow of evanescence [dar zill-i-faná]' (Báz áv-u  
 bi-dih jámí, v. 5, quoted in MA 4:187).

These poems make clear that for the lover to attain the reunion with  
 his Beloved he must follow Him. The mystical reunion with the  
 Beloved is attained through forgetting oneself and putting one's life  
 at His service, to fulfill His vision of the future world civilization.  
 This is the joy of reunion, the joy of pursuing the ideal in action. This  
 concept is explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as follows:

Until a being setteth his foot in the plane of sacrifice, he is  
 bereft of every favour and grace; and this plane of sacrifice

is the realm of dying to the self, that the radiance of the living God may then shine forth. The martyr's field is the place of detachment from self, that the anthems of eternity may be upraised. Do all ye can to become wholly weary of self, and bind yourselves to that Countenance of Splendours; and once ye have reached such heights of servitude, ye will find, gathered within your shadow, all created things. This is boundless grace; this is the highest sovereignty; this is the life that dieth not. All else save this is at the last but manifest perdition and great loss. (SWAB 76–7, sec. 36)

It is Faust's '*Verweile doch! du bist so schön!* Beautiful moment, do not pass away' (Faust, line 1699).

Beside their doctrinal meaning, which this is not the place to discuss, Bahá'u'lláh's words justify the joyous atmosphere prevailing on the feelings of anguish and pain. The inebriation, the folly, the longing for annihilation of the lover do not evoke only the pain of a fire that burns away 'all things [*jumliy-i-hastí*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 4, quoted in MA 4:210), consumes 'the world [*jahán*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 15, quoted in MA 4:211), 'sets the world on fire [*kátash zadí imkán-rá*]' (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 4, quoted in MA 4:187) and destroys 'this vanishing temple [*haykal-i-fání*]' (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 2, quoted in MA 4:186). That same fire also is light that enlightens; it is 'water of the spirit [*kawthar-i-rúhání*]' (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 2, quoted in MA 4:192) that nourishes and refreshes; it is a glimmer that falls 'on the page of the spirit [*şafhiy-i-ján*]' and confounds 'a hundred Hellenic wisdoms [*şad hikmat-i-yúnání*]' (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 3, quoted in MA 4:192), a spark whereby 'a hundred Imranite Moses [*şad Músíy-i-Imrání*]' fall into a swoon (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 4, quoted in MA 4:192), that kindles a 'flame [*Yik shu'lib*]' of love that pitches 'its tent in the water and clay of man and in his heart [*Dar áb u gil-i-ádam ham dar dil-i-insání*]' (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 5, quoted in MA 4:192), that falls 'upon the rose-bush of the spirit [*gul-bun-i-ján*]' and lights 'its beauty as a vermilion tulip

[*chún láliy-i-nu'mání*] (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 16, quoted in MA 4:193); it is the theophanic 'fire on Mount Paran [*shu'liy-i-Farání*]' (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 11, quoted in MA 4:193). The moan of the lover is a 'melody [*naghmih*]' that can bring the world to life (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 15, quoted in MA 4:211). The 'wine of the spirit [*sharáb-i-má'naví*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 2, quoted in MA 4:209) first intoxicates him and then shakes off 'his languor [*khumár*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 3, quoted in MA 4:210). That Wine is 'the wine of joy [*khamr-i-farah*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 12, quoted in MA 4:210) that is offered in 'the vessel of immortal life [*sághar-i-báqí*]' (Báz áv-u bi-dih jámí, v. 1, quoted in MA 4:186) and washes the 'soul from the whisperings of the flesh [*vasvasiy-i-nafsání*]' (Sáqí, bi-dih ábí, v. 1, quoted in MA 4:192). The lover is annihilated 'to the qualities of existence [*vasf-i-vujúd*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 5, quoted in MA 4:210), but immediately after he quaffs 'the wine of eternal life from that sweet Idol's ruby lips [*khamr-i-Baqá az la'l-i-núshín-i-Nigár*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 5, quoted in MA 4:210). He tramples upon 'the world [*mulk*]' and enters 'beneath the shade of Poverty [*zill-i-faqr*]', but he soon beholds 'the immortal World on every side [*Mulk-i-báqí-rá kunún az har kinár*]' (Sáqí az *Ghayb-i-Baqá*, v. 6, quoted in MA 4:210).

The Beloved has come. The traditional relation between the Beloved and His lovers is overturned. Whoever has recognized His Blessed Beauty 'steppeth into the sanctuary of the Friend, and shareth as an intimate the pavilion of the Loved One' (SV 17) and thus rejoices in the bliss of reunion, in this Day when

... the people of Bahá have entered the blissful abode of the Divine Presence, and quaffed the wine of reunion, from the chalice of the beauty of their Lord, the All-Possessing, the Most High. (GWB 32, sec. XIV, para.13, *Lawḥ-i-Riḍván*)

As 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "The most great, peerless gift of God to the world of humanity is happiness born of love—they are the twin sisters

of the superman; one is the complement of the other" (Quoted in 'A Fortune' 103).

From these poems, and from the entire Work by Bahá'u'lláh, a concept of mysticism emerges that is very far from the philosophizing and aesthetic, always theoretical, abstractions of certain ancient types of mysticism. Bausani writes that the Bahá'í mysticism is "a preparation to a renewed active life on the earth, whose realities once again acquire a new *value*, as if they were translucent with the absolute" (*Saggi* 152). The meeting with the Beloved is accessible to everyone, here on earth. There is but one prerequisite, an annihilation that is renouncing to the seductions of the self and of the world and entering the path of service to humankind, to create a new civilization, the only path that leads to the reunion with the Beloved and thus the only source of genuine joy.

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NOTES

- 1 All translations from Persian were done with the precious assistance of Ms. Faezeh Mardani Mazzoli, lecturer of Persian language at the University of Bologna. These translations of Bahá'u'lláh's poetry are temporary and informal. They are not authorized translations. They are made only for presentation at the 'Irfán Colloquium. These translations should not be quoted, published or distributed in any form or through any media.
- 2 It is normal practice in this journal to italicize quotations from the three Central Figures of the Bahá'á Faith following the practice of Shoghi Effendi. However, the editors decided to make an exception for this article to avoid confusion that might result due to the heavy use of transliteration from Persian and Arabic which is also in italics.
- 3 Quoted in Ráfati, 'Áthár-i-munzilih' 59; *Ishráq Khávári, Má'idiy-i-Asmání* 4:184–6 (from now on MA 4); *Majmú'iy-i-Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá* 36: 460–1 (from now on INBA 36).
- 4 See Lambden, "'Rashh-i-'Amá", Sprinkling of the Cloud of Unknowing', *Bahá'i Studies Bulletin* 3.2 (1984): 2–10. A revised translation of this poem by Lambden himself may be found in the Internet. See Lambden, 'Translation of the Rashh-i 'Amá' of Bahá'-Alláh. Translation Stephen Lambden from the text cited by Vahid Rafati from a mss. of Muhammad Nabil-i Zarándi (d. 1892) printed in Lights of Irfan', <http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/BAHA'-ALLAH/rashh-i-20%60ama'/Rashh3.htm> (accessed 2 July 2011).
- 5 See Neshati, 'Tablet of the Mist of the Unknown by Bahá'u'lláh. Translated by Ramin Neshati. Originally written as "Rashh-i-Amá"', [http://bahai-library.com/?file=bahaullah\\_rashh\\_ama\\_neshati](http://bahai-library.com/?file=bahaullah_rashh_ama_neshati) (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 6 See Cole, 'Sprinkling of the Cloud Beyond Being', [http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=16&Itemid=50](http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16&Itemid=50) (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 7 Published on Tarjuman-List, Friday, 3 June 2011, 20:51.
- 8 See Cole, 'Ode of the Dove (Qasídiy-i-Varqá'iyiyih)', <http://bahai-library.org/provisionals/ode.dove.html> (accessed 31 December 2010) and 'Ode of the Dove', [http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=37&Itemid=50](http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=37&Itemid=50) (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 9 Quoted in Fádíl-i Mazandarání, *Asráru'l-Athar* 4:200–1 (from now on AA 4); Fádíl-i Mazandarání, *Zuhúru'l-Haqq* 4:142 (only seven verses).
- 10 See Cole, 'O Nightingales by Bahá'u'lláh', *Arts Dialogue*, no. 40 (June 1997), p.14; see also Cole, 'Ay Bulbulan Ay Bulbulan (Poem)', <http://www.scribd.com/doc/17569405/Ay-Bulbulan-Ay-Bulbulan-Poem> (accessed 31 December 2010).

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- 11 Quoted in *Áthár* 3:160–192; INBA 30:\*; excerpts in MA 4:139–41; etc. See Lewis, 'Bahá'u'lláh's Mathnaví' 118–9.
- 12 See Lewis, 'Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví-i-Mubáarak*: introduction and provisional verse translation', *Bahá'í Studies Review* 9 (1999–2000): 101–57.
- 13 To The Universal House of Justice, 12 January 1997, see <http://bahai-library.com/uhj/humorist.html> (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 14 None of these poems has been translated authoritatively into English. All of the translations cited in this paper are provisional.
- 15 This list comprises only Tablets that have been provisionally or authoritatively (three cases), wholly or partially, translated into English.
- 16 Quoted in *Ishráq Khávarí*, *Ganj-i-Shayigán* 61–64.
- 17 See Cole, 'Praised be my Lord, the Most High', [http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=50](http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=50) (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 18 Quoted in *Ishráq Khávarí*, *Ayyám Tis'ih* 92–99.
- 19 Walbridge, 'Baha'u'llah's "Tablet of the Deathless Youth"', <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/trans/vol1/deathls2.htm> (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 20 Quoted in *Ishráq Khávarí*, *Ganj-i-Sháyigán* 61-4; *Adí'iy-i-Haḍrat-i-Mahbúb* 153–8.
- 21 See Cole, 'Hour of Wonder (Hur-i 'Ujab)', <http://www.whoisbahauallah.com/Alison/wonder.html> and 'Hour of Wonder', [http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index2.php?option=com\\_content&do\\_pdf=1&id=15](http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=15) (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 22 Quoted in *Áthár* 4:335–41; MA 4:335–41.
- 23 'The Song of the Holy Mariner', *Star of the West* 13.4 (17 May 1922):75–7.
- 24 See *The Tablet of the Holy Mariner: An illustrated Guide to Bahá'u'lláh's Mystical Writing in the Sufi Tradition*. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2002.
- 25 Quoted in *Ishráq Khávarí*, *Ganj-i-Sháyigán* 42–5.
- 26 See Cole, 'Nightingale of Separation', [http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=50](http://whoisbahauallah.com/explore/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=50) (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 27 Quoted in INBA 36: 457–60.
- 28 Quoted in *Ishráq Khávarí*, *Ganj-i-Shayigán* 33–35; *Andalib* 5.18:3–4; INBA 35:455–6; e-text at <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/arabic/baharepr/halih/halih.gif> (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 29 See *Taríkh-i-Nabíl-i-Zarandí* [Pt II ], quoted in *Ishráq Khávarí*, *Ayyam-i-Tis'ih* 332f.

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- 30 See Lambden, 'A Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh of the Late Baghdad Period: Lawh-i-Halih Halih Halih, Ya Bisharat', *Bahá'i Studies Bulletin* 2.3 (December 1983): 105–112. A revised version of this translation now appears at <http://www.bahai-library.org/provisionals/hallelujah.html> (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 31 See Mc Glinn, 'The Halih Halih Halih in rhythmic verse', <http://bahai-library.com/provisionals/hallelujah.html> (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 32 Quoted in *Ad'iyiy-i-Haḍrat-i-Maḥbúb* 141–53.
- 33 See 'A Tablet of the Feast of Ridván, by Bahá'u'lláh. Translated by Ali-Kuli Khan. Translated by Marzieh Gail', [http://bahai-library.com/bahauallah\\_lawh\\_ridvan\\_khan](http://bahai-library.com/bahauallah_lawh_ridvan_khan) (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 34 Quoted in Ishráq Khávarí, *Ayyám-i-Tis'ih* 100–6.
- 35 See Lambden, 'Tablet of the Bell (Lawh-i-Náqús) of Bahá'u'lláh', *Lights of 'Irfán* 4:111–21.
- 36 Quoted in Ishráq-Khávarí, *Ayyám-i-Tis'ih* 16–20; *Áthár*<sup>1314</sup> 2:174–6.
- 37 See Lambden, 'Lawh-i-Ru'yá (Tablet of Vision), by Stephen Lambden, Presented at the Irfan Colloquia Session #22 (English) London, England, August 27–29, 1999', [http://irfancolloquia.org/22/lambden\\_ruya](http://irfancolloquia.org/22/lambden_ruya) (accessed 31 December 2010); see also Lambden, 'Lawh-i-Ru'yá (Tablet of Vision). Trans. Stephen Lambden', <http://bahai-library.com/provisionals/lawh.ruya.lambden.html> (accessed 15 February 2011).
- 38 See Cole, 'Tablet of Vision by Bahá'u'lláh. Translated by Juan Cole. Originally written as "Lawh-i-Ru'yá"', [http://bahai-library.com/bahauallah\\_lawh\\_ruya\\_cole](http://bahai-library.com/bahauallah_lawh_ruya_cole) (accessed 31 December 2010).
- 39 Quoted in *Risáliy-i-Taṣbīḥ va Tablíl* 207–15; *Ad'iyiyih-i-Haḍrat-i-Maḥbúb* 183–93; *Nafahat-i Faḍl* 2:17–22; *Lawḥ-i mubáarak-i Antá'l-Káfi*.
- 40 See The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986* 455, sec. 258. See *Bahá'í Prayers* 91–8.
- 41 See The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986* 455, sec. 258. See *Bahá'í Prayers* 214–20.
- 42 See [http://www.bahai-library.com/bahauallah\\_shams\\_jamal\\_ilahi](http://www.bahai-library.com/bahauallah_shams_jamal_ilahi), accessed 22 July 2011.
- 43 Later quoted in another Tablet translated by Shoghi Effendi in *GWB* 184–92, sec. XCIII.
- 44 Tr. Franklin Lewis, see Lewis, 'Rumi's Masnavi, part 7: God's grace', guardian.co.uk, Monday 11 January 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/jan/11/islam-rumi-grace-poetry> (accessed 31 December 2011). Nicholson translates: 'Since colourlessness (pure Unity) became the captive of colour (manifestation in the phenomenal world), a Moses came into conflict with a Moses'

- 45 Quoted in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tadhkirat* 54–5. This *ghazal* does not appear in the collections of Rúmi's *ghazals* recorded on the Internet.
- 46 *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, p.1184, s.v. "intimist".
- 47 The authorized translation of a short part of the Commentary is published in 'Preface and Notes' 177–78n23. A provisional translation of the complete work has been made by Momen; see 'Abdu'l-Bahá: 'Commentary'.



# Clouds and the Hiding God: Observations on Some Terms in the Early Writing of Bahá'u'lláh

Moshe Sharon

## Introduction and Synopsis

Two early Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, probably the earliest, *Rashḥ-i-Amá* and *Lawḥ Kull at-Ta'ám*, one in Persian the other in Arabic, were translated into English and studied by Stephen Lambden and extensively researched by Vahid Ra'fati (in Persian) a decade ago, but they are still the topic of further investigation. In several places in his writings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá relates to, comments on, and interprets certain themes in these early writings.

The importance of these tablets, as well as the third one, the *Qaṣīdatu 'izz warqá'iyyah*, is that they outline the future development of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about the Divine and the divine manifestations, and their relation to the two levels of reality: that which is attainable by the temporal senses and that which is attainable by the prophets' super-awareness (SAQ 151).

Highly mystical, the language which Bahá'u'lláh uses in these tablets is cryptic in many places and allusions are constantly made to diverse sources which, on the whole, may be identified. Naturally, coming from the Muslim world, Bahá'u'lláh's prime source of reference is Islam: the Qur'án, its interpretations and the *ḥadīth*. References are also made to *ṣūfī* ideas and language. All these aspects have been studied in depth by Ra'fati in his 1999 article in Persian in *Safīniy-i-Írfán* (Book 2, pp. 50ff),<sup>1</sup> and although he dealt with only one Tablet,

*Rashh-i-'Amá*, his observations are also relevant to other early works of Bahá'u'lláh.

Let us not forget, however, that Islam was not born in a void. It was born in that part of the world that was the cradle of human civilizations, and the residues of all these civilizations were there when Muḥammad and his successors created the Islamic religion and its literature. This ancient legacy was memorized and constantly developed by storytellers, poets, and scholars, generation after generation, and found its way into the Qur'án and its traditions as it had found its way into the writings of the Hebrews, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Christians. It is therefore interesting to examine some of the terms Bahá'u'lláh uses in these early Tablets and compare them to the rich sources that represent the ancient homiletic material which found its way indirectly into Islamic *ḥadīth* literature and eventually also into the writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. I refer here to the extensive body of *midrashic* and mystical Jewish literature. I do not mean that the creators of the *ḥadīth* borrowed from the *midrash*, but that both the *midrash* and the *ḥadīth*, in the larger meaning of the word, tapped the same early sources which were available in the territory where they were born and developed.

In this lecture I shall examine several ideas used by Bahá'u'lláh, such as the idea of the cloud as the hiding place of the Divine Being or His dwelling place before creation and after creation. I shall move through the Bible and the *midrash* and show that Bahá'u'lláh's world of thought and imagination is well-rooted in the same ancient ground that gave rise to various types of thinkers before him: Prophets and priests, poets and storytellers, philosophers and theologians.

Many years ago I flew in a small airplane in which there was room only for me and the pilot. It was a winter day and the sky was rather cloudy. At a certain point, when we approached what looked like a wall of cloud the pilot said: "I am looking for an empty hole in the clouds."

I asked: “Why can’t you fly through the cloud?” and he said, “I don’t know what is waiting inside it”.

I remembered this incident when I repeatedly encountered the idea of clouds in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, especially his early writings *Rashḥ-i-‘amá’* and the *Tablet of all Food*,<sup>2</sup> and in his later tablet *Ode of the Dove*, as well as in many of his other writings, notably *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, and the *Hidden Words*. In all these writings, Bahá’u’lláh uses the word cloud in an allegorical meaning, sometimes as representing the Divine Being, sometimes the manifestation, sometimes for a new exegesis of the Scriptures, and sometimes, as in *The Hidden Words*, to denote the idea of a veil concealing the person from the truth of the New Manifestation (Thus: “*yá ibn al-‘amá’—O son of the cloud!*”).

But since every allegory has its source in more tangible and natural words and although behind the façade of words there is often a hidden meaning, I shall try in what follows to move between the two, mainly concentrating on the sources behind the usage of the idea of the cloud and touching upon two types of clouds bearing a close relation to each other: the hiding cloud and the rain cloud. The first type represents a wider concept than the other.

## The Hiding Cloud

In the Tablets of *Rashḥ-i-‘amá’*, *Kull at-Ṭá‘ám*, *Qaṣīdah Warqá’iyyah*, *Ishráqát* and many others, the Arabic-Persian word used for cloud is ‘amá’. In *Kull at-Ṭá‘ám* (Khavári, 2007, 257)<sup>3</sup> this cloud acts as veil behind which, in some cases, the divine dove or “*the dove of light*”, presumably the manifestation, hides singing the eternity of God. The concealing cloud is called in this case, “veils of cloud, *ḥujubát al-‘amá’*.” The context for identifying the cloud with a veil was the personal situation of Bahá’u’lláh following his imprisonment in the Black Dungeon, his experience of revelation therein, and his expulsion to

Iraq with all his family during the winter of 1853. He describes his experience in that period as “a dark night” creating an unusual superlative adjective in Arabic from the word *layl*—night—to express it: *al-layl al-alyal* for which in English translation would sound like “the nightiest night.” As usual in his style he repeats the same idea in other and more familiar forms: *aḥ-ḥulumát al-aṭwal* (instead of *aḥ-ḥulumát al-ṭúlá*) “the longest darknesses (*sic!*)”.

His message is clear: there is hope in this dark, seemingly hopeless situation since behind the veil of the cloud, no doubt a dark cloud, Bahá'u'lláh can hear the voice of the divine dove, and we, the readers, whether believers or not, are made to carry the idea of this dove that appears very frequently in Bahá'u'lláh's world of similes. It could well be compared to the dove in Jewish and Christian sources, the dove of the *shekhinah*, literally meaning the divine presence.

At any rate, in this study we are interested in the cloud itself, even before entering into the problems of interpreting it. The cloud represents the dark veil which, in the “dark night”, is a perfect hiding place for the divine, whose voice can be heard pointing to His presence, but whose reality cannot be conceptualized. The most striking example of this concept of God's voice without His appearance is found many times in the Bible.<sup>4</sup> In the Book of Exodus, passages describe the descent of God onto the burning Mount Sinai engulfed in clouds and smoke that obscured the top of the mountain. This terrifying event followed something the Israelites coming out of Egypt had already experienced: God leading them in a pillar of cloud in daytime. This cloud turned into a pillar of fire by night. On Mount Sinai, God's appearance was accompanied by the rumbling of thunder and by lightening, and was, no doubt, very spectacular making such a frightening impression on the people that they said to Moses “Speak thou unto us and we will hear; but let not God speak with us lest we die.” (Ex. 20:16)

In scores of places in the Bible the idea of God hiding in the cloud is expressed in various forms, but in all of them it is a thick cloud obscuring everything, not only inside it but naturally also what is beyond it. Sometimes this thickness is expressed by the Hebrew word *'av* (pl. *'avím*) instead of *'anán*, or even the two words together as in Exodus 19:9: "And the Lord said unto Moses, 'lo I come unto thee in a thick cloud (*'av hé'anán*), that the people may hear when I speak unto thee'..." Note! "Hear" not "see".

Before going on, we must emphasize here that even in the most metaphorical usages when natural objects are involved, like clouds in this case, the allegory is based on visualizing the real thing. No matter how far the metaphor goes in using the natural object to express an abstract idea, it is the natural object which leaves its impression on the mind before entering into metaphysical and speculative interpretations. For this reason, even though the cloud is used by thinkers in an allegorical sense, it is still the cloud of nature which they see and the reader, or listener sees. It is like saying of a person that he is a lion, a snake or a monkey. The meaning is understood but we still see these animals.

For the believer, who is neither a philosopher nor theologian, the natural phenomena are the true reality, and he does not need any interpretation to connect them directly with God.

For the Biblical man, God's presence in heaven as well as his descent to earth were natural realities. He did not indulge in hair-splitting arguments concerning the question of whether God could be described in limiting terms. On the contrary, prophets and ordinary believers alike did not refrain from describing God in the most anthropomorphic language. He has a head, eyes and hands. He is angry, loving, and jealous just like any human. It is his omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, his eternity and concealment which make Him different from and above his creation. At the same time he is

a personal god, who can be approached, who hears prayers and supplications; he is compassionate and merciful, but also demanding and dangerous. He can be loving but also full of rage and quick to punish: a father in a patriarchal family. He is also mysterious, and his mystery is dangerous: "Man cannot see me and live." Moses, who for the Jews is the human being who was allowed to come nearest to God, was not allowed to witness His reality, God's "face" in the language of the Bible; he was allowed to witness only God's "back" (Ex. 33:18–20). This was the highest status that any human (in Judaism, prophets are not manifestations of God) could ever reach, a status which earned Moses in Islam the title of *klím alláh* "he who spoke with Alláh."

Two divine elements are emphasized here: First, the arrival of God in a cloud. In other words, the cloud is not only an obscuring substance, forming an impenetrable veil, but also a divine chariot, to which we shall soon return. Second, the voice of God is heard from inside the cloud. The difference between this voice and the voice of the dove is that with the former, the voice heard from the cloud in Sinai was directed at all the people of Israel, in case of the dove of heaven only the prophet could hear it. However, both voices were heard in the same place, both on Mount Sinai, even if the Mount Sinai of Bahá'u'lláh is a concept more than it is a geographical spot. The difference between the two voices is both in the content and in the principle. The God of Israel established a covenant with His people in the roaring voice of thunder and the fire of lightning. But in Bahá'u'lláh's vision the atmosphere is subdued, quiet and gentle:

*I beseech thee, my God, in the darkest night when the pigeon of the cause (or: the divine Command) sings on Mount Sinai on the right side of the Red Tree, the melodies of thy eternity; and in those times of long darkness at the presence of the warbling dove of light that sings thy infinity behind the veils of the cloud.*

## Clouds and the Hiding God

يا الهي لأقسمنك في ذلك الليل الأليل عند تغني حمامة الأمر في جبل  
السيناء عن يمين شجرة الحمراء بتغنيات أزليتك وفي تلك الظلمات  
الأطول تلقاء تغرد ورقاء النوراء خلف حُجبات العماء بتغزّادات سرمديتك  
(رحيق مختوم، ٧٠٠٢ ص ٧٥٢)

In Moses' experience in Sinai it is specifically indicated that

the glory of the Lord abode upon on Mount Sinai and the cloud covered it six days, and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud, and the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses went onto the midst of the cloud, and got up into the mount; and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights (Ex. 24:16–18)

Bahá'u'lláh also wants “to go into the mount.” The scene as described by him is much quieter: no rumbling thunder, but the prophet hears the voice and also wants to be in the presence of his Lord; he also wants to be invited. He uses a very strong word to entreat the Almighty. Turning directly to him he says:

*I beseech thee...that thou raise me up into the heaven of concealment (ghayb)... and make me ascend to the horizon of witnessing (shuhúd)... and make me climb into the hiding place of thine Oneness, and honour me to encounter thy countenance, so that I take an abode nigh unto thee, [at thy side], and rest upon thine carpet and recline on the pillows of light and stretch out on the heaven of the manifestation...*

Here I wish again to point out the elements of the allegory, their usage and the part they play in the mind of the hearer. Carpets, pillows, cushions, stretching out, reclining, and so on, are of course meant here metaphorically but one can not ignore the fact that first and foremost they are real objects that represent real experience in a real

world. They are carried into the metaphor but it is because of their real nature and function that the metaphor is understood. However, in the eyes of the believer these and other similar objects need not be understood metaphorically. On the contrary, the Muslim believer, for instance, is assured by the Qur'án and a large number of traditions, as well as by endless sermons and writings of learned 'ulamá' that the delights of heaven are as real as they are described, with real food, real drink and real women, and the fires of Hell consume like any fire. Following this observation it should be emphasized that the fire, and clouds, and thunders and lightening on Mount Sinai were real. There is no metaphor here: "Moses drew near the heavy cloud where God was" (Ex. 20:18). The Biblical message is clear: the cloud, or the thick darkness, was a genuine cloud and God was actually in it.

Bahá'u'lláh wants to be there beyond the cloud and he is as bold as Moses, or even bolder for, as we have just seen, he goes into great detail about where exactly he wants to be in the presence of his Lord. Moses expressed the same idea in a short sentence: "I beseech thee: show me thy Glory." (Ex. 33:18) To which God answers: "Thou canst not see my face; for there shall no man see me, and live." (EX. 33:20) Unfortunately, there is no record of God's answer to the same request of Bahá'u'lláh who asks to be honoured with seeing God's "face" or countenance (*bi'an tusharrifani biziyaratí ṭal'atika*).

The cloud as a hiding place of God is a recurring topic in the Bible; moreover it is his abode. Thus, for instance, when King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem and placed the Ark in it "the cloud filled the House of the Lord... for the glory of the Lord filled the House of the Lord." (1K, 8:10–11). In other words, God came in His cloud into the house built for him on earth. For usually He does not dwell on earth, or, in the words of Solomon: "The Lord said that he would dwell in the thick darkness." (1 K, 8:12) The Hebrew word for "thick darkness"—*arafel*—is rightly translated as "dark cloud" in the King James Bible.



But the cloud, as we have already mentioned, is not God's static home. As a natural phenomenon, the clouds *move*, and therefore the cloud is the chariot of God. In many places in the Bible, God is portrayed as riding, or sitting on a cloud. He is also called "the rider on the clouds." (*rokhev ba'aravot*. Ps. 68:5) The word *'aravot* for clouds was borrowed together with its context from Ugarit where we find the god Ba'al, the chief deity of the Phoenicians, riding on clouds.

God is also described as moving from place to place riding on a cherub. Thus we find in Psalms 18:11(=2 Samuel 22:11): "And he rode upon a cherub and did fly; and he was seen upon the wings of the wind."

The prophet Ezekiel (1:4–26), describes in great detail his vision of the living chariot of the theophanic God, resting on four cherubs. The throne upon which he sits is above them, under the dome of the sky, exactly as in nature the clouds are under the sky, so that God moves with his chariot under the canopy of his permanent abode. He sits on the cherub or cherubs and they spread their wings to conceal him, exactly like the cloud. In fact, clouds and cherubs are one and the same; they interchange easily in biblical descriptions. The idea of the cloud-cherub being God's veil, protecting the divine appearance and at the same time serving as the divine chariot is well represented in a verse from the book of Samuel following the one just quoted which described God as riding on a cherub. "And He made darkness pavilions round about him, dark water, and thick clouds of the sky." (2 Samuel, 22:12)<sup>5</sup>

The cloud as the hiding place of God is no doubt the source of the *ḥadīth* which appears even in traditionally accepted, authoritative collections. When the prophet Muḥammad was asked "where was God before he created his creation", he answered: "He was in a cloud above which was water and beneath which was water . Then he created his throne on the water." (Ibn Májah 65)<sup>6</sup>

This tradition is usually quoted because of the word *'amá'* used in it, which has caused some discussion among theologians and mystic philosophers, because it defines God in the most limiting terms. However, believers, as I emphasized before, are not bothered by such hairsplitting arguments, and the concealment of God in a cloud is perfectly fitting, a very enduring human belief. It is enough to read the first verses of the book of Genesis to encounter the same idea.

Before creation or in the very first act of creation “when the earth was without form and void; and darkness upon the face of the water; and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the water” God began his creation in the course of which he divided between the lower water “which was under the firmament” and upper water “above the firmament” (Genesis, 1:7). In the *ḥadīth*, which was created a few thousands years after the Biblical tradition, it is not very difficult to see how this division of water came into being. It is not far-fetched to suppose that the firmament in Genesis could well be the cloud in the *ḥadīth*.

Going deeper into Sumerian-Babylonian records brings us to the story about the god Marduch, the head of the Babylonian pantheon, splitting in two the body of the monster Tiamet, ancient goddess of the primeval waters, creating heaven (with its water) from one half and earth (with its water) from the other half.

Coming back to the *ḥadīth* we are told that God first created His throne on the water, no doubt on the higher water, which is above the cloud, and which thus continues to fulfill its main function as a concealing veil for the divine. In the Biblical tradition this point is made very clear: God erects his throne above the cloud-chariot. Prophet Ezekiel described the throne above the chariot, other Biblical texts describe the throne in heaven, namely inside the canopy above the clouds: “The Lord has established His throne in the Heaven; and his Kingdom ruleth over all,” says the Psalmist (Ps. 103:19). And the Prophet Isaiah, criticizing the idea of building the House of the Lord on earth,

declares: “Thus saith the Lord: The heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; where is the house that ye may build unto Me? And where is the place that may be my resting place? (Isaiah, 66:1)

From the chariot (Heb. *merkavah*), God can rise to his throne in heaven, and from the throne he descends to his clouds-chariot. Both ways the gates of heaven open in coordination with his movements; but whichever way, he is always concealed from the creation by the clouds.

### Clouds of Rain

What are the clouds to which Bahá'u'lláh alludes in his writings. To begin with, we see that he uses the word *'amá'* as well as the word *ghimám* to describe clouds. (*Ode of the Dove* v. 2, 3) He also uses the word *saḥáb* in the same meaning. Even more interesting is the fact that that he refers to God as he who rides over a cloud, exactly as we have just found in the Biblical references, and one can hardly exclude a Biblical influence particularly since as it seems, reading the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, that Bahá'u'lláh (as well as ‘Abdu'l-Bahá—(SAQ, 36ff) was familiar with the Book of Daniel where we read the verse which speaks about the clouds of heaven as a divine chariot: “And behold there came with the clouds of Heaven, One like unto the son of man.” (Daniel: 7:13)

In the *Ishráqát*, we find a reference to Him who rides on the clouds:

*qad atá al-wahháb rákiban 'alá as-saḥáb*—“the Bestower has come riding on the clouds,” and again the same formula in a form of an oath: *qul: balá wa-rabb-as-saḥáb*—“Say: Yes, by the lord of the clouds.” (*Ishráqát, Majmú'ah-i-Alwáh*, Hofhein, 2000, p. 66 l.11 and last line)<sup>7</sup> The Islamic tradition which speaks about God being in a cloud before creation has been rightly connected with the famous *ḥadīth qudsí* where

God referred to Himself as “hidden treasure (*kanz maknún*),” and that wishing to be known he decided to create His creation. In other words, this *ḥadīth* coming straight from the mouth of God himself attributes to God wills and wishes, even uncontrolled needs such as human needs: to be known. But this *ḥadīth* is neither strange nor original. Going some thousand years back to the Midrashic tradition we find that God created the world because he wanted to build for himself an abode “down below” (*Midrash Tanḥúmāh* on *Naso*, ch.16) and to choose for Himself people who would proclaim his Name all the time. How otherwise would He be known? <sup>8</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh rejected the idea that through creation God revealed himself and came out, so to speak, from his hidden abode. Turning to God in an adoring prayer he says that every part in him bears testimony to God's oneness, omnipotence, omniscience, government and glory; “and that you are Alláh, no god but thee. You are forever a hidden treasure concealed from the eyes and conceptualization, and forever you are what you are eternally and for ever and ever.” (*Ishráqát* 65). In other words God is still concealed probably in his cloud.

If we accept that *Rashḥ-i-'amá'* is the first tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, or at least one of the first, then we must consider his particular description of this cloud, because it may reveal some of his later attitude to the same subject. This is a cloud which rains! Presumably water; although the hidden meaning in this poem which may be described as an Ode to the Manifestation is completely spiritual. This poem is a precursor of his much longer poem on the same subject the *Ode of the Dove*. In both of these poems, we encounter the theme or the symbol of the raining cloud. In the early poem, the word used for raining or sprinkling, is *rashḥ* a word which is reserved mainly for water. In the *Ode of the Dove*, written at least thirty years later, the substance sprinkled by the cloud is perfume, (“Because of its resplendence the perfume of the cloud was stirred”—*libahjatihá misk al-'amá' tahajjat*) an understandable choice of word for describing the new

Manifestation. But, then he goes on to use another word denoting clouds for describing the New Times of the divine salvation. It is not 'amá' but *ghimám*. The reference, as Bahá'u'lláh himself explains, is to two verses in the Qur'án, both referring, with and without additional interpolations, to the End of Days, or as Bahá'u'lláh puts it: *kull dhálika min 'alámát al-qiyámah wa-má yaḥduthu bihá:*—All these are the signs of the resurrection (or, End of Days) and that which will happen therein." (Bahá'u'lláh's notes to the first three verses of the Ode of the Dove.)

The idea behind the usage of 'amá' and *ghimám* in these verses is that these two words are synonyms. The word *ghimám* means heavy clouds, which reflects the meaning of the verb *ghamma*, to veil. So this type of cloud is thick enough to veil God and the angels who, according to the Qur'án, ride over it.

The word 'amá' represents all kinds of clouds, of any possible shape. However, its usual meaning is a heavy cloud of rain (like its synonyms *saháb* and *ghimám*); even if in the dictionaries other meanings can be found, which Vahid Ra'fati diligently collected. These meanings stretch from a very thin cloud to one heavy with rain and a cloud which has already poured its water but has not yet scattered. (Ra'fati, 1999:53)

Dark clouds, heavy with rain, are those connected with God. Man has always been fascinated with rain clouds because, after all, these are the clouds that enable him to live. In all religions, God or the gods cause these clouds to bestow life on earth. The clouds accompanied by lightning and thunder were identified with the great life-giving god. Ancient man paid attention to the fact that clouds of rain are found around the peaks of high mountains even when they are not anywhere else. It is not surprising that the tops of these high mountains, reaching out to the sky and surrounded by clouds pouring their rain, were seen as the abodes of the gods and the situation of the throne of the

supreme deity, the god who was identified with rain and thunder. The ancient Greeks identified Zeus as this god and in times of drought the Athenians prayed: "Rain, rain, O, dear Zeus on the corn lands of the Athenians and the plains." (Frazer, 1967 210)<sup>9</sup> Zeus's counterpart, the chief deity among the Hindus is Indra the god of war, storms, thunder and rain. In the Daily Jewish prayer, known as the Eighteen Benedictions, the second benediction extolling God's omnipotence and his ability to quicken the dead (including, no doubt, the dry land after the long summer) says:

Thou O Lord are mighty for ever, Thou revivest the dead,  
Thou are mighty to save. Thou causeth the wind to blow and  
the rain to fall. (Hertz, *Daily Prayer*, 1976, 133)<sup>10</sup>

The Psalmist, extolling God, speaks frequently about His great power by which He causes rainfall, lightning and thunder.

"He causeth vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth,  
He maketh lightening for the rain; He bringeth forth the  
wind out of his treasures." (Ps. 135:4)

That rain was the gift of the all-powerful God who was recognized as such by ancient man, no matter to which culture or religion he belonged. Dark clouds of rain were a gift or a reward from God for those who followed his commandments. This divine gift, the rain, is, therefore, conditional.

Thus we read in Deuteronomy 11 in the passage that forms the central part of the *Shema*, the most important of the Jewish prayers:

And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto  
my commandments which I command you this day, to love  
the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and  
all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season,

## Clouds and the Hiding God

the former rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather  
in thy grain, and thy wine and thine oil... (Deu. 11:13–14)

Otherwise, in the case of disobedience:

...the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and He shut  
up the heaven, that there be no rain and that the land yield  
not her fruit... (Verses 14–17)

There was only a short distance between natural rain, representing God's benevolence, and the mystical idea of divine grace streaming down from His secret abode onto the world. There was nothing strange or unusual in the idea which we find in the Jewish Kabbala of the divine life giving water, or God's seed, streaming through the tree of the *sefirot* from the "Ancient of Days", from the highest *sefira*, the Divine Crown, down to the lowest one, the *sefira* of Kingship (*malkhut*). Similarly, it was only natural, therefore, for Bahá'u'lláh to use the same idea to describe the appearance of the new manifestation of God in a term so well-known to people as rain from a cloud. He leaves no doubt about the comparison of this manifestation to real rain, for the language he uses is very clear. He uses the Arabic word *rashh* which has the specific meaning, as we saw, of dripping or leaking, mainly of water, but he defines it with the Persian verb *rikhtan* [*riz*] which means to pour. This is the verb which he chose as the rhyming word throughout the whole poem. Having established the comparison he can continue by qualifying the pouring down as not being of water but of the secret of God's fulfilled promise, and the rain, therefore, is another rain, not water, and the wind that blows with it brings the perfumes of China. This rain is:

*The overflow of the manifestation, the pouring of purity, the  
song of the birds it is, which comes through straight from the  
inner nothingness.*

This explains why 'Abdu'l Bahá, in his interpretation of the word '*amá*' to a believer in Egypt, avoided speaking about the dark cloud of rain and opted for what he defined as the very light, delicate cloud which can sometimes be seen and sometimes not. It is only if you were to concentrate intensely you might see something but when just looking nothing can be seen. Because of this, '*amá*' was understood to mean the absolute reality." (Ra'fati 1999, 58).<sup>11</sup> Just as the cloud can be seen and not be seen so also in the case of the perfect oneness and absolute reality there is perception and non-perception of the attributes which are in the Self (*dhát*), conceptualized and not conceptualized. This is the situation of the "hidden treasures mentioned in the *hadith*." (*ibid*)

Were 'Abdu'l-Bahá to regard the cloud as a heavy rain-cloud he would have found himself in the realm of the rather crude idea of God hiding in real darkness which would mean limiting him to a specific place, whereas '*amá*', as he explains it, turns the whole concept into an allegorical one. Cloud, wind, perfume, rain and sun can therefore be used freely without fear of crossing the border of *ta'yín*, limitation by definition.



NOTES

- 1 Vahid Ra'fati, *Safīneye 'Irfán*, II, 1999, p58.
- 2 These two Tablets were studied in great detail by Vahid Ra'fati and Stephen Lambden who also translated them both into English. Ra'fati composed a profound study of the first with extensive interpretations.
- 3 Ishráq Khavári, *Rahiq-i-Makhtúm*, II, 2007, p. 257.
- 4 As well as in the canonical *ḥadīths* describing the first revelation to Muḥammad through the ear not through the eye.
- 5 On chariot and cloud (*merkava ve 'anán*) see in detail the study of N.H. Tur-Sinai, *The Language and the Book* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1956: 62–72)
- 6 Ibn Májah, *Sunan, Muqaddimah*, 13:182 Publ. Dár al-Fikr n.d. p.65
- 7 Ishráqát, *Majmú'ah-i-Alwáḥ*, Hofhein: 2000, p. 66 l.11 and last line.
- 8 Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot*, 6a.
- 9 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1967:210
- 10 Hertz, *Daily Prayer*, London: Soncino Press, 1976 p133.
- 11 Vahid Ra'fati, *Safīneye 'Irfán*, II, 1999, p58.

## 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Visit to North America, 1912: A Preliminary Analysis

Robert H. Stockman

'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbás visited North America from April 11 to December 5, 1912. His eight-month sojourn took Him to some 44 localities in 15 states and the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, Canada. Because His North American trip followed on an earlier European visit (Aug. 22-Dec. 2, 1911), when 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived in New York He had a developed routine. He established Himself in a hotel or, ideally, a rented house, so that He had the space to provide hospitality and the freedom to welcome people of all races. He held what today we would call a press conference shortly after arrival, then began a daily schedule that involved correspondence in the morning, private meetings with individuals and small groups, sometimes a public talk in the salon before lunch because the press of visitors became too great for individual meetings, an afternoon walk in a park (sometimes accompanied by a crowd) or an appointment, then an evening meeting, often in the house of a Bahá'í. The latter on occasion might start with dinner and continue into the late evening or early morning.

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived on April 11, He already had three invitations to major events: the Persian-American Educational Society annual conference in Washington, D.C., April 18-20; the Bahai Temple Unity annual convention a week later in Chicago; and the Lake Mohonk Peace Conference in the Catskill Mountains of central New York, May 14-16. Therefore, after nine days in New York City, during which He spoke at the Church of the Ascension,

Columbia University, New York University, and at the Bowery Mission, 'Abdu'l-Bahá went to Washington for a week (without visiting the Philadelphia and Baltimore Bahá'í communities), then Chicago for a week. At that point he had visited the three largest Bahá'í communities in the United States, located in the country's three most influential cities. He headed back to Washington, visiting the Cleveland and Pittsburgh Bahá'ís on the way, fulfilled further commitments in the American capital, then returned to New York City briefly and headed to Lake Mohonk. His first month was a whirlwind of activity.

For the next two months—from May 17 to July 23—'Abdu'l-Bahá used New York City as His headquarters. He rented a house, gave talks there during the afternoon and usually in the houses of Bahá'ís in the evening, and spoke to various churches and societies. From New York He made excursions to greater Boston (May 22-25), Philadelphia (June 8-10), and Montclair, New Jersey (June 21-29). Particularly notable were His talks at Clark University, the annual Unitarian Association conference, the annual meeting of the Free Religious Association, and Russell Conwell's moderately evangelical Baptist Temple in Philadelphia.

Escaping the heat and humidity of New York City, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made a two-day visit to Boston, then spent twenty-three days in Dublin, a major summer resort area for the wealthy in southern New Hampshire (July 25-Aug. 16). 'Abdu'l-Bahá initially planned to depart America in September.<sup>1</sup> The earnest pleading of the California Bahá'ís, however, caused Him to change plans and head west. Leaving Dublin, in the next two months He visited Green Acre Bahá'í School (Aug. 16-23), greater Boston again (Aug. 23-30), Montreal (Aug. 31-Sept. 9), Buffalo (Sept. 10-12), Chicago (Sept. 13-17, including a day visit to Kenosha, Wisconsin), Minneapolis-Saint Paul (Sept. 17-21), Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska (Sept.

22-23), Denver (Sept. 23-26), Glenwood Springs (Sept. 27-28), Salt Lake City (Sept. 29-Oct. 1), and the San Francisco area (Oct. 2-18).

In all those places, except Nebraska, Glenwood Springs, and Salt Lake City, there were local Bahá’í communities to plan meetings and secure speaking invitations at churches and synagogues. The stop in Nebraska was prompted because William Jennings Bryan, the former Presidential candidate and future Secretary of State, had visited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Akka and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wished to return the gesture; Mr. Bryan was traveling, but Mrs. Bryan entertained Him. The 22-hour Glenwood Springs visit was necessitated by exhaustion. The three-day stop in Salt Lake City is surprising; He did meet a Bahá’í travelling from Montana in the city, but had no Bahá’í community to visit. He expressed interest in the agriculture fair and perhaps was drawn by the spiritual character of the city, but He may also have decided not to arrive in California until after the funeral of Thornton Chase, so as not to be a distraction from the services for the first American Bahá’í.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá originally had no intention to travel outside the Bay area. The Bahá’ís in Portland and Seattle had hoped He would visit their cities and had even publicized speaking invitations, but had to satisfy themselves with a train trip to Oakland to visit Him. He made an exception to visit the grave of Thornton Chase, in Los Angeles (Oct. 18-21).

After four days more in the Bay area, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá started back east, visiting Sacramento (Oct. 25-26), Denver (Oct. 29), Chicago (Oct. 31-Nov. 4), Cincinnati (Nov. 5), Washington (Nov. 6-11), Baltimore (Nov. 11), and Philadelphia (for a few minutes on Nov. 11; thirty Bahá’ís got on the train for one stop to visit with Him). His last three and a half weeks in the United States were spent in New York City

(Nov. 12-Dec. 5). He took few public speaking engagements, but spoke daily in several Bahá'í homes and in His rented house.

A preliminary review of talks mentioned in *Mahmúd's Diary, Star of the West*, and other sources suggest that He gave approximately 375 talks during His trip (of which 139 were published in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*), an average of 1.5 per day. There were some days when He gave as many as four. Extrapolation from known attendance figures and some statistical assumptions allow one to arrive at a rough figure of 93,000 people who attended His talks.<sup>2</sup> His audience included high and low alike. In Washington, D.C., where the Bahá'ís had excellent contacts with government officials, and at the Lake Mohonk Peace Conference, which was a fairly small and exclusive gathering of influential men, He spoke with many of the influential figures in American society. Particularly noteworthy are the talks He gave in thirty-one liberal and moderate white Protestant churches, fourteen Theosophical and other metaphysical gatherings, five universities, three synagogues, one African American church, Hull House, at the Lake Mohonk Peace Conference, and at the fourth annual NAACP conference.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks can be divided roughly into two types: those to the public and those primarily to Bahá'í audiences. The former usually started with a reference to a common experience—a comment by the previous speaker, a scriptural text that had been just read, an event from the daily newspaper, or the weather. From there, a link was often made to a related event in the life of Christ, then to a comparison to the life of Bahá'u'lláh and finally to the theme 'Abdu'l-Bahá sought to develop, which He illustrated by stories or anecdotes. Sometimes He grounded theological points on rational proofs based on Neoplatonic principles, referring to the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, or to essences of things.

A message to the West gradually developed throughout His journey that emphasized up to eleven principles of the Bahá’í Faith: investigation of reality, the oneness of humanity, the oneness of religion and science, the abandonment of prejudices, the adjustment of economic standards, equality of men and women, universal education, religion must be a cause of love and unity, establishment of an equal standard of human rights, a universal language, and the power of the Holy Spirit. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá first used this approach to presenting the Faith to public audiences at meetings in Paris in November 1911.

Some of the eleven are emphasized in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, like universal education; others mentioned, like a universal language; yet others only implied in the texts available in the West at that time, like equality of the sexes. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also chose not to mention some principles stressed by Bahá’u’lláh, such as the importance of promoting agriculture.<sup>3</sup> The list of principles represented a crystallization of teachings that could already be found in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings and policies (such as encouraging the Iranian Bahá’ís to open schools for girls and to bring about the advancement of women). The talks, which were soon published in Persian, provided the Bahá’ís, east and west, with a new summary of some basic Bahá’í teachings, one particularly relevant to a modern, westernized audience.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not talk about principles right away in the United States. He first mentioned three principles in a talk at the Parsons residence in Washington, D.C., on April 25, expanded to seven principles to the Chicago press on April 30 and at the Hotel Schenley in Pittsburg on May 7, then spoke of eight principles in His chief address at Lake Mohonk on May 15. The order of the points was not fixed and the number varied from talk to talk (He gave ten principles at the Baptist Temple, Philadelphia, on June 9 and eleven at St. James Methodist Church in Montreal on September 5). Many

of these principles in turn become the sole theme of talks to other groups, such as Esperantists or women's clubs. His frequent support for women's suffrage often was featured in the headlines of newspaper articles about Him. In current Bahá'í terms, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks were active engagement in public discourse.

Other groups received specialized talks on other themes: Theosophists often heard about the oneness of God and progressive revelation; the poor often heard about the divine rewards awaiting the involuntarily impoverished poor who had the right attitude toward their lot. His synagogue talks were controversial. He offered proofs of the divine origin of the missions of Abraham and Moses, which were then used to prove that Jesus and Muhammad received authority from the same source. 'Abdu'l-Bahá then called on the Jews to recognize the prophethood of Jesus and Muhammad. But it would seem that He was not calling on them to renounce Judaism; rather, He was taking a position similar to that held by liberal Protestants, Jews, and Hindus, that religionists should acknowledge and respect each other's founders as a basis of dialogue and peace: "Whenever these people mention each other's leaders with due reverence then all sufferings and contentions shall cease, and instead of hatred there will be love and instead of enmity and disunity there will be harmony and affection. This is my purpose."<sup>4</sup>

A frequent and very important theme in many of His talks was the need to establish world peace. He proposed no easy solutions for this achievement, emphasizing the need for true and abiding love between all humans, striving to free oneself from prejudices (particularly national and racial), and a deep understanding of the implications of the oneness of humanity. His emphasis on profound personal spiritual transformation seems to have been missed by some of His audience, who sought superficial political and diplomatic solutions and sometimes understood His talks to consist of platitudes. He often began His discourse on the need for peace by stressing the

horrible bloodshed and destruction being wrought by the Italians in their unprovoked and unjustified campaign to wrest modern Libya from the Ottomans. When that war helped to spawn the first Balkan War—where Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, emboldened by Ottoman weakness in Libya, sought to enlarge their domains at the expense of the Turks—He condemned the bloodshed there, warned it would continue, and praised efforts to end the war. At least six times in His North American travels—in New York City, Milford, PA, Montreal, Buffalo, Omaha, and Sacramento—He warned that Europe was a powder keg and a much greater and more destructive war there was coming. The Balkan War set the conditions for World War One.

Talks to Bahá’ís, on the other hand—especially the last talk to them in each locality—usually emphasized two things: first, the Covenant and obedience to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Center of the Covenant, and second, teaching the Faith.<sup>5</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá warned against association with Covenant-breakers, gave examples of communities that were avoiding them effectively, and noted that communities with enduring connections to them tended to be stagnant. He warned specific Bahá’ís about their connections with Covenant-breakers and even temporarily expelled Howard MacNutt from the community for his failure to understand and obey. He met with the governing bodies of the Chicago and New York Bahá’ís and had the former reorganized and reelected. He often mentioned the Universal House of Justice that would be formed in the future, thus alluding to aspects of His Will and Testament—already drafted but still not public—and presaging the development of the Bahá’í Administrative Order.<sup>6</sup>

Such talks, clearly, were designed to build a distinct, separate Bahá’í community, not to encourage those interested in Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to remain in their churches and leaven them from within. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laid the cornerstone of the Bahá’í House of Worship when He visited the Chicago area, an act of great historic significance that was also designed to build a distinct and separate



religious community. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not emphasize distinctive aspects of Bahá'í practice. There are no references to talks where He discussed fasting or Bahá'í obligatory prayer, even though some Bahá'ís were already following these practices. He was in North America for eight of the nine Bahá'í holy days, but generally did not commemorate them. He did not tell the Bahá'ís that they should stop consuming alcohol, though a few had already done so. Rather, He deferred implementation of these aspects of Bahá'í practice to a future time.

Where teaching the Faith was concerned, He stressed that a Bahá'í must love humanity, seek to serve others, and develop such a burning passion for people and service that others would be attracted to the Cause. The Bahá'í communities themselves had to strengthen their love and unity to the point where they became magnets for others. Bahá'ís also should go out to other places to proclaim the teachings. He had already encouraged regional and international Bahá'í teaching trips for at least eight years and at least six North American Bahá'ís had already traveled across Asia to speak about the Faith.<sup>7</sup> The foundation for the Tablets of the Divine Plan had already been laid before His North American visit, and His talks to the Bahá'ís about teaching did much to prepare them for the ambitious goals He was to give them four short years later.

Nearly 200 newspaper articles about His visit are currently available in the archives in Wilmette. Coverage was almost uniformly positive, in spite of the critical comments of Christian missionaries and a few verbal challenges by Covenant-breakers. The positive treatment surprised the Bahá'ís, who feared 'Abdu'l-Bahá "would simply be placed on a level with many traveling 'Swamis.'" As Thornton Chase, the first American Bahá'í, noted, "there is evidently a certain strength, sincerity, righteousness, wisdom, knowledge, and nobility manifesting from him, as an aura of spiritual power, that even our flippant and calloused news men are restrained by it."<sup>8</sup> This comment also

highlights another characteristic of 'Abdu'l-Bahá an aspect feebly captured by the overused term charisma—which was commented on in a variety of ways by those who met Him.

Another notable feature of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit was His emphasis on race unity. There are no reports indicating that the Hindu or Buddhist teachers who had come to America had made efforts to meet African Americans or attend their events. When in Washington 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke at Howard University and to the Bethel Literary Society at Metropolitan A. M. E Church. He charged Agnes Parson, a wealthy white socialite, with the mission of promulgating race unity. In Chicago He attended a session of the 4<sup>th</sup> annual convention of the NAACP. He arranged to speak at a special gathering of the African American servants of the wealthy whites vacationing in Dublin, N.H. In San Francisco He visited an ill African American Bahá'í in his house. In New York He arranged for a special banquet for African American Bahá'ís turned away from the official farewell banquet at the Great Northern Hotel. That evening, white Bahá'ís served their black co-religionists.

Equality of the races was a frequent theme He underlined when speaking about the oneness of humankind. His insistence that Louis Gregory, an African American Bahá'í attorney, be seated at His right hand at a formal luncheon hosted by the Persian legation and attended by prominent Washingtonians made a major statement about inclusion and violated almost every spoken and unspoken rule about racial separation in that segregated city. His encouragement of Louis Gregory and Louise Mathews—a British Bahá'í who accompanied Him to America—to consider marriage, led to their union on September 27, 1912, the first interracial marriage in the American Bahá'í community.<sup>9</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá carried out an exhausting and demanding schedule, day after day, for many months in spite of the fact that He was 68

years old and suffering from the ill effects of forty years of imprisonment and privation. His health in August of 1910 was so bad that He rested in Egypt an entire year, even though His initial plan was to follow a one-month sojourn in Port Said with an immediate trip to Europe (GPB).<sup>10</sup> His four-month sojourn in Europe, beginning in August, 1911, required a second Egyptian rest of three months. After arriving in the U.S., at times He spoke several times in a single day in spite of fever. The heat and humidity of summer impaired His health, which was a reason He went to Dublin, New Hampshire, for three weeks, and one reason He initially planned to leave North America for Europe in September. While traveling by train He often eschewed comfort and slept upright on a passenger seat, though on the transcontinental trip from San Francisco to Chicago He did agree to Pullman accommodation every other night.

One approach to assessing the impact of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America and its Bahá'ís is to compare His visit to that of other "Oriental" religious leaders. He was not the first Asian religious teacher to come to the United States; that honor is held by Protap Chunder Mozoomdar (1840-1905), a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, an important early Hindu nationalist movement. Mozoomdar visited over sixty Unitarian churches and a few Congregationalist churches in New England, New York, Washington, D.C., greater Chicago, and San Francisco, between August 28 and November 24, 1883. Because Mozoomdar emphasized Hindu monotheism and expressed great love and respect for Christ, he was often called a Unitarian, though he personally rejected the label. On his second American trip in 1893, Mozoomdar spoke at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, then went to Indianapolis, Buffalo, Boston, New York City, and Washington, reportedly delivering over two hundred talks in three months. He returned to the United States for five weeks in May and June 1900 to visit Unitarian churches and organizations in Massachusetts and to travel to New York City and Washington, D.C.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporaneously, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) spoke at the Parliament and went on a three-month tour of the United States, to which he returned in 1896-97 and at least once subsequently. Dharmapala's talks stimulated considerable interest in Buddhism and one American became a Buddhist, though no specific Buddhist group resulted.

Better known is Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) of the Rama Krishna Mission, who spoke repeatedly at the Parliament and then crisscrossed the United States for two and a half years, lecturing on Hinduism, critiquing "Christian civilization," and criticizing missionaries for attempting to Christianize India. Vivekananda's aggressive speaking style, his eloquent English accented with a slight brogue, and his impressive education in western philosophy made him a formidable and controversial speaker, which may explain why his travels in the United States are remembered by scholars of religion better than anyone else's. Vivekananda spoke to opera house audiences, women's clubs, and Unitarian churches; he was rarely invited to speak in a mainline Protestant place of worship. Those doors, however, were open to 'Abdu'l-Bahá fifteen years later.

Unlike the other teachers, Vivekananda created a community of American converts, the Vedanta Society, though the group had only a hundred or so members when Vivekananda left America, had less than two hundred members in 1912, and in the early twenty-first century has grown to 2,500 adherents.<sup>12</sup> His group has never approached the American Bahá'í community in size. The early followers were nearly all wealthy, educated, European Americans.

All three South Asian religious leaders included fund raising for their various projects among their pleas. Vivekananda had to pay for his own traveling expenses; he sold tickets to many of his lectures. In contrast 'Abdu'l-Bahá received a steady stream of financial support from the Persian Bahá'í community and accepted no such support at

all from Americans before or during His western tour. When American Bahá'ís tried to donate money to Him, he refused it and urged them to give it to charity.

Mozoomdar, Dharmapala, Vivekanada, and other eastern teachers such as D. T. Suzuki (the principal founder of Zen Buddhism in the United States, whose wife, interestingly enough, was an American Bahá'í)<sup>13</sup> had a measurable impact on American culture because they were the harbingers of ancient and vast religious-cultural traditions; they were the tip of an iceberg, the rest of which was increasingly accessible because of colonialism, growing commercial ties with Asia, military involvement in the region, tourism, and extensive wealth that could be lavished on the endowing of university chairs and the subvention of extensive translation efforts. In contrast, in 1912—and even today—the Bahá'í Faith is a small religious community, a minority in every land where it is found, with a relatively undeveloped secondary literature and cultural expressions. As a result, no cultural, commercial, and political forces were available to continue the momentum started by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit.

The other Asian teachers attended a pivotal event in American religious history: the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in September, 1893. They helped to make the Parliament a pivotal event because their presence on the stage as equals to the Christians implied an equality between Christianity and other religions, an idea either flatly rejected or beyond the imagination of most American Christians of the time. By puncturing stereotypes of "heathen" religions—sometimes in dramatic and controversial ways—they inaugurated a revolution in thinking that moved Christianity from "the truth" to "a religion" like the others.

They also helped move a myriad of liberal Protestants toward an appreciation of and sympathy toward other religions, thereby building on the insights and enthusiasms of the earlier generations of

Transcendentalists. Thus, for example, the twenty year old Ernest Hocking—decades later a prominent Harvard philosopher and an important lay Protestant thinker—attended a talk by Vivekananda at the World’s Parliament of Religions and came away with the realization that secular thinkers like Herbert Spencer did not have the last word about the biological and psychological origins of religion; rather, that transcendent religious experience was real, whether experienced by a Hindu like Vivekananda or a Methodist like himself.<sup>14</sup> Hocking went on to pen a preface to the Bhagavad-Gita and to chair a major liberal Protestant commission that reexamined the nature and purpose of international Protestant missionary work in the 1930s.

The nearest equivalent to Ernest Hocking, in the Bahá’í context, was Thomas Kelly Cheyne (1841-1915), a prominent Oxford scholar of the Old Testament and an advocate of higher biblical criticism, who met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when He visited Britain in 1913, became a Bahá’í in 1914, and wrote a book, *The Reconciliation of Races and Religions*, which was published that year. There is also the example of Albert Léon Guérard (1880-1959), a professor of French at Stanford University, who attended ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talk there in October 1912. Guérard, a French Protestant who became an Episcopalian, was intrigued and maintained a lifelong interest in Bahá’í ideas about race unity, world peace, a world government, and an international language. But the extent to which they influenced his humanist thinking—he published 28 books—or his active support of internationalist causes such as the United Nations remains to be explored.<sup>15</sup> He himself never indicated to Bahá’ís that Bahá’í ideas had shaped his thinking significantly.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited America in 1912, thought systems such as the Social Gospel, Progressivism, and liberal Protestantism offered tentative solutions to the dilemmas raised by Darwinism, higher biblical criticism, and comparative religion; solutions that were not to collapse until the end of World War One. Consequently, while

'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks and information about the Bahá'í principles no doubt encouraged and strengthened some thinkers, such as Guérard and Cheyne, in their commitment to world peace or racial reconciliation, His impact outside the Bahá'í community was necessarily limited. This is especially true because, two years after His travels in America, World War One erupted and forced most intellectuals to reconsider their fundamental assumptions. Furthermore, the Bahá'í principles of social reform can only be partially implemented in a secular context; much of their efficacy depends on a strong and numerically significant Bahá'í community, organized within the Bahá'í administrative system.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit greatly strengthened and deepened the American Bahá'í community, which existed partially because the earlier Asian teachers had pushed open the door to conversion to non-Christian religions. When He arrived eighteen years after the founding of the American Bahá'í community, there were between 1,500 and 3,000 American Bahá'ís—depending on whether one counts only the more active followers or includes the more loosely attracted sympathizers—located in dozens of cities. This number may seem small, but the 1916 United States religious census counted 86,000 Unitarians, 59,000 Universalists, 29,000 Spiritualists, 5,400 Theosophists, 2,900 Bahá'ís, and 190 Vedantists.<sup>16</sup> In terms of attracting Americans of European background, the Bahá'í Faith had done much better than Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam. Unlike those attracted to other Asian religions, the Bahá'ís tended to be more economically diverse: there were significant numbers of middle and working class Bahá'ís and even several score African American members. As a result, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived, there already were local Bahá'í communities in place with the ability to organize numerous public and private meetings—sometimes months in advance—publicize them through the newspapers, and attract inquirers from among the rank and file of the local population.

The Bahá’ís in 1912 were not well organized and sometimes uncertain whether they were a separate religious community or a leaven destined to spread Bahá’í teachings within the existing churches. This may be one reason why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit did not produce a great increase in dedicated followers. But it did bring in dozens of committed Bahá’ís (notably Robert Abbott, Victoria Bedekian, Howard Colby Ives, Ruth Moffett, Harry Randall, and Albert Vail) who heard of the Faith during His visit. It transformed some persons, such as Howard MacNutt and Agnes Parsons, who had to change some of their fundamental attitudes as a result of His visit. It strengthened the faith and devotion of some younger Bahá’ís, such as Grace Roberts Ober, George Latimer, and Fred Mortensen. It solidified the Bahá’í identity of many children of Bahá’ís, who often considered 1912 to be the year they accepted Bahá’u’lláh. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “*I have planted the Seeds in America. You must nurture them and care for them. If you do this, they will yield an abundant harvest.*”<sup>17</sup> The direct impact of His visit on the strength of the American Bahá’í community was notable for decades.

Ironically, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit also sharpened the division within the American Bahá’í community between those who emphasized close adherence to the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh and the interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and those who saw the Bahá’í Faith as a renewal of existing metaphysical and mystical teachings. The latter tended to relativize the Faith’s distinctive teachings and metaphorically interpret or ignore the teachings they found distasteful or backward. They seized on comments ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made in public talks and to non-Bahá’ís that implied the Bahá’ís should not organize or form a distinct community. Because they were often epistemological individualists, they tended to oppose efforts to organize the Bahá’í community by those who sought to follow ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance closely. The tension resulted in several incidents of Covenant-breaking before the decade was over and was not ultimately resolved until



Shoghi Effendi began to implement the terms of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament and build Bahá'í institutions in the 1920s.<sup>18</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá was very pleased by the way Americans received Him: "In America . . . people are more spiritual, they seek the knowledge of God, they hail the truth no matter from what quarter it comes."<sup>19</sup> Diary entries by His secretary, Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, record His sometimes gleeful comments about how audiences responded to His talks; His tablets often overflowed with pleasure; and He frequently had His Persian secretaries send bundles of newspaper clippings to Haifa or Iran so that others could share in His happiness. The Persian pages of *The Star of the West* spread positive reports of His trip throughout the Persian-speaking Bahá'í world. The confidence and increased self esteem that such reports gave to the Bahá'ís of Iran was of great significance.

The Hindu and Buddhist teachers to North America brought about something similar in their home countries, although the homeland responses to them can be divided into two types: internal to their movement and external in their culture. Their travels often solidified their own importance in their groups and strengthened the group's importance in their national cultures. Indian and Sri Lankan newspapers followed their talks at the World's Parliament and their subsequent lecture tours. As a result, Vivekananda went from a relatively unknown and untested leader of the Sri Ramakrishna Mission to the celebrated leader of one of India's most important Hindu modernizing groups, conjoining devotion to the Vedas, ecstatic bhakti worship, and the creation of modern schools and hospitals. Mozoomdar and Vivekananda became recognized as fathers of Indian nationalism. Dharmapala became seen as the great leader in Sri Lankan Buddhism, as one of the most internationally important Buddhists of his day, and as a key figure in the revival of Sri Lankan culture and nationalism.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to North America remained largely unknown to Iranian non-Bahá’ís, but one can predict that its cultural importance can only grow as more hear about it, read His talks, and come to reiterate His teachings about the oneness of humanity, world peace, equality of men and women, and universal human rights. Perhaps a secularized narrative about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá will develop, just as one has begun to form about the Bábí heroine Táhírih.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s trip to the western world, according to Shoghi Effendi, was the “culmination” of His ministry and its “greatest exploit.”<sup>20</sup> The effect He had on the development of the American Bahá’í community was considerable, but much of the impact will be felt in the future, as the Bahá’í community continues to grow and applies His teachings to the urgent problems facing humanity.

NOTES

- 1 *Star of the West*, vol. 3, no. 8, page 22.
- 2 This number is arrived at by assuming 100 attendees in home meetings, 200 at hotel meetings, and 500 in churches. Published attendance figures often exceed these figures, so the total may be low.
- 3 Bahá'u'lláh lists the importance of developing agriculture as His fifth principle in the *Lawh-i-Dunyá* (Tablet of the World), but notes that “although it hath been mentioned in the fifth place, unquestionably it precedeth the others” (Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 90). He provides various lists of Bahá'í teachings or principles in His tablets of *Ishráqát*, *Tarázát*, *Tajallíyyát*, *Bishárát*, but none of the lists correspond closely to the lists 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave in His talks in North America or Europe.
- 4 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Mahmúd's Diary* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998), 381.
- 5 *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 455, 457-58; Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd's Diary*, 128, 135, 137, 166-67, 339-41, 346-47, 390.
- 6 Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd's Diary*, 127-28, 132, 167, 268, 277, 371, 392.
- 7 The travels of Sydney Sprague, Harlan Ober, Hooper Harris, Laura Barney, Charles Mason Remey, and Howard Struven have been summarized or mentioned in Robert H. Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 2: *Early Expansion, 1900-1912* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995).
- 8 Thornton Chase, “Impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His Station,” comp. Robert H. Stockman, *World Order*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Fall, 1993), 20.
- 9 Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 67.
- 10 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 280.
- 11 Sunrit Mullick, *The First Hindu Mission to America: The Pioneering Visits of Protap Chunder Mozoomdar* (New Delhi: Northern Book Center, 2010) provides separate chapters on all three of his visits to the U.S.

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- 12 Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 108.
- 13 *Star of the West*, vol. 2, no. 17, p. 13.
- 14 William Ernest Hocking, “Recollections of Swami Vivekananda,” quoted in Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries: His Prophetic Mission, Part One*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), 117–18.
- 15 “MEMORIAL RESOLUTION: ALBERT LEON GUÉRARD (1880–1959)” at <http://histsoc.stanford.edu/pdfmem/GuerardAL.pdf>; “Telephone Conversation with Firuz Kazemzadeh, September 15, 2010, 32 minutes,” author’s personal papers; “Telephone Conversation with Dr. Amin Banani, Tuesday, September 13, 2010; 21 minutes,” author’s personal papers.
- 16 <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/00190404p1ch2.pdf>. The membership data was self reported to the Census Department.
- 17 Words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “to a little group of Americans in Paris” in 1913, *Star of the West*, vol. 4, p. 256.
- 18 Peter Smith details these issues in his essay “The American Bahá’í Community, 1893-1912: A Preliminary Survey,” in Moojan Momen, *Studies in Bábí and Bahá’í History*, vol. 1 (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982), 225-53.
- 19 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *Star of the West*, vol. 13, no. 9, p. 6.
- 20 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 295. (GPB)

## Authority and Centrality of the Universal House of Justice<sup>1</sup>

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!”<sup>2</sup> to reach the ears of the denizens of His Kingdom.



## Authority and Centrality of the Universal House of Justice

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  
Baha'i World Center

cc: International Teaching Centre  
Counsellor Jabbar Eidelkhani

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This is the English version of a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice in Persian to the Friends in Iran. This replaces its courtesy translation which was available in 2010 and was previously published in the Elucidation section of the *Lights of 'Irfán*, Book Eleven.
- <sup>2</sup> Qur'án 39:69.

## Memorandum

To: Universal House of Justice

Date: 22 February 1998

From: Research Department

### Whether the Apostle Paul was a “False Teacher”

The Research Department has studied the query contained in the email of 8 December 1997 to the Baha’i World Centre from Mr. .... Mr. ... states that “some years ago” he read a letter in *The American Bahá’í*, which quoted from a statement of the Research Department concerning the Apostle Paul. He recalls that this statement “covered references in the Baha’i Writings to Paul and noted that there was no support for the view that Paul was a ‘false teacher’”. Mr. ... is requesting a copy of this statement by the Research Department.

It seems likely to us that the letter which Mr. ... recalls reading is the one published in the “Letters” section of *The American Bahá’í*, 4 November 1992, volume 23, number 16, page 11. We have attached a photocopy of this page for his convenience and note that in the letter to the editor in question, the writer introduces the term “false teacher” in his introductory remarks; it does not appear in any of the material he quotes. It is also important to clarify that the writer is quoting (with some inaccuracy) a reference to the Research Department in a letter dated 25 November 1980 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice.

Regarding Mr. ...’s request, therefore, it seems appropriate to provide him with an extract from the House of Justice’s letter cited above which contains the reference to the Research Department and the full text of the discussion of Peter and Paul. For clarity, we have

preceded this extract by the incoming query to which this discussion is a response. Thus:

**Incoming Query from an individual:**

Also I would like to know if there is any statement in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá or the letters of the Guardian that state that Saint Paul "usurped the station of Peter, and that Saint Paul completely "changed the basic message of Jesus Christ." This is the substance of a section of a book recently published by George Ronald Pub. Co....

**Response of the Universal House of Justice**

Concerning the relationship of St. Peter and St. Paul, the Research Department has found nothing in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá or the Guardian which states that St. Paul "usurped the station of Peter" or that he "completely changed the basic message of Christ."

Of St. Peter, the beloved Guardian has written:

...let it be stated without any hesitation or equivocation that... the primacy of Peter, the Prince of the apostles, is upheld and defended. (*The Promised Day is Come*,<sup>1</sup> p. 109)

...Peter is recognized as one whom God has caused "the mysteries of wisdom and of utterance to flow out of his mouth." (*The Promised Day is Come*,<sup>2</sup> p. 110)

Now with regard to your questions. First concerning the statement of Jesus Christ "Thou art Peter and upon this rock...": this saying of Jesus establishes beyond any doubt the primacy of Peter and also the principle of succession, but is not explicit enough regarding the nature and functioning of the Church itself. The Catholics have read too much into that statement, and derived from it certain conclusions which are

## Whether the Apostle Paul was a “False Teacher”

quite unjustifiable. (From a letter dated 7 September 1938 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer)

Bahá'u'lláh Himself has testified that the original Message of Jesus has not been lost. You are undoubtedly familiar with the passage on page 89 of the Kitáb-i-Íqán,<sup>3</sup> where He states:

We have also heard a number of the foolish of the earth assert that the genuine text of the heavenly Gospel doth not exist amongst the Christians, that it hath ascended unto heaven. How grievously they have erred! How oblivious of the fact that such a statement imputeth the gravest injustice and tyranny to a gracious and living Providence! How could God, when once the daystar of the beauty of Jesus had disappeared from the sight of His people, and ascended unto the fourth heaven, cause His holy Book, His most great testimony amongst His creatures, to disappear also? What would be left to that people to cling to from the setting of the daystar of Jesus until the rise of the sun of the Muhammadan Dispensation?

In is indisputable, however, that many erroneous teachings have entered into Christianity, obscured the pure Gospel and caused disunity and schism. This is explained by the Guardian on pages 20 and 21 of the compilation entitled *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, where he points out that

...the fundamental reason why the unity of the Church of Christ was irretrievably shattered, and its influence was in the course of time undermined, was that the Edifice which the Fathers of the Church reared after the passing of His First Apostle was an Edifice that rested in no wise upon the explicit directions of Christ Himself.

It is also undeniable that St. Peter had to face many problems in his own lifetime. On page 145 of *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, the Guardian writes:

Could Peter, the admitted chief of the Apostles, or the Imám Alí, the cousin and legitimate successor of the Prophet, produce in support of the primacy with which both had been invested written and explicit affirmations from Christ and Muhammad that could have silenced those who either among their contemporaries or in a later age have repudiated their authority and, by their action, precipitated the schisms that persist until the present day?

That St. Paul on occasion disputed with St. Peter is seen from St. Paul's own words in the Epistle to the Galatians, 2:11–14. It is also St. Paul who mentions early divisions among the Christians, which he endeavours to heal, in I Corinthians 1:11–13. St. Peter's attitude to St. Paul appears in II Peter 3:15–18.

In considering the relationship between St. Peter and St. Paul, one needs to bear in mind all of these various factors. High praise is accorded to them both in the Bahá'í Writings. A particularly pertinent statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá appears on page 223 of the new publication *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*:<sup>4</sup>

One's conduct must be like the conduct of Paul, and one's faith similar to that of Peter (25 February 1980 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual)

Mr. ... may also find of interest the following extract from a letter written by the Universal House of Justice regarding whether Paul was a "Covenant-breaker":

## Whether the Apostle Paul was a “False Teacher”

Your letter... concerning the question of Saint Paul as an alleged Covenant-breaker doubtless arises from the comments of those who seek to compare the evolution of early Christianity with the origins of the Bahá'í Faith.

You are correct in noting such questions from the Writings as the one cited from the *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbás*, which confirm the high rank of the Apostle Paul in the Christian Dispensation.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, while there is no doubt that the Bahá'í teachings uphold the primacy of Peter (see *The Promised Day is Come*, page 113)<sup>6</sup> we know of no text stating that Paul was a Covenant-breaker. We have heard of a pilgrim's note to this effect, but it cannot be given credence in the absence of any validation. (13 August 1972 to an individual believer)

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### NOTES

- 1 Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980.
- 4 sec. 189) Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978.
- 5 “Physical nearness or remoteness is of no importance; the essential fact is the spiritual affinity and ideal nearness. Judas Iscariot was for a long time favored in the holy court of His Holiness Christ, yet he was entirely far and remote; while Paul, the apostle, was in close embrace with His Holiness.” (*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbás*, vol. 3 (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, pp. 719–20.
- 6 Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1941.

## Memorandum

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 2 April 2012

From: Research Department

### **The Religion of the Sabaeans and African-based religions in the Americas**

The Research Department has studied a number of questions regarding the religion of the Sabaeans, and African-based religions in the Americas such as Yoruba, Santería and Brazilian Candomblé.

#### **Religion of the Sabaeans**

The Bahá'í Teachings contain few references to Sabaeism. Bahá'u'lláh, in His Tablets in the Persian language, describes two different groups as Sabaeans. They are:

1. the followers of an ancient religion who worship idols named after stars and who claim to have taken their religion from Seth and Idrís
2. the followers of John the Baptist who failed to recognize Jesus as the Manifestation of God. He further states that this group is known to some as the Sabaeans and that it continues to exist in the world.

Some scholars also refer to the followers of John the Baptist as the Mandaeans. Currently, there are small communities of Mandaeans living in Iraq and Iran.

As to the Sabaeans who claim to derive their religion from Seth and Idrís, the Research Department has, to date, been able to locate only one additional brief reference in the Bahá'í Writings to Seth. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2007), p. 516, the Master describes Seth as one of the “sons of Adam”.

There are, however, two very interesting references to Idrís contained in a footnote which appears on p. 148 of *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988). One is a quotation from the Qur'án 19:57–58, which states:

And commemorate Idrís in the Book; for he was a man of truth, a Prophet; And we uplifted him to a place on high.

The second is a statement by Bahá'u'lláh in which He identifies Idrís with Hermes:

The first person who devoted himself to philosophy was Idrís. Thus was he named. Some called him also Hermes. In every tongue he hath a special name. He it is who hath set forth in every branch of philosophy thorough and convincing statements. After him Balínús derived his knowledge and sciences from the Hermetic Tablets and most of the philosophers who followed him made their philosophical and scientific discoveries from his words and statements.

The connection between Idrís and Sabaeism is interesting because it confirms not only the extreme antiquity of this group of Sabaeans, but also the fact that knowledge of the religion has spread over the earth—Bahá'u'lláh affirms concerning Idrís, “In every tongue he hath a special name”. It should be noted, however, that Bahá'u'lláh does not specifically name Idrís as the Prophet of the Sabaeans.



## The Religion of the Sabaeans

In letters written on his behalf, cited below, Shoghi Effendi stresses the general lack of conclusive historical records concerning the origins of the Sabaeen religion:

Regarding Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's statement in his book *The Bahá'í Proofs* to the effect that the great religions of the world, excluding the Dispensations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, are seven in number: what the author meant by that statement is that there are only seven great religions of which there is some existing trace or record, and not that only seven religions have so far appeared in the world. These seven religions mentioned by Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl are the following: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the religion of the Sabaeans, which was originally monotheistic, and became gradually corrupted, and to which Abraham's forefathers are believed to have belonged. (letter dated 9 July 1939 to an individual believer)

As to the religion of the Sabaeans, very little is known about the origins of this religion, though we Bahá'ís are certain of one thing, that the founder of it has been a divinely-sent Messenger. The country where Sabaeanism became widespread and flourished was Chaldea, and Abraham is considered as having been a follower of that Faith. (letter dated 10 November 1939 to an individual believer)

With reference to your question concerning the Sabaeen and Hindu religions: there is nothing in the Teachings that could help us in ascertaining which one of these two Faiths is older. Neither history seems to be able to provide a definite answer to this question. The records concerning the origin of these religions are not sufficiently detailed and reliable to offer any conclusive evidence on this point. (letter dated 9 November 1940 to an individual believer)

The teachings throw no light on the Prophet of the Sabaeans. The followers of this religion lived in Ur of the Chaldees, where Abraham appeared. (letter dated 30 July 1941 to an individual believer)

For more information on this subject, Mr. ... is also referred to the writings of Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, specifically, *The Bahá'í Proofs* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), and an article entitled "Explanation of Daniel's Interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's Dream" which is published in *Star of the West*, April 28, 1916, vol. VII, no. 3, pp. 17–24.

In relation to the second group, that is the followers of John the Baptist or the Mandeans, Bahá'u'lláh states that this group continues to exist in the world. Further historical and archaeological research will, no doubt, be required to corroborate the link between Sabaeism and traditional African beliefs.

#### **African-based religions in the Americas**

Mr. ... enquires whether the Bahá'í Writings comment on the immense popularity and current explosive growth of these Yoruba-based religions in the New World and he asks about the Bahá'í view of the "possession" that takes place during the ceremonies that invoke the Yoruba "Orishas" (spirits, "gods").

While we have not found any specific reference to these religious movements in the writings of the Faith, Mr. ... might well be interested in Shoghi Effendi's discussion of the "universal fermentation" that characterizes the "Age of Transition", one feature of which is the decline in recognized religions and the subsequent "emergence of an increasing number of obscure cults, of strange and new worships, of ineffective philosophies, whose sophisticated doctrines have intensified the confusion of a troubled age."<sup>1</sup>

## The Religion of the Sabaeans

As to the Bahá'í view of the "possession" that takes place during Yoruba ceremonies and other such "supernatural" phenomena, Mr. ... might find it useful to refer to *Some Answered Questions*, page 252. 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicates that, in general, the "converse, presence and communications of spirits is but imagination and fancy, which only appears to have reality". The Universal House of Justice in a letter dated 30 August 1984 written on its behalf to an individual believer provides the following guidance concerning the attitude toward the "psychic arts" of other people:

The important thing for Bahá'ís to understand is that the influence of such "arts" is dependent on the conviction, even the sub-conscious conviction, of the person affected and, similarly, the power of the "priests" to overcome the influence is likewise an outcome of the sufferer's conviction that it is from the "priest" that he or she will be able to obtain help.

We wish to draw Mr. ...'s attention to the following extracts, drawn from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, which summarize the Bahá'í teachings on this topic:

We must use the Writings of the Prophets as our measurement. If Bahá'u'lláh had attached the slightest importance to occult experiences, to the seeing of auras, to the hearing of mystic voices; if He had believed that reincarnation was a fact, He, Himself, would have mentioned all of these things in His Teachings. The fact that He passed over them in silence shows that to Him, they had either no importance or no reality, and were consequently not worthy to take up His time as the Divine Educator of the human race.

We must turn our faces away from these things, and toward the actual practice of His Teachings in our everyday life through our Bahá'í Administration, and in our contact

with other people and the examples we give. (From a letter dated 22 April 1954 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

While such accounts are interesting and provoke one's curiosity, we have no way of checking the veracity of such experiences. Shoghi Effendi has advised in his letters to the friends who asked him about psychic powers that we do not understand the nature of such phenomena, that we have no way of being sure of what is true and what is false, that very little is known about the mind and its workings, and that we should endeavour to avoid giving undue consideration to such matters. (From a letter dated 16 May 1985 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

## The Religion of the Sabaeans

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### NOTES

- 1 See *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), pp. 170–186.

## Supreme Tribunal (*Mahkamiy-i-Kubra*)

### Question

What is meant by Bahá'í Court (in the Writings of the Guardian)? What is "Mahkamiy-i- Kubra" mentioned in the Writings and how does it differ from the Universal House of Justice? Is it the same as the General Assembly of the United Nations or it will be one of the organs of the Bahá'í Administrative Order?

### Answer

1. Regarding the Supreme Tribunal or the Supreme Court (*Mahkamiy-i-Kubra*), this term is used in Bahá'í Writings with different connotations. Sometimes it is a reference to the institutions of the Lesser Peace. (For example in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to Dr. Forel, He outlines the method which could be followed at such a time).

At other times, however, when the context is the Bahá'í World Commonwealth, the World Tribunal becomes one of the principal organs, operating under the Universal House of Justice. That would be in the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Dispensation.

A study of the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice will show you that in its Declaration of Trust, five paragraphs are devoted to describe the powers and duties of the Supreme Body. The last paragraph consists of its judicial authority. It is this authority that it will transfer to the World Tribunal of the Great Peace, and then of the Most Great Peace.

There is yet another application of the term “court” in the writings of Shoghi Effendi.

You find this explained in “The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh” page 200. You will also find reference to such courts in the goals of the Ten Year Crusade—both internationally and nationally— for countries in the East, where religious courts (for Jews, Christians and Muslims) had been established during the Ottoman Rule. This region included Palestine—later carried over by Israel.

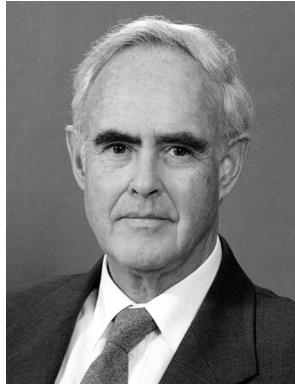
This was why Shoghi Effendi anticipated that the International Bahá'í Council would become such a religious Bahá'í court for Israel, if circumstances permitted. On the national level, the National Assembly of the country would become such a Bahá'í religious court but this has not yet materialized.

Ali Nakhjavani

March 14, 2012

# IN MEMORIAM





**Ian Chalmers Semple** (December 2, 1928–December 1, 2011) was a member of the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, from 1963 to 2005. Mr. Semple was a popular speaker and delivered any number of well-researched and elucidating talks on key topics related to fundamental Bahá'í tenets at various Bahá'í gatherings. He was a sincere supporter of the `Irfán Colloquium and a valuable contributor to the *Lights of `Irfán*. The texts of some of his talks are published in Books Six, Nine, Ten and Twelve, of the *Lights of `Irfán*. In addition the texts of the following talks are published in other sources:

*Interpretation and the Guardianship*, a talk given at a seminar in Haifa on 18 February 1984.

*Obedience*, a talk given on 26 July 1991 in the Reception Concourse of the Seat of the House of Justice in the Spiritual Enrichment Program.

*Knowledge and the Covenant*, a talk given at the Conference on Knowledge and Scholarship on 5–6 December 1997 in the U.K.

*From the Tablets of the Divine Plan to the Ridván Message 2007*, a talk given at the Swiss Winter School 25–30 December 2007

*The International Bahá'í Council and the Universal House of Justice*, a talk given at the Changing Times Conference in the Czech Republic in December 2008

*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, a talk given at the Changing Times Conference in the Czech Republic in December 2008

Mr. Semple was born in New Barnet, England, U. K. He did his national service in the British Army, during which period he earned a commission in the Royal Corps of Signals. Mr. Semple studied at Pembroke College, Oxford University, obtaining a BA degree in German and French Languages and Literature in 1952, and an MA degree in 1955. He subsequently studied accounting in the City of London, qualifying as a Chartered Accountant in 1955, becoming a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales.

In 1950, the last year of the British Bahá'í community's Six Year Plan, Mr. Semple embraced Bahá'í Faith and joined British Bahá'í community and served as an active member of a number of the National Committees for the next several years. In 1956 he was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the British Isles and served as its secretary. In 1957 he was appointed as a member of the Auxiliary Board in Europe with particular responsibility for the north of England, Scotland, Norway and Sweden. In 1961 he was elected to the International Bahá'í Council, and moved his residence to Haifa. In 1963 he was elected to the Universal House of Justice and served in that capacity until 2005. After retirement, Ian moved to Bulle, Switzerland, where many members of his family live. He is survived by his wife Louise, whom he married in 1963, two sons, Michael and Nick, and a daughter, Jenny.

The sad news of the sudden passing of Mr. Ian Semple was announced by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world in the following message:

In Memoriam

**THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE**  
**Bahá'í World Centre • P.O. Box 155 • 31001 Haifa, Israel**

Transmitted by email

TO: All National Spiritual Assemblies

DATE: 1 December 2011

MESSAGE:

Our hearts are laden with sorrow at the passing to the Abhá Kingdom of our dearly loved former colleague Ian C. Semple, staunch, clear-sighted, outstanding servant of the Blessed Beauty. Having embraced the Cause of God in the prime of his youth while at university, he devoted his considerable energies, eloquent pen and keen intellect to its protection and to the promotion of its vital interests throughout the rest of his life. A distinguished record of six decades of uninterrupted labour in the Divine Vineyard included service as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, of the Auxiliary Board for Propagation in Europe and of the International Bahá'í Council, and culminated in forty-two years of membership of the Universal House of Justice from its establishment in 1963 until

2005. The shining qualities of his being, his immense courtesy, surpassing humility, purity of heart, irrepressible joy and unflinching optimism—all born of an unshakeable faith in the Word of God and its capacity to redeem humankind—endured him to everyone who had the privilege of knowing him.

## Lights of 'Irfán Book Thirteen

We extend our loving sympathy to his beloved wife, Louise, to his dear children, Michael, Nicholas and Jennifer, and to his grandchildren for the loss they have sustained and pray for the bounties of God to surround them. May Ian's valiant soul receive a joyous welcome in the celestial realms above and be richly rewarded for his fealty and his exemplary dedication to duty. We call upon the friends everywhere to hold memorial gatherings in his honour, including befitting commemorative services in the Houses of Worship throughout the world.

The Universal House of Justice

# APPENDICES

## Abbreviations Used in this Book

ABL	`Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>`Abdu'l-Bahá in London</i>
ADJ	Shoghi Effendi. <i>Advent of Divine Justice</i>
ARO	<i>Arohanui: Letters from Shoghi Effendi to New Zealand</i>
CC	<i>Compilation of Compilations volumes 1-3</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>
MUHJ	<i>Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-86</i>
PB	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh</i>
PBA	Compilation. <i>Principles of Bahá'í Administration</i>
PDC	Shoghi Effendi. <i>Promised Day Is Come</i>
PM	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Prayers and Meditations</i>
PT	`Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>Paris Talks</i>
PUP	`Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>Promulgation of Universal Peace</i>
SDC	`Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>Secret of Divine Civilization</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>
SW	<i>Star of the West</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, volumes 1-3</i>
TB	Bahá'u'lláh. <i>Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas</i>
TDP	`Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>Tablets of the Divine Plan</i>
WOB	Shoghi Effendi. <i>World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters</i>
WT	`Abdu'l-Bahá. <i>Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá</i>

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See a complete list of abbreviations at  
[http://bahai-library.com/abbreviations\\_bahai\\_writings](http://bahai-library.com/abbreviations_bahai_writings)

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