



Lights of 'Irfán

Papers Presented
at the 'Irfán Colloquia
and Seminars

Book III

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‘Irfán Colloquia and Seminars



Book Three

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Lights of 'Irfán
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Book Three
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*I*t is now incumbent upon them who are endowed with a hearing ear and a seeing eye to ponder these sublime words, in each of which the oceans of inner meaning and explanation are hidden, that haply the words uttered by Him Who is the Lord of Revelation may enable His servants to attain, with the utmost joy and radiance, unto the Supreme Goal and Most Sublime Summit—the dawning-place of this Voice. —Bahá'u'lláh
Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 147

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Preface

Preface

The Words of God have innumerable significances and mysteries of meanings - each one a thousand and more,¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts in one of His talks delivered in the United States. And in another talk He adds, “It is difficult to comprehend even the words of a philosopher; how much more difficult it is to understand the Words of God. The divine Words are not to be taken according to their outer sense. They are symbolical and contain realities of spiritual meaning.”² The ‘Irfán Colloquium is a forum for those who undertake deeper studies of the Words of God, attempting to understand the meanings and messages contained in those sacred words and presenting their findings to the participants.³ Such gatherings take place several times in Europe and North America every year. Each year more than 100 papers are presented in these gatherings, half of them in the sessions conducted in English and the other half in the sessions conducted in Persian. The present volume of *The Lights of ‘Irfán* contains some of the papers presented at the ‘Irfán Colloquia held in 2001. Lights of ‘Irfán volumes are published by the Haj Mehdi Arjmand Memorial Fund.⁴

The main theme of the colloquium in 2001 was Mysticism and the Bahá’í Faith. About half of the papers published in this volume deal with various aspects and dimensions of that theme. Two papers are on the Seven Valleys, studying it from two different points of view: “A Journey through the Seven Valleys” by Ghasem Bayat and “The Seven Valleys and the Scientific Method” by Robert Sarracino. This latter paper and Kavian Milani’s paper “The Mystical Dimensions of the Bahá’í Administrative Order” open new lines of research in Bahá’í literature.

Papers on “Mysticism and the Bahá’í Community” by Moojan Momen, “The Báb’s Epistle on the Spiritual Journey Towards God” by Todd Lawson, “Knowledge, Certitude and Mystical Heat: The Hidden Essence of God’s Word” by LeRoy Jones, and “Mysticism in African Traditional Religion” by Enoch Tanyi present various aspects of and different approaches to the study of mysticism and the Bahá’í Faith.

The sessions of the Irfan Colloquium, over the past few years, have been followed by a Seminar on the study of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh. Studies presented in 2001 and included in this volume, in addition to the papers related to the Seven Valleys, are “The beginning that hath no beginning: Bahá’í Cosmology” by Vahid Brown, which discusses the interpretation of a particular segment of the Tablet of Wisdom (Lawh-i-Hikmat); “Lawh-i-Mánikjī Sáhīb,” a Tablet of Bahá’u’lláh in response to the questions of Mánikjī Sáhīb, by Ramin Neshati; “An Exposition on the Fire Tablet of Bahá’u’lláh” by James Thomas; and “The Wronged One: Shí’í Narrative Structure in Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet of Visitation for Mullá Husayn” by William McCants.

Other papers in this volume include “From Adam to Baha’u’llah: The Idea of a Chain of Prophecy” by Zaid Lundberg, a paper which was not completely ready for publication in *The Lights of ‘Irfán*, Book II, and was mistakenly referred to in the Preface of that volume under its earlier title “Perception Into Faith: A Radical Discontinuity Within Unity”; Jianping Wang’s “The Influence of Bábí Teachings on Ling Ming Tang and Nineteenth-century China”; and Oliver Scharbrodt’s paper “Theological Responses to Modernity in the Nineteenth-century Middle East.”

All papers in this volume present the views and understandings of their authors. The texts of the papers are published as provided by the authors; therefore their style or scholarly approaches are not the same. They are published in this volume according to the alphabetical order of the surnames of the authors. Abstracts of all the presentations made at the ‘Irfán Colloquia and Seminars are published in a series of separate booklets.

Iraj Ayman
Chicago, March 2002

Notes

- 1) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust) p. 155
- 2) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 459
- 3) *Irfán* is a Persian-Arabic word referring to mystical, theological, and spiritual recognition and knowledge.
- 4) Haj Mehdi Arjmand (1861-1941) was a distinguished Bahá’í scholar of the Biblical studies and a prominent teacher of the Bahá’í

Lights of 'Irfán

Faith in Iran.

A Journey through the Seven Valleys¹ of Bahá'u'lláh

by Ghasem Bayat

Preamble

In this brief journey through the Seven Valleys² of Bahá'u'lláh, we will partake of its spiritual bounties, focus on its principal message, tune our hearts to the teachings it enshrines, marvel at its masterful composition and form, and recognize some of the distinctive features of this book as compared with Islamic mystic writings. This brief journey is at best an introduction to this Epistle, and is intended to encourage the readers to embark on an in-depth study of the Seven Valleys to receive the full measure of love and life it offers.

The Historical Background

This Epistle of Bahá'u'lláh was revealed during the Baghdad period, circa 1862 C.E.. It was revealed in answer to questions raised by Shaykh Muhyi'd-Dín,³ the judge of Khániqayn, a town located in Iraqi Kurdistan, northeast of Baghdad, and near the Iranian border.

The words of the beloved Guardian in describing the significance of this Epistle and its relation to other Writings of Bahá'u'lláh provides us with a perspective on this book:

To these two outstanding contributions to the world's religious literature [the Kitáb-i-qán and the Hidden Words], occupying respectively, positions of unsurpassed preeminence among the doctrinal and ethical Writings of the Author of the Bahá'í Dispensation, was added, during that same period, a treatise that may well be regarded as His greatest mystical composition, designated as the "Seven Valleys," which He wrote in answer to the questions of Shaykh Muhyi'd-Dín, the Qádí of Khániqayn, in which He describes the seven stages which the soul of the seeker must needs traverse ere it can attain the object of its existence.⁴

This Epistle was revealed in the language and the composition of the mystic Sufi Writings, and is part of a category of the mystical Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that includes Books such as the Four Valleys,⁵ the Hidden Words,⁶ and the Kitáb-i-qán,⁷ plus Tablets like the Essence (Gems) of Mysteries,⁸ and the Mathnaví-i-Mubárák (Blessed Ode).⁹ All of these Writings, with the exception of the Blessed Ode, were revealed during the Baghdad period, prior to the declaration of His ministry. The composition of the Blessed Ode probably started during His sojourn in Kurdistan but was completed in Adrianople.

The Seven Valleys describes various stages in the mystic journey of a wayfarer, and identifies the conditions prerequisite to success in this spiritual quest. This Treatise is revealed in an eloquent language and is composed in a masterful style, with beauty and brevity. Some of its poems, traditions, words of wisdom and stories can be traced back to the mystic writings of 'Attár, Rúmí, Ansá'í, Saná'í, and others. At a first glance, therefore, it appears to be a mystical book in conformity with the Islamic mystical literature of the past, encouraging the seekers to break away from the rigors of life and undertake a spiritual path. A deeper study of the language, themes, style and abundance of poems and stories that are used in this Epistle only serve to accentuate this first impression.

In spite of this resemblance to the Islamic mystic writings, it stands apart from all in its purpose, its meanings, its message, and its claims. This article will show how virtually every story, every metaphor and every poem conveys distinctly different objectives and meanings from those intended by the mystics in their writings. All these find their fulfilment in the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His advent in this world. Examples will be offered to show how the use of mystic language and its metaphors have been used to proclaim this new Cause and its Truth through a medium commonly understood by mystics.

Some of the distinctive features of this Epistle that form the subject matter of this article on the Seven Valleys are as follows:

- i. The principal message of this Treatise is the glad-tidings of the coming of the Promised Manifestation of the Ancient Beauty amongst men. This message appears throughout this Epistle,

- at times wrapped in metaphors and allusions, and at other times in abundantly clear language.
- ii. This Treatise uses mystic language and its abundant metaphors to expound on the Truth brought by the new Cause about the reality of God’s Manifestations, the relationship of man to his Creator, and the purpose and the ultimate reach of man’s spiritual quest. The contrasts between these assertions and common Sufi beliefs are at times overwhelming.
 - iii. This Treatise also contains the seeds and the elements of many of the teachings of the Cause that were amplified in subsequent Writings of the Faith throughout Bahá’u’lláh’s ministry.

The Language and the Composition

This Epistle is revealed in a masterful style, eloquent composition, extreme brevity, and in apparent conformity to the traditions and language common amongst the mystic Sufis. Like many Islamic mystical writings, the Seven Valleys describes the themes that relate to the wayfarer’s path, highlights issues that they need to consider at each stage, and provides advice on the titles and requirements of these stages.

The celebrated thirteenth-century Persian mystic ‘Attár¹⁰ describes the eternal spiritual quest of man for the knowledge and companionship of the Lord in his book the Conference of the Birds (*Mantiqú’-t-Tayr*).¹¹ In this book, ‘Attár uses the metaphor of birds for humanity and the human soul. He relates how the birds assembled to learn about their King. Upon learning about Him they longed so much for His company that they embarked on a harsh and long journey to reach Him. At last, thirty tired and tried birds amongst them reached the presence of their King, the Phoenix. The Phoenix is that mystical bird repeatedly reborn again from the ashes, in much the same way that God’s Manifestations grace the world of man with their frequent visits. The Persian name for this mythical Phoenix is Seymorgh, meaning “thirty (*sey*) birds (*morgh*).”

In the Conference of the Birds ‘Attár recalls these seven stages of the journey of the birds as seven valleys, and describes them as the Valleys of Search, Love, Knowledge, Contentment, Unity, Wonderment, and Poverty and Nothingness. It is noteworthy that there is a significant diversity of views amongst the mystics about these stages, their numbers and descriptions. It is sufficient to state that ‘Attár himself describes the number of these stages in his “Book of Hardship” (*Mosibat-Námeh*) as five, each with different titles.¹² These stages are described still differently by Abú-Nasr Sarraj, are counted as ten by Shaykh ‘Abdu’lláh Ansári, and later as one hundred in his other works.

Any detailed discussion of these stages and their descriptions as related by the mystics falls outside the scope of this brief article. As intended in mystic writings, “valley” relates to the treacherous and dangerous path or station that a wayfarer has to traverse. Its names, descriptions and numbers are subject to the perspective of the wayfarer, and are consequently often reported differently. It is unfortunate that throughout the years these superficial aspects of the spiritual journeys have received undue attention by the wayfarers and have actually become obstacles between them and the object of their quests.

One of the objectives of the Seven Valleys has been to assist the seeker to search and find Bahá’u’lláh, as He has proclaimed Himself in ways that all eyes can see Him and all ears can hear His melody. Bahá’u’lláh refers to the futility of the ritualistic efforts of some that have caused these numerous obstacles in the wayfarers’ paths to Him with these words:

Secrets are many, but strangers are myriad. Volumes will not suffice to hold the mystery of the Beloved One, nor can it be exhausted in these pages, although it be no more than a word, no more than a sign. “Knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it.”¹³

Bahá’u’lláh titles these stages of spiritual quest in the Seven Valleys as the Valleys of Search, Love, Knowledge, Unity, Contentment, Wonderment, and True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness. With a minor change in order, these are the same valleys that ‘Attár discussed.

A study of the Seven Valleys indicates that a wayfarer’s journey through these stages is intended to break him away from undue attachment to and obsession with this material world, and purify and prepare his mind and heart to perceive higher truths. The guidance given in the Seven Valleys is about knowing oneself, one’s need of spiritual bestowals, contentment and submission unto the will of God, and the desire for God’s favour. It encourages perseverance in one’s search after the Beloved, purification of one’s eyes, ears and mind from

A Journey through the Seven Valleys

whatever may be unacceptable in His sight, and the opening of one's heart so that His love may enter.

This journey is a physical and spiritual endeavour to build a wayfarer's character and spirit in order to make him worthy of entering the presence of his Lord. At the same time, it is in line with the teachings of all great Faiths. The choice of 'Attár's titles for the stages in this spiritual endeavour is neither critical nor central to the main theme of this Epistle. The Seven Valleys does not intend to elevate any of the methods and descriptions of these stages over others, and it should not be our goal either. This point comes across clearly from the Words of Bahá'u'lláh when He states:

The stages that mark the wayfarer's journey from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland are said to be seven. Some have called these Seven Valleys, and others, Seven Cities.¹⁴

As can be seen from this quote and from earlier quotes, Bahá'u'lláh places no special emphasis on the numbering or titles of these paths.

A seeker in the Sufi traditions was expected to spend a lifetime of effort and training under different spiritual guides to pass through these valleys. Bahá'u'lláh's statement in the Seven Valleys instead places the emphasis on the Lord's grace and the genuineness of the wayfarer's search, and not on mere ritualistic efforts:

These journeys have no visible ending in the world of time, but the severed wayfarer—if invisible confirmation descend upon him and the Guardian of the Cause assist him—may cross these seven stages in seven steps, nay rather in seven breaths, nay rather in a single breath, if God will and desire it. And this is of "His grace on such of His servants as He pleaseth."¹⁵

The objective is recognition of Bahá'u'lláh and obedience to His commandments in a single declaration of faith and submission, "Yes, My Lord."

Regarding the large number of metaphors and citations in this Treatise, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the mention of many of these references is in response to the wishes of the friends:

There is many an utterance of the mystic seers and doctors of former times which I have not mentioned here, since I dislike the copious citation from sayings of the past; for quotation from the words of others proveth acquired learning, not the divine bestowal. Even so much as We have quoted here is out of deference to the wont of men and after the manner of the friends.¹⁶

While most of Bahá'u'lláh's tablets are addressed to specific individuals or groups, these tablets are actually intended for a much wider audience and a large section of mankind. For example, the Book of Certitude was ostensibly revealed in answer to the questions of a maternal uncle of the Báb, but there is no doubt that this book has served to enlighten, in addition to Muslims, a large number of Jewish and Christian believers by addressing their scriptural concerns as well. Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets are written to many groups and sections of mankind, including Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Bábís, Sufis, clergymen, kings, rulers, and the learned.

In the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, Bahá'u'lláh states that His intention in revealing Tablets to the clergy, doctors of jurisprudence, and Sufis had been to teach and educate each group of people according to their capacity and provide for the transformation of individuals, thereby bringing about the peace and tranquillity of all mankind:

The purpose of the one true God, exalted be His glory, hath been to bring forth the Mystic Gems out of the mine of man. . . . That the divers communions of the earth, and the manifold systems of religious belief, should never be allowed to foster the feelings of animosity among men, is, in this Day, of the essence of the Faith of God and His Religion. . . . Exert yourselves that ye may attain this transcendent and most sublime station, the station that can insure the protection and security of all mankind. This goal excelleth every other goal, and this aspiration is the monarch of all aspirations. . . . At one time We spoke in the language of the lawgiver; at another in that of the truth-seeker and the mystic, and yet Our supreme purpose and highest wish hath always been to disclose the glory and sublimity of this station.¹⁷

This statement indicates that the purpose underlying Bahá'u'lláh's mystical Writings has been the same as that of the entire body of His Writings. Bahá'u'lláh's intention has not been to add to or modify any of the diverse and disparate Sufi movements.

Some of the distinctive features of the Seven Valleys from the Islamic mystic Writings are highlighted below.

Glad Tidings of the Appearance of God’s Manifestation amongst Humanity.

The principal message of the Seven Valleys is that God’s Manifestation has appeared amongst humanity. This is the Good News awaited by the faithful for centuries and even millennia. This message is also for the mystics who would prepare themselves for their entire lives for just a glimpse of the Ancient Beauty.

The Islamic mystic Writings provide spiritual guidance to seekers in their quest for communion with God. The words of Bahá’u’lláh, on the other hand, are the words of the Divine proclaiming His Manifestation in this world and calling the believers to His Presence. This Good News, which in the Seven Valleys is at times wrapped in allegories and symbolic terms and at other times in lucid terms, is unmistakably clear if taken as a whole.

As the views of some Sufi extremists regarding their communion with God have become indistinguishable from Pantheism, Bahá’u’lláh makes it clear in this Treatise that union with God as described by Sufi extremists is unattainable. He redefines and restates the goal of the mystic quest as recognition of God’s Manifestation for the age and obedience to His laws, thus uniting the goals of the mystics and the faithful in their hopes and aspirations. This is a significant change for the mystics and will be discussed in greater detail.

He emphatically states and clearly defines the limit of man’s spiritual reach:

However, let none construe these utterances to be anthropomorphism, nor see in them the descent of the worlds of God into the grades of the creatures; nor should they lead thine Eminence to such assumptions. For God is, in His Essence, holy above ascent and descent, entrance and exit; He hath through all eternity been free of the attributes of human creatures, and ever will remain so. No man hath ever known Him; no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being. Every mystic knower hath wandered far astray in the valley of the knowledge of Him; every saint hath lost his way in seeking to comprehend His Essence. Sanctified is He above the understanding of the wise; exalted is He above the knowledge of the knowing! The way is barred and to seek it is impiety.¹⁸

Thus, the object of the ancient quest and the ultimate spiritual reach of a wayfarer in this day is recognition of Bahá’u’lláh. The Seven Valleys contains the spiritual guidance that prepares man to meet and recognize the “Lord of the Age.” In a complementary Epistle, the Four Valleys, seekers at all stages of spiritual development are guided to one of the manifold attributes and stations of Bahá’u’lláh. These two Treatises are the Lord’s guidance to His subjects to recognize and follow Him, even though the formal declaration of His message was yet to come. These messages, some of which are highlighted here, are expressions of love and excitement, hope and fulfilment.

In the opening chapter of the Seven Valleys, in response to a letter from the Shaykh, Bahá’u’lláh addresses him in these words:

And since I noted thy mention of thy death in God, and thy life through Him, and thy love for the beloved of God and the Manifestations of His Names and the Dawning-Points of His Attributes—I therefore reveal unto thee sacred and resplendent tokens from the planes of glory, to attract thee into the court of holiness and nearness and beauty, and draw thee to a station wherein thou shalt see nothing in creation save the Face of thy Beloved One, the Honored, and behold all created things only as in the day wherein none hath a mention.¹⁹

This is an invitation to the Shaykh to enter His presence and gaze on the face of the Beloved, the Honored. He is then promised that if he recognizes Him he will achieve his spiritual destiny in the “heavenly abode” in “the Center of realities,” which is the World of the Cause:

By My life, O friend, wert thou to taste of these fruits, from the green garden of these blossoms which grow in the lands of knowledge, beside the orient lights of the Essence in the mirrors of names and attributes—yeaming would seize the reins of patience and reserve from out thy hand, and make thy soul to shake with the flashing light, and draw thee from the earthly homeland to the first, heavenly abode in the Center of realities, and lift thee to a plane wherein thou wouldst soar in the air even as thou walkest upon the earth,

A Journey through the Seven Valleys

and move over the water as thou runnest on the land.²⁰

The meanings of this statement and the station of Bahá'u'lláh are unmistakable, yet, to make it even clearer, Bahá'u'lláh then refers to Himself as the “Shebá of the Merciful,” and to His message as “the wind (*Sabá*) of certitude” that brings faith and certainty.

Wherefore, may it rejoice Me, and thee, and whosoever mounteth into the heaven of knowledge, and whose heart is refreshed by this, that the wind [*Sabá*] of certitude hath blown over the garden of his being, from the Sheba of the All-Merciful.²¹

For the Shaykh and other mystics like him, the meaning and intention of these metaphors was abundantly clear. For Sufis, “*Sabá*” is an easterly breeze that carries the fragrance and message of the Beloved. The east is a metaphor for the world of light and heaven, while the west is symbolic of the darksome material world. Mythology has it that Shebá, i.e., Queen of Shebá, received a message of love and compliance from King Solomon. Shebá responded positively and, in doing so, became the king’s beloved. Consequently “Shebá” in Sufi literature stands for a metaphor of the pure souls who respond to the Lord’s commands and become the Manifestation of His names and attributes in the human realm.

Therefore, it can be understood that the eastern breeze of certitude (the new Faith) has arrived from the Manifestation of the All Merciful (Bahá'u'lláh) from the heavenly abode in the Center of realities (World of Cause) to refresh the soul of this seeker (the Shaykh).

This paragraph ends with a remark often found in Islamic Writings: “Peace be upon him who followeth the Right Path.” As this expression is repeated five times throughout this Epistle it merits some additional comment.

The “Right Path” is what every practicing Muslim prays for five times a day. This is a challenge for every Muslim who professes Islam to be the Right Path, yet prays fervently to be guided to it. Islamic traditions explain that the “Right Path” is a reference to the Person and the Cause of the Promised One of Islam. In this context, Bahá'u'lláh states that He is indeed the “Way of God” and His Truth.

O Salmán! The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men. No man’s understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day-Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself. Whoso turneth away from them, hath turned away from God, and whoso disbelieveth in them, hath disbelieved in God. Every one of them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of His Truth unto every one in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. They are the Manifestations of God amidst men, the evidences of His Truth, and the signs of His glory. [emphasis added]²²

This is an example of Bahá'u'lláh’s reference to Himself as the Promised One of Islam, clear and lucid to those of pure heart and mind who have eyes to see and ears to hear, and yet concealed to those who do not wish to know.

Bahá'u'lláh amplifies His intended meaning of this phrase from the words of a Muslim mystic, Khájih ‘Abdu’lláh Ansárí,²³ when He states:

Wherefore, relevant to this, Khájih ‘Abdu’lláh—may God the Most High sanctify his beloved spirit—hath made a subtle point and spoken an eloquent word as to the meaning of “Guide Thou us on the straight path,” which is: “Show us the right way, that is, honor us with the love of Thine Essence, that we may be freed from turning toward ourselves and toward all else save Thee, and may become wholly Thine, and know only Thee, and see only Thee, and think of none save Thee.”²⁴

As all attributes and names of God relate to the Manifestation of the Lord, the love of the Lord that this mystic equates to the “Straight Path” also means the love of His Manifestation.

It is interesting to note that “Guide Thou us on the straight path” is quite similar in meaning and purpose to

the words of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."²⁵ These two statements are probably amongst the most often repeated and yet equally misunderstood statements by Christians and Muslims alike.

In Sufi traditions, a seeker has to follow and learn the manners of search from a spiritual guide (Murshíd), and first reach a state of union and total submission unto him. He then needs to find the highest-ranking guide of his age (*Qutb*, literally, the "Pole," signifying the station of this guide around whom all things revolve), and reach the same state of total submission and union with him. He will then be ready to contemplate union with the Lord. Bahá'u'lláh reminds this Shaykh that he needs a spiritual guide to undertake his search, and that He is that Guide who can lead him. To reiterate the significance of His assertion, He further reminds the Shaykh of an often related story of a journey in which "Moses the Law-giver" was asked to accompany Khidr to obtain wisdom. In mystic Writings Khidr was regarded as the wise and enlightened soul who was enabled to find and quaff from the water of life and obtain eternal life.

During their journey Khidr's actions and motives were questioned by Moses three times after Khidr indicated that he did not wish to go any further with Him in view of Moses' lack of confidence in him. Nevertheless he explained the just motives of his actions to Moses before parting from Him: (1) He had damaged and disabled the boat they were travelling in to protect it from being confiscated by the local ruler for military purposes; (2) He had killed a young man to avoid a pending spiritual disaster he was about to bring upon his family; (3) He had repaired the ruined wall of a garden that belonged to an orphan without asking for reward to avoid the discovery of the family treasure which had been buried under the wall by the now-deceased father, until his son becomes an adult.

In this story, related in Rúmí's *Mathnaví*²⁶ and cited twice in the Seven Valleys by Bahá'u'lláh, the contrast is made between Moses as the Law-giver and Khidr as the essence of wisdom. Despite His knowledge and powers, Moses was unable to grasp the wisdom of things and was in need of a guide. This mystic rendering of a portrait of a Manifestation of God is not in conformity with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the station and unity of Manifestations of God. There could be many explanations for the symbolism of this story. One may regard Moses and Khidr as two aspects of the manifold stations of Moses. One aspect of Him is portraying the significance of the Law and the other reflecting the need for wisdom in all things. The story teaches the need for a combination of wisdom and the law.

Bahá'u'lláh refers to this story in conformity to mystic traditions for a purpose:

Veiled from this was Moses
Though all strength and light;
Then thou who hast no wings at all,
Attempt not flight.

If thou be a man of communion and prayer, soar up on the wings of assistance from Holy Souls, that thou mayest behold the mysteries of the Friend and attain to the lights of the Beloved, "Verily, we are from God and to Him shall we return."²⁷

The essence of Bahá'u'lláh's message in quoting Rúmí in this story is that the Shaykh, or indeed any seeker, needs to follow Him regardless of his own knowledge and powers, just as Moses had to follow Khidr on His spiritual journey. So, Khidr is a metaphor for the Person of Bahá'u'lláh, and the mystics could not miss the implications of this statement. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh uses the words of Rúmí, "Then thou who hast no wings at all,/ Attempt not flight," to inform the seeker gently that he is indeed in need of His guidance.

The manner in which this mystic story has been related and used in the Seven Valleys is an example of the masterful use of an old story to convey a new message.

Bahá'u'lláh refers to His person in this passage as the "Holy Soul" and the "Friend" and "Beloved." It is noteworthy that, throughout the ages, the mystics have used the term "Beloved" as strictly referring to God. Bahá'u'lláh states that the true seeker needs His guidance to behold His mysteries and see His lights. In the *Kitáb-i-'qán*, among other titles, Bahá'u'lláh refers to Himself as the Source of all light:

And now, We beseech the people of the Bayán, all the learned, the sages, the divines, and witnesses

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amongst them, not to forget the wishes and admonitions revealed in their Book. Let them, at all times, fix their gaze upon the essentials of His Cause, lest when He, Who is the Quintessence of truth, the inmost reality of all things, the Source of all light [Núr al-anwár], is made manifest, they cling unto certain passages of the Book, and inflict upon Him that which was inflicted in the Dispensation of the Qur'án.²⁸

The term *núr al-anwár*, “the Source of all light” (lit. “Light of lights”), has been the subject of much commentary by great thinkers and philosophers such as Suhrevardí, the founder of the philosophical school of *Ishráq*, “Illumination.”²⁹ He states that “Núr al-anwár” is the pinnacle of creation, the purpose of creation, the first creation, the first wisdom, the primal reason, the universal mind, and that all lights and minds are but its creation and owe their existence to it. These terms are interchangeably used by mystic philosophers and thinkers to refer to God’s Manifestations. Bahá’u’lláh clearly chose to declare His station in the Book of Certitude and the Seven Valleys in terms that would have been unmistakably understood by those familiar with the philosophical schools of thought of the time. His use of such titles as “Quintessence of truth,” the “inmost reality of all things,” and the “Source of all light” reflects His claim.

Throughout this Treatise Bahá’u’lláh emphasizes that the seeker needs to open his inner eyes to see the Beloved, and listen attentively to His words. To succeed, he must leave aside his own preconceived ideas and abandon all prejudices. The stories in this Epistle serve to make these very points. A few examples of such stories will clearly support this view and show how each story at the same time has been given a fresh purpose and meaning in the context of the message of His advent.

The love-story of Majnún and Laylí is an old narrative of romance about the children of two Arab noblemen. In Persian literature, and especially in Persian mystic literature, this romance has evolved to symbolize a divine relationship. The most noteworthy example of this can be seen in the poetry of Nizámí Ganjaví, written around 1188 C.E.³⁰ In the Seven Valleys Bahá’u’lláh once again alludes to His station using this well-known story. He first relates the story as told by ‘Attár in the Conference of Birds. He tells how Majnún was found sifting through the dust in search of his beloved Layli. To the onlookers, who criticized him for “searching for a pure pearl in the dirt of the street,” he declares that he would seek her everywhere, that perchance he might find her. Then Bahá’u’lláh adds a short epilogue to this story that states:

Yea, although to the wise it be shameful to seek the Lord of Lords [Rabú'l-Arbáb] in the dust, yet this betokeneth intense ardor in searching. “Whoso seeketh out a thing with zeal shall find it.”³¹

This statement at first glance seems to be an affirmation of the positive effects of zeal and perseverance in achieving one’s goals. However, a closer look reveals that Bahá’u’lláh interprets the title “pure pearl” in the story to mean “Lord of Lords.” That is, Majnún really *was* searching for his Lord in the dust. Furthermore, the choice of “Lord of Lords” [*Rabú'l-Arbáb*] is deliberate, for its *abjad* number is the numerical equivalent of His own name “Husayn-‘Alí,” both adding up to 238. This may signal that if the seeker searches for the Lord of Lords with zeal, he will succeed in finding Him in the world of man.

A true test of the faith of sincere believers throughout the ages has been their ability to perceive the Manifestations of the Lord in human flesh, in circumstances common to all. It is this test that distinguished Peter in the Dispensation of Christ and Mullá Husayn in the Dispensation of the Báb from others. The difficulty of the people of His age to recognize His station is clear from the way Christ answered John the Baptist when he asked Him if He was the Messiah:

Jesus answered, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor are hearing the good news—and happy is the man who does not find me a stumbling block.”³²

Like Christ, Bahá’u’lláh uses metaphors to overcome the handicap of people, asking them to open their inner eyes and ears to recognize Him. One example is that of His story of Jacob and his love and longing for his lost son Joseph, a well-known and often quoted narrative in the mystical literature.

In this story Joseph, the twelfth son of Jacob, was so much loved by his father that his envious brothers, wishing to dispose of him, threw him in a well and then sold him into slavery. Pretending that he had been killed by wild beasts, they then presented Jacob with his son’s bloodstained shirt. Jacob cried so much at the reported loss of his son that he lost his sight. In the meantime, Joseph was taken to Egypt by slave-traders and

sold into the house of a wealthy merchant. Years later, the lovesick lady of the house, to punish him for his honesty and chastity, accused him of ill behaviour, thereby sending him to prison.

Over the course of seven years of imprisonment, Joseph demonstrated his ability to interpret fellow prisoners’ dreams, including a high-ranking official temporarily fallen out of favour. This skill was so amazing that it resulted in his being brought to the court of the Pharaoh to interpret his dream. Pharaoh had dreamt that seven lean cows devoured seven fattened cows and seven dried out wheat bushels destroyed seven green wheat bushels. Joseph interpreted this dream to be a warning that seven lean years will follow seven years of plenty. The Pharaoh appreciated this interpretation and put him in charge of collecting surplus wheat in preparation for the coming years of famine. So ended Joseph’s undeserved years of suffering and the beginning of his prosperity and authority

In the meantime, due to famine in the land of Palestine, his brothers travelled to Egypt in search of food. Joseph recognized his brothers but did not introduce himself at first. After informing them of his identity, he sent his shirt with his brothers to Jacob to Palestine. Never having lost hope of seeing his son, Jacob, after inhaling the perfume-laden smell of his son’s shirt, regained his sight. Jacob subsequently travelled to Egypt once again to enjoy the pleasure of his son’s company.

This moving story has been the subject of many poems and mystical narratives throughout the ages. It is noteworthy that the Báb chose to reveal a commentary on the Súrih of Joseph of the Qur’án on the first night of His declaration to Mullá Husayn. The beloved Guardian refers to this book too and its references to Bahá’u’lláh as the true Joseph in *God Passes By* in these words:

A more significant light, however, is shed on this episode, marking the Declaration of the Mission of the Báb, by the perusal of that “first, greatest and mightiest” of all books in the Bábí Dispensation, the celebrated commentary on the Súrih of Joseph, the first chapter of which, we are assured, proceeded, in its entirety, in the course of that night of nights from the pen of its divine Revealer. The description of this episode by Mullá Husayn, as well as the opening pages of that Book attest the magnitude and force of that weighty Declaration. A claim to be no less than the mouthpiece of God Himself, promised by the Prophets of bygone ages; the assertion that He was, at the same time, the Herald of One immeasurably greater than Himself. . . .

Already in Shíráz, at the earliest stage of His ministry, He had revealed what Bahá’u’lláh has characterized as “the first, the greatest, and mightiest of all books” in the Bábí Dispensation, the celebrated commentary on the Súrah of Joseph, entitled the Qayyúmu’l-Asmá, whose fundamental purpose was to forecast what the true Joseph (Bahá’u’lláh) would, in a succeeding Dispensation, endure at the hands of one who was at once His arch-enemy and blood brother. This work, comprising above nine thousand three hundred verses, and divided into one hundred and eleven chapters, each chapter a commentary on one verse of the above-mentioned Súrah, opens with the Báb’s clarion-call and dire warnings addressed to the “concourse of kings and of the sons of kings”; forecasts the doom of Muhammad Sháh; commands his Grand Vizir, Hájí Mírzá Áqásí, to abdicate his authority; admonishes the entire Muslim ecclesiastical order; cautions more specifically the members of the Shí’ih community; extols the virtues, and anticipates the coming, of Bahá’u’lláh, the “Remnant of God,” the “Most Great Master . . .”³³

Bahá’u’lláh refers to this story in the Seven Valleys, the Four Valleys, and other of His works, pointing to Himself as that true Joseph, and that, like Jacob, seekers need to open their inner eyes to see Him. Some examples on this theme are quoted here from the Seven Valleys:

In this journey the seeker reacheth a stage wherein he seeth all created things wandering distracted in search of the Friend. How many a Jacob will he see, hunting after his Joseph; he will behold many a lover, hasting to seek the Beloved, he will witness a world of desiring ones searching after the One Desired. . . .

And if, by the help of God, he findeth on this journey a trace of the traceless Friend, and inhalet the fragrance of the long-lost Joseph from the heavenly messenger, he shall straightway step into THE VALLEY OF LOVE and be dissolved in the fire of love. . . .

O My Brother! Until thou enter the Egypt of love, thou shalt never come to the Joseph of the Beauty of the Friend; and until, like Jacob, thou forsake thine outward eyes, thou shalt never open the eye of thine inward

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being; and until thou burn with the fire of love, thou shalt never commune with the Lover of Longing.³⁴

When taken together, these references show that the historical Joseph is only a metaphor, and furthermore, the true Joseph is the Friend, the traceless Friend, Joseph of the Beauty of the Friend, understood in mystical Writings to point to the Lord. The news of this long-lost Joseph and His advent was to come from a heavenly messenger, as it was the subject of many of the Báb's Writings. As the beloved Guardian stated the fundamental purpose of Qayyúmu'l-Asmá was to "forecast what the true Joseph (Bahá'u'lláh) would, in a succeeding Dispensation, endure at the hands of one who was at once His arch-enemy and blood brother." A brief examination of the life of Bahá'u'lláh reveals many other similarities between Bahá'u'lláh and Joseph, including His exile and suffering, and His triumph in His earthly life. In the same way that Jacob longed for his long-lost son Joseph, a stream of believers sought Bahá'u'lláh's company at all costs and under all conditions, a fulfilment of His words when describing the condition of the seekers in the Valley of Search:

In this journey the seeker reacheth a stage wherein he seeth all created things wandering distracted in search of the Friend. How many a Jacob will he see, hunting after his Joseph; he will behold many a lover, hasting to seek the Beloved, he will witness a world of desiring ones searching after the One Desired.³⁵

Jacob's loss of his physical sight and his subsequent discovery of his lost Joseph are again used as a metaphor for directing the seekers to forsake their outward eyes. In this way, the physical persons of God's Messengers do not become tests of their faith and obstacles for them.

Sacred scriptures often contain a series of tests to measure the sincerity of believers' faith. They test the willingness of the faithful to forsake wealth and comfort, and if necessary, life itself, in the path of Truth. Furthermore, the faithful should be prepared to endure all hardship and calamities in the path of his love with contentment and gratefulness. Examples of these can be found in the Jewish Scriptures, the New Testament, Qur'án, mystical literature, and Bahá'í scriptures. In the Seven Valleys this message is given repeatedly. In one instance Bahá'u'lláh uses a well-known story to remind the Shaykh and other seekers of the prerequisites of true love. He quotes only part of a long story from Rúmí about "a man in love," who had lost his health and wealth in the path of his love to no avail:

There was once a lover who had sighed for long years in separation from his beloved, and wasted in the fire of remoteness. From the rule of love, his heart was empty of patience, and his body weary of his spirit.

Shunned by all, his longing bore no fruit until:

At last, the tree of his longing yielded the fruit of despair, and the fire of his hope fell to ashes. Then one night he could live no more, and he went out of his house and made for the marketplace. On a sudden, a watchman followed after him. He broke into a run, with the watchman following; then other watchmen came together, and barred every passage to the weary one.

Agonized with displeasure at the watchmen and in despair he finds himself at a decision point about life itself:

Then he came to a garden wall, and with untold pain he scaled it, for it proved very high; and forgetting his life, he threw himself down to the garden.

Once he made that choice to give up his life he indeed found his life and love:

And there he beheld his beloved with a lamp in her hand, searching for a ring she had lost. When the heart-surrendered lover looked on his ravishing love, he drew a great breath and raised up his hands in prayer .

..

In this way, his intense displeasure with this seemingly cruel act of the watchmen was transformed into a deep appreciation of the Lord's pleasure:

Now if the lover could have looked ahead, he would have blessed the watchman at the start, and prayed on his behalf, and he would have seen that tyranny as justice; but since the end was veiled to him, he moaned and made his plaint in the beginning. Yet those who journey in the garden land of knowledge, because they see the end in the beginning, see peace in war and friendliness in anger.³⁶

In this way, the Beloved of the world asks everyone to act in the same way. Once again this familiar story

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only serves to highlight the intended message.

Bahá’u’lláh often expresses His displeasure with people without inner eyes and ears, people who have made Him the target of their tyranny and envy. In such an address in the Seven Valleys He makes another reference to His station:

Thus it is that certain invalid souls have confined the lands of knowledge within the wall of self and passion, and clouded them with ignorance and blindness, and have been veiled from the light of the mystic sun and the mysteries of the Eternal Beloved; they have strayed afar from the jewelled wisdom of the lucid Faith of the Lord of Messengers, have been shut out of the sanctuary of the All-Beauteous One, and banished from the Ka’bih of splendor. Such is the worth of the people of this age!

And if a nightingale soar upward from the clay of self and dwell in the rose bower of the heart, and in Arabian melodies and sweet Iranian songs recount the mysteries of God—a single word of which quickeneth to fresh, new life the bodies of the dead, and bestoweth the Holy Spirit upon the moldering bones of this existence—thou wilt behold a thousand claws of envy, a myriad beaks of rancor hunting after Him and with all their power intent upon His death.³⁷

His proclamation that His word bestows new life to the dead and confers Holy Spirit upon this existence is a clear statement of His station.

A still clearer message comes when Bahá’u’lláh describes the special bounties of His day and that all should try to benefit from His presence while He is still with them:

The cloud of the Loved One’s mercy raineth only on the garden of the spirit, and bestoweth this bounty only in the season of spring. The other seasons have no share in this greatest grace, and barren lands no portion of this favor. O Brother! Not every sea hath pearls; not every branch will flower, nor will the nightingale sing thereon. Then, ere the nightingale of the mystic paradise repair to the garden of God, and the rays of the heavenly morning return to the Sun of Truth—make thou an effort, that haply in this dustheap of the mortal world thou mayest catch a fragrance from the everlasting garden, and live forever in the shadow of the peoples of this city.³⁸

He calls His day the spiritual “season of spring,” and refers to Himself as the “nightingale of the mystic paradise,” and “the rays of the heavenly morning.” In His mercy for those who have still missed His claim, He makes yet another proclamation of His advent for those who have eyes to see:

And when thou hast attained this highest station and come to this mightiest plane, then shalt thou gaze on the Beloved, and forget all else.

The Beloved shineth on gate and wall.

Without a veil, O men of vision.

Now hast thou abandoned the drop of life and come to the sea of the Life-Bestower. This is the goal thou didst ask for; if it be God’s will, thou wilt gain it.³⁹

Once a seeker recognized this Manifestation of the Lord for this age he will enter the sea of the Life-Bestower and gaze at the face of the Beloved and forget all else. Then he will discover that the light of the Beloved Who has revealed Himself is the source of all lights.

The poem that Bahá’u’lláh quotes here is a masterpiece of Persian poetry by Hatif of Isfahan⁴⁰ and carries an incredible message parallels one of the principal messages of the Bahá’í dispensation: the concept of “Progressive Revelation.”

In this poem, in a state of wonderment one night, Hatif finds his way to a Zoroastrian temple. There, he finds Zoroastrian believers engaged in ceremonies surrounding the Holy Fire. With all his being, he recognizes that there is only one God, and that all are but His signs. Hatif then makes his way to a Christian church in which worshipers are engaged in their devotions. He challenges them in their belief in the Trinity. One of the devotees explains to him that the Trinity is only a reflection of the Ancient Beauty in three mirrors. He hears this from the chime of the church bell with his inner ears that there is no One but Him, and that all are but His signs. In that state of amazement and with a pure heart and open mind he enters a mystic temple in which he

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finds the lovers of the Beloved. He asks them for guidance and after quenching his thirst once again, he becomes conscious of a melodious chant coming from the heavenly quarters stating that there is no One but Him, and that all are but His signs. It is then that he discovers that

The Beloved shineth on gate and wall

Without a veil, O men of vision.

Hatif then concludes that while the Beloved shineth like the sun it would be inappropriate to search for Him with a candle. Morning has broken while we are still in the night season. This brief reference to a single verse of this poem in the Seven Valleys speaks volumes about Bahá'u'lláh's message.

And finally Bahá'u'lláh makes the most obvious reference to His advent and His person using a poem from Rúmí:

How strange that while the Beloved is visible as the sun, yet the heedless still hunt after únsel and base metal. Yea, the intensity of His revelation hath covered Him, and the fullness of His shining forth hath hidden Him.

Even as the sun, bright hath He shined,

But alas, He hath come to the town of the blind!⁴¹

To complete our discussion on this theme, we will offer one last reference in the Seven Valleys to the Qur'án. In the Valley of Wonderment Bahá'u'lláh makes the following statement:

The pen groaneth and the ink sheddeth tears, and the river of the heart moveth in waves of blood. "Nothing can befall us but what God hath destined for us." Peace be upon him who followeth the Right Path!⁴²

In this passage Bahá'u'lláh reiterates His confidence that His fate is governed by the will of God and not by the machinations of His enemies. In evidence of His claim, He offers the Qur'anic verse "Nothing can befall us but what God hath destined for us."

An examination of the context of this verse shows the appropriateness of this statement and the extraordinary message that exists below the surface. It refers to verse 51 in the Súrat' at-Tauba (Repentance) in the Qur'án, which was revealed in Medina and, in particular, deals with the treachery and breaking of treaties by the infidels.⁴³ Muhammad foretells of their coming punishment and declares to them that the station of those who serve the Cause of God and participate in the Holy War is far above those who maintain their infidelity and yet repair the Mosque. He states that those who put their worldly interests above God's will are in a loss. In vain, the infidels wish to extinguish the Light of God, but He will protect His Light. He warns the believers that unless they serve the Cause of God, He will choose others to replace them. He then states that "nothing will happen to us except what God has decreed for us; He is our Protector; and on Him let the believers put their trust."

Bahá'u'lláh reminds those who have insight that just like the Prophet of Islam He is the target of attacks from friend and foe, alike, and that He will endure all in the pathway of His Lord. God will establish His Cause and protect His Light, that is Him, even if people oppose Him. If those around Him reject His call, He will raise up others to assist Him.

As a befitting conclusion to this section and revealing a glimpse of Bahá'u'lláh's station, below are some of the titles that appear in the Seven Valleys: Sheba of the All-Merciful, Joseph of the Beauty of the Friend, The Friend, Sun of Truth, Manifestation of the Sun of reality, the Beloved, the Eternal Beloved, the Beauty of the Beloved, the Nightingale of the Mystic Paradise, the Nightingale with Arabian Melodies and Sweet Iranian Songs, the Eternal Morning Dawn, the New Beloved One, the Light of Manifestation of the King of Oneness, the Master of the House, the Master of Love, the Tree of Knowledge, the Eternal City, the City of God, the Face of The Beloved One, the Divine Face, the Guardian of The Cause, the Sea of the Life-Bestower, the Falcon of the Mystic Heaven

Spiritual Truths in the Seven Valleys

The Seven Valleys is a repository of a great deal of spiritual truths of this Cause. Although this book is revealed in the language and form of the mystic Writings, at times the truths it contains completely contradict

the common views of the Sufis. At other times it acts to resolve, clarify, modify and harmonize many of the complex and paradoxical elements of their beliefs. In the interest of brevity, however, only a few examples of these truths are highlighted in this article.

1. The Ultimate Goal of Man’s Spiritual Quest

Over time, the Sufis came to believe that, if confirmed by the Lord’s grace, a seeker would eventually reach a state of union with the Lord. Termed “annihilation in God [*faná*]” and eternal life in Him [*baqá*],” this union has been described variously by different mystics.

Bahá’u’lláh rejects this view, stating that this goal is unattainable to humanity. He further clarifies that the ultimate goal of man’s reach in physical life is recognition of the Lord’s Manifestation for the age and service at His threshold:

However, let none construe these utterances to be anthropomorphism, nor see in them the descent of the worlds of God into the grades of the creatures; nor should they lead thine Eminence to such assumptions. For God is, in His Essence, holy above ascent and descent, entrance and exit; He hath through all eternity been free of the attributes of human creatures, and ever will remain so. No man hath ever known Him; no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being. Every mystic knower hath wandered far astray in the valley of the knowledge of Him; every saint hath lost his way in seeking to comprehend His Essence. Sanctified is He above the understanding of the wise; exalted is He above the knowledge of the knowing! The way is barred and to seek it is impiety; His proof is His signs; His being is His evidence. . . . Yea, these mentioning that have been made of the grades of knowledge relate to the knowledge of the Manifestations of that Sun of reality, which casteth Its light upon the Mirrors. . . . Then it is clear that even for the rays there is neither entrance nor exit—how much less for that Essence of Being and that longed-for Mystery.⁴⁴

Bahá’u’lláh offers the words of ‘Alí, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, as proof of His statement: “The way is barred and to seek it is impiety.”⁴⁵ The significance of this reference to Sufis stems from the fact that most Sufi groups regard ‘Alí as their spiritual figurehead.

Bahá’u’lláh explains the meaning of the Unity of God, annihilation of self, perpetual union with God and the essence of faith and Certitude in another Tablet:

He is indeed a true believer in the unity of God who, in this Day, will regard Him as One immeasurably exalted above all the comparisons and likenesses with which men have compared Him. He hath erred grievously who hath mistaken these comparisons and likenesses for God Himself. Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?

O Shaykh, O thou who hast surrendered thy will to God! By self-surrender and perpetual union with God is meant that men should merge their will wholly in the Will of God, and regard their desires as utter nothingness beside His Purpose. Whatsoever Creator commandeth His creatures to observe, the same must they diligently, and with the utmost joy and eagerness, arise and fulfil. They should in no wise allow their fancy to obscure their judgment, neither should they regard their own imaginings as the voice of the Eternal. . . . The station of absolute self-surrender transcendeth, and will ever remain exalted above, every other station. It behoveth thee to consecrate thyself to the Will of God. Whatsoever hath been revealed in His Tablets is but a reflection of His Will. So complete must be thy consecration, that every trace of worldly desire will be washed from thine heart. This is the meaning of true unity.

Do thou beseech God to enable thee to remain steadfast in this path, and to aid thee to guide the peoples of the world to Him Who is the manifest and sovereign Ruler, Who hath revealed Himself in a distinct attire, Who giveth utterance to a Divine and specific Message. This is the essence of faith and certitude.⁴⁶

From these passages, it becomes clear that the mystic Beloved for the age is Bahá’u’lláh, and that the zenith of the spiritual reach of a seeker is recognition of Him and His Cause, and obedience to His commands.

2. God’s “Most Excellent Names”

Bahá’u’lláh states repeatedly in the Seven Valleys and other tablets such as the *Kitáb-i-‘qán* that man cannot attain to the knowledge of God except through the knowledge of the attributes of God’s Messengers. In

fact, He states that a perfect understanding of God's unity demands negation of any names and attributes to that Essence of Essences. He once more offers the words of 'Alí, the son-in-law of the Prophet as evidence for His statement about the characters of those who have gone beyond the limitations of names and attributes and attained His recognition:

For these have passed over the worlds of names, and fled beyond the worlds of attributes as swift as lightning. Thus is it said: "Absolute Unity excludeth all attributes."⁴⁷

'Alí's complete statement is that religion begins with the Lord's recognition, His recognition is only complete by obedience and faith in Him, and faith in Him is complete only with recognition of His Oneness.⁴⁸ Recognition of His Oneness is complete with purity of Faith in Him, and completeness of Faith in Him demands negation of any names and attributes to Him, as no one and no attributes can befittingly describe Him.

During the Islamic Dispensation, a series of names and attributes referred to as "Most Excellent Names" were thought to be God's Names and Titles. This was based on a reference in the Qur'án in which all such names are attributed to Alláh and Rahmán ("Mercy"):

Say: Call upon Alláh, or call upon Rahmán: By whatever name ye call Upon Him, (it is well): For to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names.⁴⁹

These "Most Excellent Names" have been related in the words of the Prophet (hadíth) and the Imáms with minor differences. Ja'far as-Sádiq, the sixth Shí'ih Imám, was reported to relate ninety-nine of these names. In a departure from this general belief and in complete conformity to 'Alí's statement ("... completeness of Faith in Him involves negation of any names and attributes to Him, as no one and no attributes can befittingly describe Him . . ."), Bahá'u'lláh uses part of the same Qur'anic passage and explains that all these names and titles refer to God's Messenger, Muhammad:

He who was *Ahmad* in the kingdom of the exalted ones, and *Muhammad* amongst the concourse of the near ones, and Mahmúd in the realm of the sincere ones . . . "by whichever (name) ye will, invoke Him: He hath most excellent names" in the hearts of those who know.⁵⁰

In other words, these titles and attributes belong to all of God's Manifestations. In many tablets Bahá'u'lláh refers to His Own Advent with all of these "Excellent Names." For example, in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh states:

Verily, all created things were immersed in the sea of purification when, on that first day of Ridván, We shed upon the whole of creation the splendours of Our most excellent Names and Our most exalted Attributes. This, verily, is a token of My loving providence, which hath encompassed all the worlds.⁵¹

3. Unity of Being

The concept of "Unity of Being," which at times, and for some Sufi extremists, borders on pantheism, is amongst the principal beliefs of many Sufis and other groups of mystics. For a detailed discussion of various aspects of this topic the reader is referred to other publications.^{52,53}

A short presentation of some of the main concepts about God that have been current amongst different groups would help a better understanding of the Bahá'í perspective on this subject:

1. **God of Immanence:** This means an in-dwelling God. This implies an impersonal God that is part of the order of creation and a close relationship between Him and His creation.
2. **Transcendent God:** This is a God that has caused the creation but remains as a definite and an individual entity, separate from His creation. Man is not part of God and God does not dwell in the world or in man. This is the God of prophetic religions.
3. **Pantheistic God:** Pantheism involves belief in a God that is the totality of creation. God is the whole, and the world and man are parts of it. Man is a part of God or as most Sufis believe, man possesses some elements of God within him. As a consequence of this view mystics have come to believe that either man can reach God or man can actually become united with Him. The ecstasy and the joy that accompanies moments of prayers, meditation and contemplation have been offered by the mystics as evidence to their claim of becoming united with God.

4. God of Deism: This is the belief of those who accept that the universe has been created and is controlled by an intelligent force, and furthermore, identify this force with the God of religion. However they deny that this force is a personal God who hears man’s prayers and has any interest in man’s welfare.
5. God of Theism: This is the belief of those who see God as the creator and separate from nature and yet dwells in every of its activities. This is much the same as a God that is both immanent and transcendent.

The mystery of the joining of man with God has been described in various ways by mystics. Some have made it analogous to a drop of rain that has been separated from the sea and eventually flows back to the sea. The pantheistic view of God and creation is remarkably consistent with this analogy. Some have explained the creation as a mere mirage and unreal in the same way that waves disappear after the sea becomes calm. Waves are but reflections of creation, that in essence and substance, come from the sea and unto it return.

This brings up the nature of the process of creation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides us with an insight on this topic in *Some Answered Questions*:

Know that proceeding is of two kinds: the proceeding and appearance through emanation, and the proceeding and appearance through manifestation. The proceeding through emanation is like the coming forth of the action from the actor, of the writing from the writer. Now the writing emanates from the writer, and the discourse emanates from the speaker, and in the same way the human spirit emanates from God. It is not that it manifests God--that is to say, no part has been detached from the Divine Reality to enter the body of man.⁵⁴

The second kind of creation is through Manifestation, just as a tree grows from a seed. The flower manifests the seed, and in a sense, is not entirely different from the seed. This belief is at the core of the pantheistic view. Furthermore, the mystics have come to believe that the soul of man is the spiritual element in him, and that, prior to its association with man’s body, this soul existed in some form with God. It is a natural extension of the belief that we are part divine, that God dwells in us, and that our soul returns to Him. The Sufis’ interpretation of the scriptures that “one needs to know oneself to know God” comes from this premise.

Some mystics have come to define the “Unity of Being” as the unity of God with His creation. Others have come to believe God is the only true existence, and that creation is as ephemeral as sea-waves or bubbles that form and disappear at the surface of water. In Mullá Sadra’s philosophy this subject appears as the “Unity of Being” and the “Diversity of Created Things.”⁵⁵ Nevertheless he sees a common underlying unity in the diversity of the world of creation, just as light appears in different colors as it passes through differently colored glasses. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, our return to our Lord is not like the return of drops to the sea but more like the return of birds to the Abhá Paradise.

As opposed to the philosophically based “Unity of Being,” some Sufis have come to reach their goal through love and adoration. The founder of this school of thought is believed to be Ibn-Faridh.⁵⁶ This belief is called the “Unity of Witnesses, the Lover and the Beloved [*Shuhúd*].” Whatever these descriptions convey and under whatever definition this communion with the Lord falls, Bahá’u’lláh wishes to take the seeker to heights that go far beyond these terms and their meanings. In a reference to these views He states in the Seven Valleys that

[i]n this Valley, the wayfarer leaveth behind him the stages of the “oneness of Being and Manifestation [*Shuhúd*]” and reacheth a oneness that is sanctified above these two stations. Ecstasy alone can encompass this theme, not utterance nor argument; and whosoever hath dwelt at this stage [*Mahfel*] of the journey, or caught a breath from this garden land, knoweth whereof We speak.⁵⁷

In this statement, Bahá’u’lláh describes the station of the believers who were admitted to His banquet [*Mahfel*] and entered His garden.

It is worthwhile to ponder the station of the Lord’s Manifestation for this age. Bahá’u’lláh testifies to His station in these words:

God testifieth that there is none other God but Him and that He Who hath appeared is the Hidden Mystery, the Treasured Symbol, the Most Great Book for all peoples, and the Heaven of bounty for the whole world. He is the Most Mighty Sign amongst men and the Dayspring of the most august attributes in the realm of

creation. Through Him hath appeared that which had been hidden from time immemorial and been veiled from the eyes of men. He is the One Whose Manifestation was announced by the heavenly Scriptures, in former times and more recently. Whoso acknowledgeth belief in Him and in His signs and testimonies hath in truth acknowledged that which the Tongue of Grandeur uttered ere the creation of earth and heaven and the revelation of the Kingdom of Names. Through Him the ocean of knowledge hath surged amidst mankind and the river of divine wisdom hath gushed out at the behest of God, the Lord of Days. Well is it with the man of discernment who hath recognized and perceived the Truth.⁵⁸

He is the promise of all ages, He is the Beloved of all, He is the object of adoration for all, He is the One sought by all and the union that man seeks is union with Him.

4. The Three Realms: Realms of God, His Messengers (the Cause) and Man

It can be said that, with rare exceptions, the majority of Sufis as well as the faithful in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe in two realms, one the realm of God and the other in which men and other created things reside. The consequence of this belief has been a general confusion about the station and place of the Founders of great religions. In the early years of Islam, the Muslims placed Prophet Muhammad firmly on earth, the Christians, based on the Nicene Creed, raised Jesus Christ to the level of the realm of God, and some mystics and Sufis allowed man to reach God's station.

Bahá'u'lláh, however, teaches that there are three realms, the realm of God (the absolute and the Divine Essence), the world of man (the realm of all created things), and an intermediary kingdom, the realm of God's Messengers (the world of Cause). In the opening passage of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the first two realms (the World of man and the world of Cause) are explicitly mentioned, and the third (the realm of God) implicitly stated:

The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation.⁵⁹

Bahá'u'lláh presents in the Seven Valleys some of His manifold stations. His titles in this book, some of which were quoted earlier, attest to this. In the Four Valleys He refers to four of His stations, i.e. His Self, Wisdom, Love and Spirit. In the Súrat'ul-Haykal (Discourse of the Temple), He clarifies the relationship between His Person (Mírzá Húsayn-'Alí), His Divine Spirit (Most Great Spirit), and God, where the concept of the three realms are expounded. It is in this context that it would be possible to understand and relate to Trinity in the context of the Bahá'í Faith, i.e. the Father = God, the Son = Jesus and the Holy Spirit = Christ/Divine Spirit).

In the early history of Islam, based on the Qur'án and Islamic traditions, the Muslims regarded the Prophet Muhammad as only another human being, the only difference being that He was the recipient of God's Revelation. In time, however, some Muslim thinkers, and in particular the Sufis, started to focus on the spirit of the Prophet and relate it to the Word, Logos, First Created, Primal Will, Light of Muhammad, etc. Bahá'u'lláh refers to these titles of the Divine Spirit of the prophet in the Seven Valleys:

And I praise and glorify the first sea which hath branched from the ocean of the Divine Essence, and the first morn which hath glowed from the Horizon of Oneness, and the first sun which hath risen in the Heaven of Eternity, and the first fire which was lit from the Lamp of Pre-existence in the lantern of singleness: He who was Ahmad in the kingdom of the exalted ones, and Muhammad amongst the concourse of the near ones, and Mahmúd in the realm of the sincere ones. . . "by whichsoever (name) ye will, invoke Him: He hath most excellent names" in the hearts of those who know.⁶⁰

These titles all refer to the Most Great Spirit that is the Divine Spirit to all Manifestations of God throughout the ages. So it can be seen that there is a consistency throughout the ages in referring to God's vicegerents Divine Spirit.

With belief in this intermediary realm confusion surrounding the meaning of the words of Manifestation of God regarding their stations clears.

5. The Relationship Between Religion, Mystic Path, and the Truth

Some Sufi orders gradually came to believe that the purpose of religion, particularly religious laws and ordi-

nances, was to purify man’s heart and mind and prepare him for undertaking a true mystic path. The purpose of the mystic quest in turn was to guide man to the “Truth.” In doing so, some Sufis saw religion as only a preliminary step in their quest. As a consequence, some Sufi orders came to believe that observance of the laws of religion was only binding on a wayfarer in the initial stages of his quest, and thereafter were not binding on him. This belief became the cause of a great deal of conflict and bloodshed amongst believers. It must be said, however, that many other Sufi orders never accepted this doctrine.

In a radical departure from this belief and its implications, Bahá’u’lláh defines the essential and complementary relationship between these stages of man’s spiritual maturation and enjoins the observance of all laws and ordinances at all times:

In all these journeys the traveler must stray not the breadth of a hair from the “Law,” for this is indeed the secret of the “Path” and the fruit of the Tree of “Truth”; and in all these stages he must cling to the robe of obedience to the commandments, and hold fast to the cord of shunning all forbidden things, that he may be nourished from the cup of the Law and informed of the mysteries of Truth.⁶¹

Bahá’u’lláh states that the “Law” (religious ordinances) is the secret of the mystic “Path,” and the “Fruit” (result) of the Tree of “Truth.” Through this relationship, these three aspects of man’s spiritual journey are eternally linked. Bahá’u’lláh strengthens this in the opening chapter of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas where He makes man’s salvation conditional on both recognition of God’s Manifestation for each age and obedience to His Laws:

It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration.⁶²

This very theme and the need for observance of all of the Lord’s ordinances have been repeated throughout the Writings.

True belief in God and recognition of Him cannot be complete save by acceptance of that which He hath revealed and by observance of whatsoever hath been decreed by Him and set down in the Book by the Pen of Glory. They that immerse themselves in the ocean of His utterances should at all times have the utmost regard for the divinely-revealed ordinances and prohibitions. Indeed His ordinances constitute the mightiest stronghold for the protection of the world and the safeguarding of its peoples.⁶³

6. Wealth, Poverty, Detachment and The Process of Living

One of the features distinguishing the Bahá’í Writings, including the Seven Valleys, from the extremist mystical Writings is the meaning of common Sufi terms such as “poverty” and “detachment.” Among some of the early puritans and Sufis in Islam there appeared the belief that this world is but transitory and worthless and that man’s salvation depends upon his complete break from it all. These believers found ample references from the Qur’án and other Islamic sources supporting their views:

47:36 The life of this world is but play and amusement: and if ye believe and guard against Evil, He will grant you your recompense, and will not ask you (to give up) your possessions.⁶⁴

Or in another verse from the Qur’án:

29:64 What is the life of this world but amusement and play? but verily the Home in the Hereafter—that is life indeed, if they but knew.⁶⁵

The works of many notable Sufi writers abound with expressions about the uselessness of this world. Few passages from the writings of Khájih ‘Abdulláh Ansárí on this subject would suffice:

O my dear, why are you wondering about the conditions of this world and why do you expect your wealth to last? How one can explain this riddle of wealth that has been earned at great sufferings, and accumulated at great hardship, and yet left behind with sorrows and disappointment? . . . This world is but a bridge on the path to the next. It is neither a place for peace nor a place for rest. It is all but the cause of hardship and calamities. This world is bent on causing you harm and mistreatment. Whoever found wealth therein is truly poor, and whoever found status he is amongst the wrongdoers. Every song that it sings says “The world is the prison of the believer and the heaven of the unbeliever,” and every speech that it makes states

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that “the world is but a place for error.”^{66,67}

The true meanings of poverty, wealth, detachment and the purpose of life and prescriptions for living are abundantly explained in the Bahá’í Writings. Study of these Writings makes it quite clear that in this Faith “poverty” is not about being materially poor, and “detachment” is not about breaking away from life and people and committing oneself to endless rituals in remote temples. The Faith intends to bring about a spiritual and a material balance to one’s life, and take away the errors of obsession with a one-dimensional material existence. Otherwise a life of isolation from society, begging for one’s existence, wasting of one’s time and resources, being utterly useless to oneself and the society, and occupying oneself with endless hard rituals in the name of worship have all been abhorred in the Writings.

The objectives of this Faith are to bring about prosperity and social justice for all, and a civilized and spiritual human society. It is about peace and harmony and the establishment of an ever-advancing civilization in this world and preparation of man for a spiritual regeneration and spiritual progress in worlds to come. The Bahá’í teachings are all about building a more suitable world and society for the future generations.

Some examples of these teachings include: compulsory education for all; learning of trades and professions; extending helping hands to all in need; building of orphanages and universal healthcare for all and all ages; elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty; enrichment of family life; equality for all; elimination of the need for wars and weapons of mass destruction; and world government

Therefore some of the references to poverty in the Seven Valleys and the Hidden Words such as these quoted below should be understood in the wider context of the Writings as a whole:^{68,69}

O friend, the heart is the dwelling of eternal mysteries, make it not the home of fleeting fancies; waste not the treasure of thy precious life in employment with this swiftly passing world. Thou comest from the world of holiness—bind not thine heart to the earth; thou art a dweller in the court of nearness—choose not the homeland of the dust.

O YE THAT PRIDE YOURSELVES ON MORTAL RICHES!

Know ye in truth that wealth is a mighty barrier between the seeker and his desire, the lover and his beloved. The rich, but for a few, shall in no wise attain the court of His presence nor enter the city of content and resignation. Well is it then with him, who, being rich, is not hindered by his riches from the eternal kingdom, nor deprived by them of imperishable dominion. By the Most Great Name! The splendor of such a wealthy man shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven even as the sun enlightens the people of the earth!

Teachings in the Seven Valleys

The Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, irrespective of the time-period, language, and form of composition all have a common purpose, and all contain elements of the Teachings of the Faith. As an example some of the Teachings that appear in the Seven Valleys and were elucidated in His subsequent Writings are outlined here:

- God is indescribable. All names and titles given to God relate to God’s Manifestations.
- The Manifestations of God are all one.
- Obedience to God’s commandments and recognition of His Manifestations at each age are both necessary for man’s salvation.
- Man is in need of God’s grace, bounty and spiritual guidance.
- The spiritual Worlds of God are innumerable.
- Man’s heart and soul becomes worthy of God’s grace when purified and cleansed from base desires and excessive materialism. The guidance given in the Seven Valleys prepares man to receive God’s grace.
- The ultimate goal of man’s spiritual progress is recognition of God’s Manifestation for the age.
- Man is essentially a spiritual being with material needs. Hence his happiness depends on the extent of his spiritual growth.

Lights of 'Irfán

- Physical and spiritual truths are not absolute, but relative.
- Each man receives his portion of God's grace and everyone is judged according to his or her own capacity.
- The prerequisite to success in one's search after truth is the elimination of all forms of prejudices and blind imitation.
- Man must set his vision at the outcome of all things.

Notes

- 1) This paper was presented at Louhelen and Bosch Bahá'í Schools in Michigan and California during October and November 1999.
- 2) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, translated by Marzieh Gail, in consultation with 'Alí-Kulí Khán, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Ill., U.S., 1991.
- 3) Shaykh Muhiyí'd-Dín, the judge of Kháníqayn in Iraqi Kurdistan.
- 4) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 140.
- 5) Bahá'u'lláh, *Four Valleys*, translated by Marzieh Gail, in consultation with 'Alí-Kulí Khán, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Ill., U.S., 1991.
- 6) Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, translated by Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Ill, U.S., 1931
- 7) Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-qán*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, United Kingdom
- 8) Bahá'u'lláh, The Essence (Gems) of Mysteries (*Jawáhinu'l-Asrár*). [This Epistle is in Arabic with no approved translation yet.]
- 9) Bahá'u'lláh, Mathnaví-i-Mubárák (*The Blessed Ode*). [This poem is in Persian and has the same style as that of Mathnavi of Rúmi. There is no approved English translation of this ode yet.]
- 10) Fáridu'd-Dín 'Attár (ca. 1150–1230 C.E.), one of the greatest Persian Sufi poets.
- 11) 'Attár, *The Conference of the Birds*.
- 12) 'Attár, *Book of Handship* (Mosíbat-Námeh).
- 13) Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 24.
- 14) *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 17) Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to The Son of the Wolf*, pp. 13–15
- 18) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 22-23.
- 19) *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 20) *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
- 21) *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 22) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, U.K. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, XXI, p. 49.
- 23) Khájih 'Abdu'lláh Ansárí, (1006–1088 C.E.), a well-known Sufi, principally remembered for his Supplications and Quatrains.
- 24) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 16.
- 25) New Testament, Matthew 6:9–10
- 26) Jalálu'd-Dín Rúmi (1207–1273 C.E.), the founder of the “Mawlaví Whirling” dervish order and author of the Mathnaví, one of the most celebrated mystical works of all time. Bahá'u'lláh quotes Rúmi in many of His Writings.
- 27) References to the story of the journey of Moses and Khidr from Rúmi's Mathnaví appear on page 17:
Veiled from this was Moses
Though all strength and light;
Then thou who hast no wings at all,
Attempt not flight.
and on page 26:
If Khidr did wreck the vessel on the sea,
Yet in this wrong there are a thousand rights.
- 28) Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-qán*, p. 92.

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- 29) Suhrevárdí, founder of the philosophical school of Ishrâq.
- 30) Nezámí Ganjáví, *Five [Stories]*, (*Khamsih-ye Nezám'í*), written around 1188–1189 C.E.
- 31) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 6-7.
- 32) New Testament, Matthew 11:4-6.
- 33) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 6, 23.
- 34) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 5-9 passim.
- 35) *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
- 36) *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
- 37) *Ibid.*, p. 19–20
- 38) *Ibid.*, p. 38
- 39) *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39
- 40) Hatif of Isfahan
- 41) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 39.
- 42) *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 43) Súrat 'at-Tauba (Repentance) from the *Qur'án* 9:5.
- 44) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 22–24.
- 45) 'Alí-ibn-Abí-Tálib. Related by Ishrâq Khávarí in *Qamús-i-`qán*, vol. 2, p. 741.
- 46) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 336–338.
- 47) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 15.
- 48) 'Alí-ibn-Abí-Tálib, *A Collection of Sermons and Letters* (Nahj'ul-Balaghat).
- 49) Qur'án, S.17 (Bani-Isra'il), 110.
- 50) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 2.
- 51) Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 47.
- 52) Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism. The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Oneworld Publications, U.K.
- 53) Glen A. Shook, *Mysticism, Science and Revelation*, George Ronald, U.K.
- 54) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 239–41.
- 55) Mullá Sadrá
- 56) Ibn-Faridh
- 57) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 39.
- 58) Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Tajallíyát (Effulgences) p. 47.
- 59) Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 19.
- 60) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 2.
- 61) *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.
- 62) Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 19
- 63) Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Tajallíyát (Effulgences) p. 50.
- 64) Qur'án 47:36—MUHAMMAD
- 65) Qur'án 29:64—AL- 'ANKABUT.
- 66) Khájih 'Abdulláh Ansárí. *Anwár-al-Tahqiq* (Lights of Search) in Persian, page 42. What is given here is a verb translation from Persian.
- 67) Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 35.
- 68) Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, p. 41.

The Beginning that Hath No Beginning: Bahá'í Cosmogony¹

by Vahid Brown

Behold, O concourse of the earth, the splendours of the End, revealed in the Manifestations of
the Beginning!
—Bahá'u'lláh

Endowed with consciousness, gifted with reason, humankind's experience of the world is necessarily an experience of meaning, collectively embodied in our worldviews and revealed in our cultures, languages, institutions, and ways of life. Myth, in the sense of the core sacred narrative of humankind's spiritual traditions, has for millennia been a circle enclosing all aspects of human life. At the center of this circle is the consciousness of the intimate relationship between the Absolute and the world. The fount of the mythic consciousness is a narrative of cosmogony, a foundational, overarching story of the creation of the universe. The perception of this link between the deep core of the Bahá'í Faith's spiritual vision of the universe and its outermost application in its social, administrative or institutional affairs is essential to an adequate awareness of modern Bahá'í life as *sacred*. The goal of this paper is to delineate several fundamental aspects of Bahá'í cosmogony and its underlying metaphysics, aspects which are central to the mythic vision of the world that animates Bahá'í life.

Throughout the works of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, creation remains an important theme, addressed in a variety of ways in several different "codes,"³ often alluding to aspects of the Islamic cosmogonic tradition. More than any other term, symbol, or concept, however, the Will of God is at the center of the Bahá'í notion of creation. It is the defining term of Bahá'í myth at every level, be it prophetological, epistemological, historical, societal, or personal.

In Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawh-i-Hikmat* (Tablet of Wisdom) we find an important discussion of the Will and of cosmogony that provides an ideal framework for our exploration, as it brings together diverse but parallel creation narratives found in the broader corpus of Bahá'í scripture. This paper will be structured around a detailed exploration of four selected passages from the Tablet (paragraphs 8, 9, and 12).

The Tablet was addressed to Áqá Muhammad Qá'iní, Nabíl-i-Akbar, arguably the most learned of Bahá'u'lláh's early disciples.⁴ Nabíl-i-Akbar was deeply versed in virtually all fields of study available to a man of his time and place, a fact to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred when speaking of him as a man "of wide learning, at once a mujtahid, a philosopher, a mystic, and gifted with intuitive insight, he was also an accomplished man of letters and an orator without a peer."⁵ Such a prodigious wealth of knowledge on the part of His audience may explain Bahá'u'lláh's allusions in this Tablet to so many currents of cosmogonic understanding in Islam.

As regards thine assertions about the beginnings of creation, this is a matter on which conceptions vary by reason of the divergences in men's thoughts and opinions. Wert thou to assert that it hath ever existed and shall continue to exist, it would be true; or wert thou to affirm the same concept as is mentioned in the sacred Scriptures, no doubt would there be about it, for it hath been revealed by God, the Lord of the worlds.⁶

This passage has been interpreted in a number of ways by various scholars of the Bahá'í Faith, the gamut of which can be gauged by referring to the works of Adib Taherzadeh, Moojan Momen, and Juan Cole.

Adib Taherzadeh maintained that these sentences, along with the remainder of this paragraph, give an unequivocal statement of the eternity of the world, and a firm rejection of the idea of a temporally originated cosmos, of creation *ex nihilo*.⁷ He reads the paragraph as juxtaposing two ideas of creation: (a) that "it hath ever existed," that it is eternal and (b) that "God was a hidden treasure and created man in order to make Himself known," which refers to the sentence in the Tablet immediately following those given above.⁸ The lat-

ter idea, to Taherzadeh, “seems to imply an interval without a creation,” i.e., the notion of temporal origination.⁹ Taherzadeh is clear, however, that such an idea is implied and is *only* implied, and he goes on to opine that what is really being distinguished are two ideas of eternity, “the eternity of God and the eternity of His creation.”¹⁰ He explains this idea by referencing talks on the matter by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions*, and another Tablet of Bahá’u’lláh from the ‘Akká period, the Lawh-i- ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb.¹¹

A different reading of this paragraph is presented by Moojan Momen in an article in which he argues for cognitive relativism vis-à-vis questions of Bahá’í metaphysics.¹² In it, he describes the issue as “that of whether the world of creation is coeternal with God or created in time.”¹³ In line with the development and application to Bahá’í metaphysics of the idea of cognitive relativism, which is the wider context in which this statement occurs, the author suggests that both of these positions are equally valid, but neither of them are “true” in anything like an absolute sense, for they concern realities or processes about which no intelligible concept can be considered adequate. Momen appears to read the passage as *explicitly* suggesting a notion of creation in time, which is then set in juxtaposition to the notion of eternity.

Juan Cole’s position lies somewhere in between. In his draft entry on the Tablet of Wisdom for the Bahá’í encyclopedia project, Cole seems, like Momen, to take for granted that Bahá’u’lláh is writing about the question of the eternity of the world versus its creation in time, out of nothing.¹⁴ To Cole, Bahá’u’lláh is saying that “both the eternity of the world and the creation of the world are valid ways of talking,” a statement which he supports by a treatment of the same distinction between essential (or ontological) pre-existence and temporal pre-existence noted by Taherzadeh.¹⁵ That is, the world is originated by God and is therefore contingent, and God, as That upon which the existence of the world is contingent, is essentially pre-existent. Yet this process of originating the cosmos has always been going on, and there is not a *time* in which it began, before which there was no world. Thus, to speak of God being *before* the creation is to speak of His existential rather than temporal priority in relation to the world. These concepts are explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the text Taherzadeh cites.¹⁶

Both Momen and Cole are reading this passage as a clear reference to the notions of creation in time, creation from nothing, or both. If we follow Cole and accept “sacred Scriptures” to embrace the Bible and the Qu’rán,¹⁷ we are left with the quandary that neither of these texts carry an explicit concept of creation *ex nihilo*. In fact, there are plenty of indications that the idea of temporal creation *ex nihilo* didn’t arise in the Abrahamic religions until a considerable time after the composition of their core scriptures.¹⁸ Additionally, there have always been important figures and sects in these religious traditions promoting readings of these texts that did not imply an *ex nihilo* creation, but simply a causal relationship between God and the world. One such group was the Shaykhí movement, with which Nabíl-i-Akbar, the immediate recipient of this Tablet, was associated.¹⁹

Momen’s reading of the passage hints at a larger problem. Do the Bahá’í writings affirm the eternity of the world or its creation out of nothing in time? If the answer is yes to both, how do we resolve the apparent contradiction?

As Momen implied in his comments about the Lawh-i-Hikmat, the answer is yes on both counts. As to the eternity of the world, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote and spoke emphatically on this point. One could cite, in support of the argument for eternity, the following:

Know that it is one of the most abstruse spiritual truths that the world of existence—that is to say, this endless universe—has no beginning. . . . If we could imagine a time when no beings existed, this imagination would be the denial of the Divinity of God. Moreover, absolute nonexistence cannot become existence. . . . Therefore, as the Essence of Unity (that is, the existence of God) is everlasting and eternal—that is to say, it has neither beginning nor end—it is certain that this world of existence, this endless universe, has neither beginning nor end.²⁰

The Creator always had a creation; the rays have always shone and gleamed from the reality of the sun, for without the rays the sun would be opaque darkness. The names and attributes of God require the existence of beings, and the Eternal Bounty does not cease. If it were to, it would be contrary to the perfections of God.²¹

Here we see no equivocation, no room for the suggestion of temporal creation or creation *ex nihilo*. Such,

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according to these citations, would be contrary to God's perfection and in denial of His divinity. The matter would appear to be settled, if it weren't for other instances in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh that speak of creation from nothing. For example:

All that is in heaven and all that is in the earth have come to exist at His bidding, and by His Will all have stepped out of utter nothingness into the world of being.²²

All praise to the unity of God, and all honor to Him, the sovereign Lord, the incomparable and all-glorious Ruler of the universe, 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, hath received them into His kingdom of incorruptible glory.²³

The apparent contradiction is resolved, however, by the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, both of whom state that "nothingness" in this context is not meant literally, as an absolute nonexistence which is replaced by existence in an act of *creatio ex nihilo*. Writing of the second quotation from Bahá'u'lláh immediately above, Shoghi Effendi stated, through his secretary:

The statement in the "Gleanings", pp. 64-65, "who out of utter nothingness . . ." etc., should be taken in a symbolic and not a literal sense. It is only to demonstrate the power and greatness of God.²⁴

'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke repeatedly to this question. In one instance, He states that "existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness."²⁵

If we re-examine the passage from the Tablet of Wisdom, it is quite clear that Bahá'u'lláh is affirming the eternity of the universe, while at the same time upholding the truth of whatever has been revealed in the sacred Scriptures. Even if we assume that His reference to the sacred Scriptures is intended to engage in the mind of His reader a more or less common understanding of these texts—that the universe was created in time and from nothing—it seems clear that He is not doing so in order to *affirm* that understanding. Bahá'u'lláh juxtaposes two truths, which many thought to be opposed to one another, and proceeds to elucidate their compatibility. One can affirm the scriptural concept of creation since the universe is dependent on a cause, exists through something other than itself, and is therefore contingent. This fact entails a preexistence on the part of its Cause, but a preexistence which is ontological rather than temporal. The fact that the universe has always existed does not confer upon it an eternity identical to the eternity of God, for the latter exists at an infinitely higher place in the hierarchy of being.

This same juxtaposition and resolution was offered in another place by Bahá'u'lláh, where He writes:

As to thy question whether the physical world is subject to any limitations, know thou that the comprehension of this matter dependeth upon the observer himself. In one sense, it is limited; in another, it is exalted beyond all limitations. The one true God hath everlastingly existed, and will everlastingly continue to exist. His creation, likewise, hath had no beginning, and will have no end. All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause.²⁶

In the Lawh-i-'Abdu'r-Razzáq, Bahá'u'lláh offers yet another manner of approach, one which introduces a fundamental concept for Bahá'í cosmogony. In it, Bahá'u'lláh again addresses an individual who had posed a "question concerning the origin of creation."²⁷ He first answers that the beginning of creation "hath had no beginning," that it "hath existed from eternity, and will continue to exist forever."²⁸ He then refers to a well-known *hadíth* that could be understood to imply a *creatio ex nihilo*:

As to those sayings, attributed to the Prophets of old, such as, "In the beginning was God; there was no creature to know Him," and "The Lord was alone; with no one to adore Him," the meaning of these and similar sayings is clear and evident, and should at no time be misapprehended. To this same truth bear witness these words which He hath revealed: "God was alone; there was none else besides Him. He will always remain what He hath ever been." Every discerning eye will readily perceive that the Lord is now manifest, yet there is none to recognize His glory. By this is meant that the habitation wherein the Divine Being dwelleth is far above the reach and ken of any one besides Him. . . . He will, for ever, remain immea-

surably exalted above any one except Himself.²⁹

This is similar to the resolution examined above. The sayings of the Prophets that imply a time when God existed *prior* to the existence of anything else are interpreted by Bahá’u’lláh to point to an ontological priority, not a temporal one. God can always be described as being “alone,” for His is an absolute existence, while all else is contingent and caused, acquiring existence from the will of another.

But He continues in this Tablet to provide a unique turn on this cosmogonic issue, assimilating its cosmic level to an historical dimension. The Manifestations of God are offered as one of the intended referents in the scriptural passages that speak of God and His creation. The various names by which the reality with cosmic causal significance are known in the Bahá’í writings and which are understood to have “created” all things—the Will, the Word, the Command—are related to the Manifestations of God in such a way as to imbue Their activity with cosmogonic meaning. Thus, Bahá’u’lláh offers an additional elucidation of those texts that speak of God “before” creation in the context of the earthly mission of His Manifestations:

Consider the hour at which the supreme Manifestation of God revealeth Himself unto men. Ere that hour cometh, the Ancient Being, Who is still unknown of men and hath not as yet given utterance to the Word of God, is Himself the All-Knower in a world devoid of any man that hath known Him. He is indeed the Creator without a creation. For at the very moment preceding His Revelation, each and every created thing shall be made to yield up its soul to God. This is indeed the Day of which it hath been written: “Whose shall be the Kingdom this Day?” And none can be found ready to answer!³⁰

This plurality of cosmogonic levels is essential to the Bahá’í mythic structure, and allows the creativity of God to be perceived in concrete moments of sacred time. By virtue of its capacity for extension to diverse levels of experience and reality, cosmogonic symbolism reverberates throughout humanity’s diverse modes of life, be they personal, cultural, historical, spiritual, or political. As will be seen, the thread that ties the cosmogony to all aspects of the sacred in the Bahá’í worldview is the concept of the Will of God.

The next passage from the Tablet of Wisdom reads:

Indeed He was a hidden treasure. This is a station that can never be described nor even alluded to. And in the station of ‘I did wish to make Myself known,’ God was, and His creation had ever existed beneath His shelter from the beginning that hath no beginning, apart from its being preceded by a Firstness which cannot be regarded as firstness and originated by a Cause inscrutable even unto all men of learning.³¹

There are two narratives embraced by this passage; one of symbol and metaphor, and one of a more rational, philosophical discourse. Both narratives have a long heritage of development, and both are essential to Bahá’í cosmogony. Over the next few pages we will call these, respectively, the myth of the Hidden Treasure and the paradox of causality.

The Myth of the Hidden Treasure

The myth of the Hidden Treasure springs ultimately from a *hadíth qudsí*—a recorded utterance of Muhammad, His companions or Imams, which has as part of its text an ascription of a saying to God Himself.³² Though providing the substance of contemplation for countless Muslim mystics over time, this particular *hadíth qudsí* was generally repudiated by the *hadíth* scholars.³³ It is not found in any of the six canonical collections of *hadíth* recognized by Sunnis and most Shí’ites as authentic and authoritative. Nonetheless, it is quoted, cited, and alluded to in a great many places in the Bahá’í writings, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a celebrated commentary on it while in His teens.³⁴

While there are a number of variants of the Hidden Treasure *hadíth*, the form which is cited here in the *Lawh-i-Hikmat* and upon which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote His commentary can be translated as follows:

I was a Hidden Treasure. I did wish (or love) to make Myself known, so I created the Creation that I might be known.

The Tablet of Wisdom distinguishes between two “stations” (*maqámát*) of God or of Being in this *hadíth*. The first station is that of the Hidden Treasure, so transcendent that it is beyond description or even allusion. With reference to this station, it is impossible to ascribe existence to anything other than the divine Essence. In His commentary on this *hadíth*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote:

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And that Essence of Primal Oneness, in that most great station in which it is said: “There was God and there was naught else besides Him,” is called by the names: the Hidden Treasure, the Hidden Ipseity, the Absolute Unity, Pure Essence, Absolute Non-specificity, the Hidden of the Hidden, the Primal Mystery, the Absolute Unknown, the Indescribable One, the Undiscoverable One and other Names.³⁵

The second station, of “I did wish to make Myself known,” is the station at which God can be addressed by names and attributes, including “the Creator.” As such, He has a creation, which is contingent yet eternally existent. These two stations are also distinguished in a prayer of Bahá’u’lláh:

I testify that Thou wast a hidden Treasure wrapped within Thine immemorial Being and an impenetrable Mystery enshrined in Thine own Essence. Wishing to reveal Thyself, Thou didst call into being the Greater and the Lesser Worlds, and didst choose Man above all Thy creatures, and didst make Him a sign of both of these worlds, O Thou Who art our Lord, the Most Compassionate!³⁶

The creative activity of the second stage can be referred to as the Word, as in this verse: “Thou didst wish to make Thyself known unto men; therefore, Thou didst, through a word of Thy mouth, bring creation into being and fashion the universe.”³⁷ The Word of God, in turn, depends upon the agency of God’s Will (*mashíyyat*) and Purpose (*irádih*):

I testify that no sooner had the First Word proceeded, through the potency of Thy will and purpose, out of His mouth, and the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths.³⁸

In the myth of the Hidden Treasure, we can discern the classic cosmogonic pair of chaos and cosmos. The station of the Hidden Treasure corresponds to chaos, for at this stage the universe is considered as nothingness, while God’s Essence is an impenetrable abyss, in which it is impossible to identify characteristics or structure. At the station of “I did wish to make Myself known,” there comes the appearance of order (cosmos), a clear relationship between Creator and creation in pursuance of a definite purpose. The concept which mediates between these two sides of the semantic opposition is the Will. It is the Will which brings creation “out of the wastes of utter nothingness” —chaos—and it is “the energies of Thy Will whereby the entire creation hath been generated” that regulate the order—cosmos.

It should also be noted that the human being plays a critical role in the myth of the Hidden Treasure.³⁹ If the desire to be known is the cause of creation, such a desire could only be fulfilled in the creation of a being with the capacity for knowledge. This central role is expressed by Bahá’u’lláh in the following:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, 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 . . .⁴⁰

As with the cosmos/chaos pair, the semantic opposition of known/unknown, which, in the myth of the Hidden Treasure is the tension behind the decision of God to create, is mediated by the Will of God. Not only is the Will responsible for the creation of the capacity to know, it is the Manifestation of that Will in the Prophets and Messengers that mediates between the latency of this capacity and its actual fulfillment. Perhaps the clearest expression of the identity of the Will with the Prophets is this passage from the Báb: “It is this Primal Will which appeareth resplendent in every Prophet and speaketh forth in every revealed Book.”⁴¹ That humanity’s knowledge of God is possible only through the Manifestations is a central theme throughout the Bahá’í writings, for it is the Manifestation of God “Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation.”⁴²

The cosmogonic concepts of the myth of the Hidden Treasure are used at a variety of levels. In the *Lawh-i-Hikmat*, we see them employed at the level of cosmogony proper, in terms of the creation of the universe. But these concepts are also central to the Bahá’í view of sacred history, in which cycles of time are initiated by the appearance of a Manifestation of the Primal Will, a Prophet who transmits God’s message to humanity and lays the foundation for a new civilization. All of the same elements are present. The moment before the Prophet reveals Himself, there is a “Creator without a creation,”⁴³ a chaos in which God is utterly hidden. The “works and acts of each and every one of these Manifestations of God” are assimilated to the creative activity of God,

inasmuch as they “are a reflection of His Will and Purpose.”⁴⁴ At both levels, creation is effected through the Word. There is even a parallel in the distinction between the two stations of God described above and the two stations of the Manifestations explained by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-*qán*. At the level of God’s Oneness—the Hidden Treasure—no attributes or names can be affirmed, since the Essence is identical only with Itself and transcends description. Similarly, in “the station of pure abstraction and essential unity,”⁴⁵ all of the Prophets are one, and no distinctions can be made between them. In the station of wishing to be known, God is named by definite attributes, each of which has a concomitant effect—i.e., God is the Creator and therefore has His creation. Reflecting this, the Prophets have a “station of distinction,” in which “[e]ach one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite Mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation.”⁴⁶ Their “particular Revelation” corresponds to the creation of a new civilization in the era in which They appear.

The Paradox of Causality

Turning to the second narrative, we find the perplexing statement that the universe, though eternal, is preceded by a “Firstness which cannot be regarded as firstness and originated by a Cause inscrutable even unto all men of learning.”⁴⁷ Our understanding of this paradox of causality, insofar as any understanding is possible, will be facilitated by a brief look at its development in Islamic thought.

Greek philosophy, which the Islamic world studied and absorbed, contrasted two traditions of the idea of God or the Absolute. In Aristotelian thought, God is the First Cause, the Unmoved Mover who is ultimately responsible for all motion. From this perspective, God is the highest link in a chain of causality, and is therefore directly connected to His effects. The Neoplatonic tradition, on the other hand, emphasized the transcendence of God or “the One.” This latter tradition—at least insofar as it is based in the works of Plotinus—held that any name for God is merely a symbol for an unknowable reality, a reality which is the ground of the chain of being rather than its apex. For example, in the *Enneads*, Plotinus writes:

The name “the one” is merely a denial of multiplicity. The Pythagoreans signified it symbolically among one another through the term Apollo [a-pollón: “not many”], by apophasis of the many. If the one is to be taken as a positing, name, and referent, we would express ourselves more clearly if we did not speak its name at all. We speak it so that we can begin our search with that which signifies the most simple, ending with the apophasis of even that.⁴⁸

How can one say that it is a being among beings, something to which a thus can be applied? It is other than all things that are “thus.”⁴⁹

There is certainly a hierarchy of causes in Neoplatonism—the chain of hypostases—but the link between the two highest orders of being in this hierarchy is of a different nature than the link between the highest order of the hierarchy and that unutterable reality that transcends yet embraces the chain of being in its totality.

The Islamic philosophical discourse on these issues can also be schematized into two similarly contrasting traditions. Islamic theology could be called apophatic in a general sense, in that it could not but affirm the all-important principle of *tawhíd*, divine unity, and that “there is nothing like Him.”⁵⁰ Yet there is a broad divide between, on the one hand, such philosophers as Ibn Síná (Avicenna, d. 1037 C.E.) or al-Farábí (d. 950 C.E.), for whom it is legitimate to represent God as the First Cause, the Necessary Being; and on the other hand, such Shí’ite thinkers as the Ismá’ílí Abú Ya’qúb Sijistání (tenth century) or *Shaykh* Ahmad al-Ahsá’í (d. 1826), for whom the ascription to God of being a cause (*‘illa*) is little less than heresy.

In early Ismá’ílí thought, the cause of causes (*‘illat al-‘illal*) is not God, but rather the First Intellect, which is the first originated being.⁵¹ God is not delimited or defined by creation because, to these thinkers, a cause is necessarily delimited and qualified by its effect. The appearance of an effect confers the quality of causation upon its cause. Inasmuch as an effect rises *necessarily* from its cause, as heat does from fire, God envisioned as first cause would cease to be free. Rather, the first cause, the cause of all secondary causes, is said to have been *made to cause* those causes by God. It is not directly caused by God, but is rather *originated* (*abda’*) by Him. It may seem like wordplay, but the essential point of this argument is that God is not the first cause in the great chain of causes and effects, for if this were the case God would then be similar to those secondary causes and their effects. Rather, God is the Origin (*mubdi’*) of the First Intellect, the latter being identified with

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the Word or the Unity (*wahda*).⁵² From this first originated being (*al-mubda' al-awwal*), all things are produced through emanation (*inbi'áth* or *fiyd*). The chain of causation begins here, functioning in much the same way as in the Neoplatonic hierarchy.⁵³

In the works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í one finds many parallels to the metaphysical doctrines of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths. Like the philosophers of early Ismá'ílism, Shaykh Ahmad drew upon the teachings of the Shí'í Imáms in elaborating his thought. One reported saying of the sixth Imám, Ja'fár as-Sádiq, was particularly important for the Shaykh's understanding of creation. In this enigmatic statement, quoted abundantly by Shaykh Ahmad, the Imám says: "God created the Will (*mashiyyat*) through itself (*bi-nafsihá*), and created all things (*al-ashyá'a*) through the Will."⁵⁴

One can see from this statement how Shaykh Ahmad may have developed a notion similar to that of the early Ismá'ílís, in which God is not seen as the direct cause of creation but as the origin of the first cause. In fact, Shaykh Ahmad did exactly that, though not in the same terms. He took this teaching of Imám Sádiq and laid it at the foundation of his metaphysics. For Shaykh Ahmad, the "acting" of an agent is distinct from both the agent itself and the act for which the acting is a process of occasioning.

If the Primal Will created itself, or was created by itself, does God then have no connection with the universe? Is there not a circularity in the idea of a self-created Will? Shaykh Ahmad is emphatic in answering both of these questions in the negative. He explains that *mashiyyat* is God's acting, and an acting⁵⁵ depends upon an agent of that acting for its subsistence.⁵⁶ He defines the mode of subsistence by which the acting of an agent has its own distinct being as "subsistence of emanation," or "processional subsistence" (*qiyám as-Sudúrí*).⁵⁷ Thus, the Primal Will is contingent upon God for its being, and could be conceptualized as God's "process of emanating." Yet, he insists that the Emanator, the process of emanating, and the end-result emanation are three distinct realities, which he classifies on the cosmological scale as Real Being (*al-wujúd al-haqq*), Absolute Being (*al-wujúd al-mutlaq*), and Delimited Being (*al-wujúd al-muqayyad*).⁵⁸ In the case of the Primal Will, it is dependent on God for its existence but is at the same time its own cause. Shaykh Ahmad points out that a process-of-willing is not coequal with the actor upon whom this process depends, nor is it the same as the willed result. Further, the process-of-willing does not come to be through anything other than itself, for if it did we would have to say that it came to be through another process-of-willing which in turn depended upon a third process-of-willing, around and around in an infinite regress.⁵⁹ Thus, the Primal Will can be seen as its own cause, while yet remaining contingent in relation to God, the Real Being.

In Bábí and Bahá'í texts, we can find both of these approaches to the affirmation of God's transcendence. As in early Ismá'ílí doctrine, God is not the cause of causes but the Originator of the cause of causes; and as with Shaykh Ahmad, the traditional statement of the Imám Ja'fár as-Sádiq is cited in evidence of God's independence from receiving qualification from His effects.

These strains are the background to the statement under discussion, that "His creation had ever existed beneath His shelter from the beginning that hath no beginning, apart from its being preceded by a Firstness which cannot be regarded as firstness and originated by a Cause inscrutable even unto all men of learning."⁶⁰ From one perspective, the Firstness (*awwal*) is not a firstness (*lá awwal*) due to the fact that creation is not "after" God in a temporal sense. But further, it is not even "after" God as an effect is "after" a cause. The Primal Will, while it constitutes an actional quality of God, is its own cause. It is the Primal Will which in turn is the agent of the creation of the universe. God's "firstness" in relation to the Primal Will is ambiguous, for the Primal Will is the cause of the Primal Will. But on the other hand, the "firstness" of the Primal Will is not absolute, for its very being is God's activity.

A few pages later in the *Lawh-i-Hikmat*, Bahá'u'lláh seems to employ language similar to the Ismá'ílís to indicate these distinctions, when He says that "such men as were the source and the wellspring of Wisdom never denied the moving Impulse [*'illa*] behind these causes, nor the Creator [*mubdi'*] or the Origin [*mabda'*] thereof."⁶¹ This language appears to mirror the Ismá'ílí notion of the First Intellect or Primal Will as the cause (*'illa*) of causes, with God as the originator (*mubdi'*) of the First Intellect. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterates this principle in several places, such as in the following: "He, the invisible, the lofty and the incomprehensible, is preceded by no cause but rather is the Originator of the cause of causes."⁶²

The writings of the Báb display a nearly identical use of terms to distinguish the creativity of God from the

creativity of the Primal Will as first “cause.” Todd Lawson has cited passages from the Báb’s earliest work—the Tafsír Súrat al-baqara—that employ the terms *ibdá’* (origination, from the same root as *mubdi’*) and *ikhtri-ra’* (invention) in what Lawson describes as the Báb’s “distinctive cosmogony entailing twin creative processes.”⁶³ The employment of these and similar pairs of terms to make this same distinction has a rich tradition in Islamic philosophy, and is not confined to Ismá‘ílí cosmology. As William Chittick notes:

For many Muslim thinkers, “innovation” [*ibdá’*] is God’s creation without intermediary, whereas “creation” (*khalq*) refers to his creation by means of a preexistent something. Thus one can say that God “innovated” the intellect, but he “created” everything by means of the intellect.⁶⁴

As to the saying of Ja‘fár as-Sádiq, this is also quoted and discussed in the Bábí and Bahá’í writings. Saiedi has noted that in the Báb’s *Sahífiy-i-‘Adlíyyih* (Book of Justice), the Báb “explains that God created the Primal Will from nothing through the causation of the Will itself without any external determination, and created all other beings by the causation of the Will . . .”⁶⁵ In His *Súriy-i-tawhíd*, the Báb expounds the doctrine at some length, explicitly citing the Imáms, and identifying the Primal Will with the First Remembrance, which can be understood to refer to the archetypal reality of the Manifestation of God.⁶⁶ This latter element of the Báb’s treatment of this idea is expressed in another Tablet in which God addresses the Báb, as His Manifestation, in these words:

In truth I have created Thee through Thyself, then at My Own behest I have fashioned all things through the creative power of Thy Word. We are All-Powerful. I have appointed Thee to be the Beginning and the End, the Seen and the Hidden.⁶⁷

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also quotes the tradition of Imám Ja‘fár, though in a slightly different form. This is in a commentary on the very passages of the *Lawh-i-Hikmat* being examined here, and is cited in the course of explaining the segment which is the substance of the next stage of our inquiry, to which we now proceed.

That which hath been in existence had existed before, but not in the form thou seest today. The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force [*fá’il*] and that which is its recipient [*munfa’il*]. These two are the same, yet they are different. . . . Such as communicate the generating influence [*fá’ilayn*] and such as receive its impact [*munfa’ilayn*] are indeed created through the irresistible Word of God which is the Cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof.⁶⁸

In a Tablet to *Shaykh* ‘Alí-Akbar *Qúchání*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elucidates and interprets the above paragraph from the *Lawh-i-Hikmat*, as well as a later passage concerning Nature.⁶⁹ After quoting the first sentence of the above, He writes: “From this blessed verse it is clear and evident that the universe is evolving. In the opinion of the philosophers and the wise this fact of the growth and evolution of the world of existence is also established. That is to say, it is progressively transferred from state to state.”⁷⁰

Concerning the next sentence, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated . . . that is to say: The matter [*máddih*] and primary matter [*hayúlá*, Greek *hylé*] of contingent beings is the ethereal power, which is invisible and known only through its effects, such as electricity, heat, and light—these are vibrations of that power, and this is established and proven in natural philosophy and is known as the ethereal matter [*máddíyyih-áthríyyih*]. This ethereal matter is itself both the active force (*fá’il*) and the recipient (*munfa’il*); in other words, it is the sign of the Primal Will in the phenomenal world. “God created man by the Primal Will and the Primal Will by itself.” The ethereal matter is, therefore, the active force since light, heat and electricity appear from it. It is also the recipient, for as vibrations take place in it, they become visible.⁷¹

This verse and its commentary has brought us to the heart of Bahá’í cosmogony. This cosmogonic narrative—of the creative interaction of active and passive forces—is the model for Bahá’í sacred narrative at every level.

This narrative describes a creative unfoldment with respect to three levels of being. The first level is God, and it is His acting—self-caused yet contingent—that occupies the second level. To this level can be given the more-or-less equivalent names of the Word, the Command, or the Primal Will of God. The third level is that of the creation, the phenomenal world. Earlier we noted that *Shaykh* Ahmad sets forth a similar model, giving

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the three levels the names Real Being, Absolute Being, and Delimited Being. The God-Command-Creation scheme is emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a number of places, such as in *Some Answered Questions*, where we find Him saying:

[T]he Sufis admit God and the creature, and say that God resolves Himself into the infinite forms of the creatures, and manifests like the sea, which appears in the infinite forms of the waves. These phenomenal and imperfect waves are the same thing as the Preexistent Sea, which is the sum of all the divine perfections. The Prophets, on the contrary, believe that there is the world of God, the world of the Kingdom, and the world of Creation: three things.⁷²

The Lawh-i-Hikmat describes the dynamics of the relationships between these three levels in terms of *process* and *semantic opposition*. At the level of the world of God, there is no tension between opposites, nor any duality. God is the *coincidentia oppositorum*, in Whom essence is identical with existence. All divine attributes and names, which include polarities such as justice and mercy, merge into one at the level of the Unknowable Essence, of the Hidden Treasure. This is elegantly expressed by Shaykh Ahmad in his *al-Fawá'id al-Hikmiyyah*:

With respect to His Quintessence (Glorified is He!), however, the matter is counter to that which is possible with respect to creation. So from a single aspect He is Lofty in His Proximity, Proximate in His Loftiness. From a single aspect He is the Manifest in His Occulting, the Occult in His Manifesting. From a single aspect He is the First through His Lastness, the Last through His Firstness.⁷³

This is an eternal and immutable state, described earlier as the station of the Hidden Treasure. The station of God’s desire to be known can be identified with the second level, the world of Command. This second level is God’s acting (*fi’l*), His Primal Will which was created through itself. It is here that the first trace of duality arises, a duality infinitely more subtle than the duality prevailing in the world of creation. From what is below it, the world of Command appears as a perfect unity, but in relation to God it is nothing. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said

Though the ‘First Mind’ [the Primal Will] is without beginning, it does not become a sharer in the preexistence of God, for the existence of the universal reality in relation to the existence of God is nothingness, and it has not the power to become an associate of God and like unto Him in preexistence.⁷⁴

But what exactly is this duality in the World of Command, and what, at this level, do the active and passive forces signify? In looking for the answers in the Bahá’í writings, we find an abundance of codes employed. These codes use symbols drawn from the Qur’án and traditions of Islamic thought, from Greek philosophy, even from the esoteric science of alchemy. We’ll here explore several prominent “codes” relevant to the mythic dimension at other levels of the Bahá’í teachings, and that are thus part of the experience of the sacred in the modern-day Bahá’í community.

One code for the expression of the creative tension in the world of Command derives from the Qur’anic creation myth. In it, a prominent theme concerns the word “Be,” by which God brings things into existence. There are eight verses that employ the formula, one of which reads: “Verily, His Command, when He intends a thing, is only that He says to it, “Be!” —and it is!”⁷⁵

The Arabic word for “be” is *kun*, from the three-letter root *káf* (K), *wáw* (W, Ú), and *nún* (N). The imperative form used in these Qur’anic verses is written with just the two consonants *káf* and *nún*. Islamic thinkers developed a number of symbolic interpretations of these verses, in which the *káf* and the *nún* were seen to represent primordial entities engaged instrumentally by God’s creative Command. One common interpretation coupled this verse with the first verse of the sixty-eighth *Súrih* of the Qur’án: “Nún. By the Pen and that which they write.”⁷⁶ The *káf* was identified with the Pen, which is used symbolically in Islamic and Bahá’í texts for the Primal Will or First Intelligence; while one of *nún*’s literal meanings—“inkpot”—was exploited to provide a symbol for the passive counterpart to the active Pen.⁷⁷

In an early Ismá’ílí text by Abú Ya’qúb Sijistání (tenth century), we find a passage concerning the “significance of ascribing the Command of God to these two letters—that is, to the *káf* and the *nún*,” in which it is explained that

anything having either a spiritual or a corporeal nature cannot appear except as one of a pair, [regardless of] whether it is sublime or mundane. Because the Command of God, the Almighty, initiates the formation

of such pairs, it is represented by two letters so that it will be understood that God’s Command is the cause of everything in which duality is found to exist. . . . As joined together in this word whose very being derives from the Command of God, these two letters are witness on the part of every pair of creatures, each one being paired with its partner, just as the *káf* is the mate of the *nún*, that this condition in all cases derives from the Command of God, the Most High.⁷⁸

Later in the same work, Sijistání writes: “The first cause which is the oneness is called “the Word [*kalima*] of God,” glorious is His majesty and it—that is, *kalima*—has four letters. . . . The *káf* [in *kalima*] corresponds to intellect, since it is the principle of existences and the origin of higher and lower substances, and in it is the seed of corporeal and spiritual forms. This is like saying that the totality of all creatures appears with the *kun* [of the divine Command *kun*] even before the *nún*.”⁷⁹

These passages envision the two letters of the *kun* representing the principle of duality, a principle manifest throughout contingent being, but with its source in the Command rather than in God. Sijistání states that everything in existence is one of a pair; this perhaps derives from the many statements in the Qur’án to the effect that all things were created in pairs.⁸⁰ Sijistání also relates the *káf-nún* duality to the composite nature of all things, in which are necessarily combined matter and form.⁸¹ He notes that the *káf* in *kun* is vowelless (*muta-harrík*; a term used to signify a vowelless consonant, but lit. “in motion”), while *nún* in the word *kun* is not vowelless (i.e., carries a *sukún*, which means literally “silence, repose, rest”). This is then related to the activity of *káf* and the passivity of *nún*, which are further said to be symbolic of prime matter and form, respectively.⁸²

In the work of Shaykh Ahmad, the symbols of these two letters are treated similarly. The *káf* and the *nún* are the active and passive forces which interact at the World of Command and thereby produce the lower realms of existence; in his terminology, they constitute the dynamics of Absolute Being by which Delimited Being is generated. The *káf* is said to symbolize the Will of God (*mashíyat*), and *nún*, His Purpose (*irádih*). For Shaykh Ahmad, in each composite thing existence is active while essence is passive. Will is responsible for the creation of the first while Purpose is responsible for the creation of the second.⁸³

In the Báb’s *Tafsír-i-Bismilláh ar-Rahmán ar-Rahím*, the same equation is made between these two letters and the respective stages of Will and Purpose. He writes that the Will, represented by *káf*, is the father of all things and is responsible for the creation of matter. Purpose, represented by *nún*, is the mother of all things and is responsible for the creation of form.⁸⁴ The matter/form pair is closely related with that of existence/essence mentioned by Shaykh Ahmad.

In the works of Bahá’u’lláh the “code” of the *káf* and the *nún* are also employed as symbols for the process whereby cosmic creativity—through which the World of Creation issues from the World of Command by the instrumentality of the Will of God—is assimilated to the creative power of the Manifestation of God, through Whom human life and civilization is revolutionized and reformed. The symbol is used in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 177, where it is translated as “the letters B and E.” In the notes to that text we read: “Shoghi Effendi, in letters written on his behalf, has explained the significance of the ‘letters B and E.’ They constitute the word ‘Be,’ which, he states, ‘means the creative Power of God Who through His command causes all things to come into being’ and ‘the power of the Manifestation of God, His great spiritual creative force.’”⁸⁵

As mentioned above, the *káf* and the *nún* have also been identified with three other pairs of active and passive realities: existence and essence, matter (or substance) and form, and Will and Purpose. The first two pairs can be treated together, as they revolve around similar philosophical problems. The Aristotelian concept of hylomorphism (from *hylé*, prime matter, and *morphé*, form) holds any given thing to be composed of a potential material element and an actual formal element. The active/passive values to these categories, however, are reversed in Shaykhí and Bahá’í texts, so that the active half of this pair is considered to be matter (*mádda*) or substance (*jawhar*) rather than form (*súrat*). The question of existence and essence embraces a history of philosophical speculation distinct from the question of hylomorphism. It was of major concern and the subject of lively debate in Islamic philosophy from the time of Ibn Síná, and can be summarized as the question of whether a thing was primarily a mode of existence to which an essence functioned as a qualifying accident, or, on the other hand, an essential reality to which existence was the qualifying accident allowing it to appear in outward manifestation.

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In the Bahá'í writings, the two questions—of hylomorphism and existence over essence—are answered in essentially the same way. Any given thing in the universe is seen as a composite in which matter or substance is an active element “received” by a delimiting form. In the same way, existence is the act, closely identified with the Will, and essence is the particular reception of this act by which a thing comes to be as it is. The two elements are simultaneous in the coming-into-being of the thing, each of them necessary. The “thingness” of the thing lies in neither essence nor existence, but rather both of them through their interaction. However, matter or existence is higher in the hierarchy of being, as it depends solely on God’s acting, while form or essence depends on matter/existence for its subsistence. Matter is called the “father,” form the “mother,” but both are necessary in the “procreation” of the thing. These points are variously expressed in the following quotations:

For example it has been stated that all things are composed of two elements: the “receiver” [qábil] and the “received” [maqbúl]. By “received” is meant substance [mádda] and primary matter [huyúlá] and by “receiver” is meant the form [súrat] and shape which confines and limits the primary matter from its state of indefiniteness and freedom to the courtyard of limitation and definite form.⁸⁶

[I]t is not possible for a thing to have an external existence and not to be formed into a shape because substance [mádda] and primal matter [hayúlá] in order to exist need form[súrat], while shape and form in order to appear need substance.⁸⁷

The sun is born from substance [máddih] and form [súrat], which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection.⁸⁸

Some think that the body is the substance [jawhar] and exists by itself, and that the spirit [rúh] is accidental and depends upon the substance of the body, although, on the contrary, the rational soul [nafs an-nátiqih] is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident—that is to say, the body—be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains . . . the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.⁸⁹

Certainly, that which is the substance [jawhar] is superior to that which is the accident, for the substance is the origin, and the accident is the consequence; the substance depends on itself, while the accident is dependent on something else; that is to say, it needs a substance upon which to depend.⁹⁰

The inseparability of the halves of these pairs casts light on the statements of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá regarding the ethereal matter quoted above. Another aspect of the unity of active and passive is that they are both manifestations of the one Primal Will.

The other pair seen in the *káf* and the *nún* is that of *mashíyyat* and *irádih*, Will and Purpose. These are related to the creative energies of the Command mentioned in the verses of the Qur’án that speak of the word *kun*, such as the one already quoted:

Verily, His Command, when He intends [iradih] a thing, is only that He says to it, “Be!” —and it is!⁹¹

Will is mentioned in a similar fashion:

Alláh createth what He will [yashá’, same rt. as *mashíyyat*]. If He decreeth [qadá] a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! [kun] and it is.⁹²

In the context of the Bahá'í writings, Will and Purpose are the two highest degrees of a seven-stage schema which describes the process of the generation of all things, from the apex of the World of Command down to their appearance in the world of creation. This schema goes back to a saying of the sixth Imám, Ja‘fár as-Sádiq, which mentions the following degrees: Will (*mashíyyat*), Purpose (*iráda*), Determination (*qadar*), Decree (*qadá*), Permission (*idhn*), Fixed Time (*ajal*), and Book (*kitáb*).⁹³ Nader Saiedi has discussed this scheme in a recent work, in which he notes that the “heart of these seven stages of creation is the union between existence and essence.”⁹⁴

Beginning with treatment of this question in *Shaykh Ahmad*, the stage of Will is related to the creation of existence, and Purpose with the creation of essence and its linking to existence.⁹⁵ Returning to the Báb’s Tafsír-i-Bismilláh ar-Rahmán ar-Rahím already referred to above, it will be remembered that He equated *káf* with Will, *nún* with Purpose, and ascribes the creation of matter (*mádda*) to the former and of form (*súrat*) to the

latter. He states that Will is the father of all things, Purpose their mother, and then he relates this to a saying attributed to Rahmán in which the latter is reported to have stated that he and ‘Alí were the father and mother, respectively, of all Muslims.⁹⁶ We begin to see from these sets of mutually implicating pairs how the dialectic at the level of cosmogony can be assimilated to spiritual history.

We have already seen Bahá’u’lláh employing the concepts of Will and Purpose as interrelated counterparts to the cosmic creation . . . “—no sooner had the First Word proceeded, through the potency of Thy will and purpose, out of His mouth, and the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized . . .” —but He also refers to this process as the agency in the bringing into being of the laws and principles by which His community is organized: “. . . grant that Thy servants may not be kept back from this Divine Law [*sharí‘ah*] which, at Thy will [*mashíyyat*] and according to Thy pleasure [*iráda*], hath branched from Thy most great Ocean.”⁹⁷

In the following key passage from the Lawh-i-Hikmat, “Such as communicate the generating influence [*fá’i-layn*] and such as receive its impact [*munfa’ilayn*] are indeed created through the irresistible Word of God which is the Cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof,”⁹⁸ the words *fá’i-layn* and *munfa’ilayn* could be literally translated as the *twin agents* and the *twin patients*. Bahá’u’lláh has identified the *fá’i-layn* as fire and water and the *munfa’ilayn* as air and earth.⁹⁹ In other places, the Bahá’í writings engage the Graeco-Islamic tradition on this question, in which the two agents could be defined as heat and cold, and the two patients moistness and dryness, with the four elements themselves thus composed of active and passive natures.¹⁰⁰ One could read this verse as saying that the Word of God is responsible for the creation of the four Classical categories of elements and natures, which interact with each other in the composition of all physical things. It can also be read as a reference to the dialectics of Will and Purpose and of Determination and Decree within the World of Command.

These first four degrees of the Báb’s seven-stage schema are often treated as a distinct quaternity by both Shaykh Ahmad and the Báb. In the Persian Bayán, the Báb dazzles the reader with over a dozen interrelated symbolic quaternities, including (1) Will, (2) Purpose, (3) Determination, (4) Decree; and (1) fire, (2) air, (3) water, and (4) earth. In the former, Will and Determination are the active counterparts of the passive elements of Purpose and Decree. Thus, we can align these concepts to the verse in the Lawh-i-Hikmat, in that the *fá’i-layn*, the two agents of fire and water, are equated in the Bayánic quaternary symbolism with the active categories of Will and Determination, while the *munfa’ilayn*, the two patients of air and earth, are equated with Purpose and Decree. Following Shaykh Ahmad, the Bayánic quaternities are divisions or stages of the one Act or Acting of God, known also as the Primal Will.¹⁰¹ The unity of the twin realities in the Primal Will can be seen as identical to the unity of the four realities, but with the latter there is a greater measure of dynamic complexity.¹⁰²

Verily, the Word of God is the Cause that hath preceded the contingent world—a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times.¹⁰³

From the elements of Bahá’í cosmogony already surveyed, it is clear that creation is not a single, unique event, from which time and creation stretch passively on. The activity of the divine Will is constant, and it is upon this ceaseless activity that each existing thing depends. In the above passage from the Lawh-i-Hikmat, an additional element to this relationship is introduced. The divine Will provides not simply a constant ground of being for all existent things; it is responsible at every moment for the creation of the cosmos. This is entailed by the active/passive categories in the Bahá’í writings.

There is a constant transformation of form and essence that constitutes the appearance of change and development in the things around us. If we think of this transformation as existential motion, then the cause of such motion will be either the forms that appear to be flitting from state to state, or it will be the substance (or existence) which these forms delimit and define into a particular thing. If the existential motion is caused by the nature of the forms, then form is active. If it is caused by the nature of existence, then existence is active. Since it has been seen that, in Bahá’í texts, existence is the active category while essence or form is passive, we must conclude that the appearance of change and development is due to the active nature of existence (or substance).

It has also been seen that existence derives from God’s acting, from His Will. It is thus fundamentally—one could say literally—dynamic. As all particular things in the cosmos depend upon the Will, they are characterized

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by this dynamism in their very being, and cannot be considered to be “at rest” in any way. From one moment to the next, all things subsist in the ground of God’s dynamic acting, being constantly regenerated and renewed. Every instant is a cosmogonic moment, “in the beginning.”

Bahá’u’lláh is explicit about this idea of perpetual creation in the *Kitáb-i-Badí’*. Saiedi has summarized the presentation as follows:

Completion is simply and solely dependent on the will of God because creation is a continuous process. God does not create a being which then continues to exist on its own. On the contrary, everything is at every moment coming into existence and ceasing to exist. Bahá’u’lláh describes this as the continuous reflection of the different names of God, including the names of Life-Giver and Life-Taker. If nothing in the realm of creation is characterized by continuous existence, and everything is always created anew, then perfection or completion is only a matter of the divine act of creation. It is the will of God to bring into existence any being at any moment in any form He desires.¹⁰⁴

Another statement of this principle is found in Bahá’u’lláh’s *Súriy-i-Vafá*:

Know thou moreover that every created thing is continually brought forth and returned at the bidding of thy Lord, the God of power and might.¹⁰⁵

The idea of perpetual creation can also be considered as *process*, as in the following passage:

The wonders of His bounty can never cease, and the stream of His merciful grace can never be arrested. The process of His creation hath had no beginning, and can have no end.¹⁰⁶

The metaphors of breath and of sunlight have also been used in the Bahá’í writings to express this concept:

I can have no doubt that should the holy breaths of Thy loving-kindness and the breeze of Thy bountiful favor cease, for less than the twinkling of an eye, to breathe over all created things, the entire creation would perish, and all that are in heaven and on earth would be reduced to utter nothingness.¹⁰⁷

[A]ll the earth’s creatures require the bounty of the sun, for their very existence is dependent upon solar light and heat. Should they be deprived of the sun, they would be wiped out. This is the being with God, as referred to in the Holy Books: man must be with his Lord.¹⁰⁸

The doctrine of continuous cosmogony is of immense significance to the mythic dimension of the Bahá’í Faith. According to this perspective, all operations of the Will of God are creative, and all events or entities seen to represent God’s Will are endowed with the charisma of cosmogony. Likewise, the Word of God, whether in the sense of the primordial command “Be!” or in the sense of the scriptures brought by the Prophets and Messengers, is endowed with an infinite capacity to bring ever-new realities into being.

The nature of history is comprehended by Bahá’u’lláh in ways that exactly parallel the description of the cosmogonic process. As the universe is a product of God’s Will, so is the historical process seen as a manifestation of this dynamic and all-pervading reality. In the case of both cosmic unfoldment and the series of temporal events, the engine that moves the process forward is depicted as a dialectic of opposing forces. Periods of history, like the physical world, are described as springing from the Word of God, and depend upon the ceaseless divine activity of this dialectic in order to develop. At the center of both space and time stands the figure of the Manifestation of God, the vehicle of the Primal Will, at Whose appearance the world is recreated and time is begun anew. The two narratives—of creation and of history—employ the same stock of images and codes, and modern Bahá’í life is, in many ways, the performance of these narratives: the same images and codes serve to confer upon it historical meaning and world-creativity in the consciousness of those who live it.

Abbreviations

BP	<i>Bahá’í Prayers</i>
GPB	Shoghi Effendi, <i>God Passes By</i>
GWB	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh</i>
KA	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>The Kitáb-i-Aqdas</i>

Lights of ‘Irfán

KI	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>The Kitáb-i-‘qán</i>
LANZ	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand</i>
MF	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Memorials of the Faithful</i>
PM	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>Prayers and Meditations</i>
SAQ	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Some Answered Questions</i>
SWA	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá</i>
SWB	The Báb, <i>Selections from the Writings of the Báb</i>
TB	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh</i>

Notes

- 1) The article presented here is, with minor modifications, the third chapter of a lengthier work, *Cosmos and Chaos: Myth, Creation, and the Bahá’í Administrative Order*, forthcoming. That work and this revised extract are greatly indebted to the generous assistance offered by too many people to mention here. While I’ll include full acknowledgements in the book, I cannot omit mention here of the constant help provided by David Bikman as a critical reader and masterful editor; by William F. McCants and Khazeh Fanapazir for similar assistance, and for help with primary sources; and to beloved Sama, Dr. Rhett Diesser, Ismael Velasco, Armin Eschraghi, Keven Brown, Erica Toussaint, Damien Adia, Dr. Iskandar Hai, Dr. Kavian Milani, Dr. Steven Phelps, Iscander Tinto, Guy Sinclair, Darach Watson, James Goldsmith, and many, many others, for all your assistance, encouragement, and friendship. Thanks also to Dr. Iraj Ayman for extending the invitation to present *Cosmos and Chaos* at the 2001 ‘Irfán Colloquium in Michigan.
- 2) *KI*, p. 168.
- 3) “Code” is here used following the myth scholar Eleazar Meletinsky, in the sense of a particular descriptive language in mythopoetic discourse. See *Poetics*, p. 210.
- 4) Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá’ís*, p. 112.
- 5) MF, p. 6. Nabil-i-Akbar was a remarkable man by any standard. Prior to becoming a Bábí (ca. 1853) he attained the rank of *muj-tahid* (a Shí’í jurist empowered to decide on matters of Islamic law), by the authority and under the tutelage of the greatest Shí’í leader of his time, Shaykh Murtadá Ansári. The latter was the sole *marja’ at-taqlid* (point of emulation in all matters of religious practice) of the entire Shí’í world, and was mentioned by Shoghi Effendi as the man “whom Bahá’u’lláh . . . extolled in the ‘Laws-i-Sultán,’ and numbered among ‘those doctors who have indeed drunk of the cup of renunciation,’ and ‘never interfered with Him,’ and to whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred as ‘the illustrious and erudite doctor, the noble and celebrated scholar, the seal of seekers after truth.’” (*GPB* p. 143) Before studying with Shaykh Murtadá, Nabil-i-Akbar spent five years in the town of Sabzivár, attending the classes of Hájí Mullá Hádí Sabzivári (d. 1878), the most renowned Persian philosopher-mystic of the Qájár period in Iran (1794-1909), called in his day the “Plato of his time” and the “Seal of the Sages” (Nasr, *Islamic*, p. 305). Nabil-i-Akbar was eulogized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in MF (pp. 3-7), and was named by Him as one of the Hands of the Cause of God.
- 6) *TB*, p. 140.
- 7) *Revelation*, IV:39f.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 9) *Ibid.*
- 10) *Ibid.*
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 40f.
- 12) Momen, “Relativism.”
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- 14) Cole, “Laws-i-Hikmat,” web.
- 15) *Ibid.*
- 16) Taherzadeh, *Revelation*, IV:40n.
- 17) Cole makes this equation for the passage in the Laws-i-Hikmat in “The Concept of Manifestation,” section 3: “God and the World.”
- 18) According to one author: “Nearly all recent studies on the origin of the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo have come to the conclusion that this doctrine is not native to Judaism, is nowhere attested in the Hebrew Bible, and probably arose in Christianity in the Second Century C.E. in the course of its fierce battle with Gnosticism.” (Peter Hayman, “Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991), p. 1-15) The *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, under the article “Judaism,” adds that “[a]lthough the first chapter of Genesis affirms divine creation, it does not offer an entirely unambiguous view of the origin of the universe, as the debate over the correct understanding of Gen. 1:1 in former as in modern times discloses. (Was there or was there not a preexisting matter, void, or chaos?) Yet, basically, the interest of the author was not in the mode of creation, a later concern perhaps reflected in the various translations of the verse: “In the beginning God created,”

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- which could signify what medieval philosophers designated *creatio ex nihilo* ("creation out of nothing"); and "when God began to create," which could indicate some concept of prime matter. He was concerned rather to affirm that the totality of existence, inanimate (Gen. 1:3-19), living (20-25), and human (26-31), derived immediately from the same divine source; and, thus, that it is a universe." ("Judaism" *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. <search.eb.com/bol/topic?eu=108153&sctn=25>) In a lengthy study of Islamic cosmogony, Dr. al-Alousi points out, in discussing the Qur'anic idea of creation (*khalāqa*) that "[t]he etymological meaning of *khalāqa* indicates creation from some material. The attempts of commentators and philologists [sic] to interpret the word in a peculiar way in the Qur'ān, that is to say in favour of creation ex-nihilo, reflect later influences" (*The Problem*, p. 22). The author meticulously combs the Qur'ān for any explicit statement of creation from nothing, and finds, not only that there is no such verse, but that there is much evidence that the Qur'ān teaches creation from something, an ordering of the cosmos by God from already-existing matter (*Ibid.*, chap. 1). This same observation regarding the Qur'anic account of creation starting from some substance rather than from nothing was made by Dr. Vahid Rafati in his article "Lawh-i-Hikmat."
- 19) MF, p. 3.
 - 20) SAQ, p. 180.
 - 21) *Ibid.*, p. 281.
 - 22) GWB, p. 318.
 - 23) *Ibid.*, p. 64f.
 - 24) LANZ, p. 41.
 - 25) SAQ, p. 281.
 - 26) GWB, p. 162.
 - 27) GWB, p. 150.
 - 28) *Ibid.*
 - 29) *Ibid.*, p. 150f.
 - 30) *Ibid.*, p. 151.
 - 31) TB, p. 140.
 - 32) Some Islamic scholars consider this tradition to be an *Isrā'iliyya*, a wisdom-saying passed down by the Jews that eventually entered the oral traditions of the early Muslims. On this question, see Roberto Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'iliyyat* in Muslim Literature." *Arabica: Journal for Arabic and Islamic Studies* 49.2 (April 1999), pp. 193-210. See also Nurbakhsh, *Traditions*, p. 13, where it is called a *hadīth qudsī* but is given as a saying of the prophet David. Nurbakhsh quotes the *hadīth* from a thirteenth-century ms.
 - 33) Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 391 n 14.
 - 34) GPB, 241. M. Momen has published a provisional translation of this tablet in his "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary..."
 - 35) Momen, "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary," p. 9.
 - 36) PM, p. 48f.
 - 37) BP, p. 122f.
 - 38) PM, p. 295.
 - 39) Cf. the illuminating discussion by Hodgson, *Venture*, II:222-227, on the "myth of the microcosmic return."
 - 40) GWB, p. 65.
 - 41) SWB, p. 125.
 - 42) KA, p. 21.
 - 43) GWB, p. 151.
 - 44) GWB, p. 59.
 - 45) KI, p. 152.
 - 46) *Ibid.*, p. 176.
 - 47) TB, p. 140.
 - 48) Sells, *Mystical*, p. 17. Bracket-note is Sells'.
 - 49) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 - 50) Qur'ān 25:11.
 - 51) Makarem, *Doctrine* p. 81.
 - 52) Netton, *Alláh* p. 217.
 - 53) This is very much a simplification of early Ismá'ílí cosmogonic philosophy. For more information, refer to the works of Paul Walker, Daftary, Makarem and Netton listed in the bibliography.

- 54) Hamíd, *Metaphysics* 174n 23, my translation of the Arabic.
- 55) As awkward as it is, I've followed Shaykh Ahmad in using the gerund “acting” as opposed to “action” to highlight the distinction between an action and the process whereby that action comes into being.
- 56) *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 57) *Ibid.*, pp. 148 and 174f.
- 58) *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 59) *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 60) *TB*, p. 140.
- 61) *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 62) *SWA*, p. 61; cf. *SAQ* p. 203.
- 63) *Authority of the Feminine*, p. 110, 122n 81. For examples of earlier usage of these terms in this manner by medieval Neoplatonists—Jewish and Muslim—see Altman and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, pp. 68-74. See also below, note 121, for the usage of these terms by Shaykh Ahmad.
- 64) Chittick, *Heart* p. 77f.
- 65) *Logos*, p. 55f.
- 66) *Le Báyân Arabe*, p. 25ff.
- 67) *SWB*, p. 159.
- 68) *TB*, p. 140.
- 69) Shaykh ‘Alí-Akbar Qúchání (1871-1915) was a remarkable man, of similar distinction in knowledge as Nabí-i-Akbár, recipient of the Tablet of Wisdom. In addition to receiving his authorization to practice Islamic law from the leading *mujtahid* of his day, he was also an exponent of the philosophy of Mullá Hádí Sabzívání (see note 4 above). In this Tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addresses him as “thou who callest unto the Covenant.” He was martyred in Khurasan in 1915, and his death is mentioned by Shoghi Effendí on p. 298f. of *GPB*. The Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is published in *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* (‘Abdu’l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávarí ed., 9 vols. Tehran: Mu’assisa Millí Matbú’at Amrí, 128-9 B.E.) 2:68-70, and *Amr va Khálaq*, 1:168-9. Part of a provisional translation by Keven Brown was published in the *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 2:3 (1989-90), p. 28, in his article on the origin of matter.
- 70) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Lawh-i-Shaykh ‘Alí-Akbar Qúchání Shahíd, passage as trans. by Keven Brown, “A Bahá’í Perspective” p. 28.
- 71) From the same provisional translation by Keven Brown, partially published in *Ibid.*, p. 28. The partial translation of this passage as found there has been modified in consultation with Keven Brown.
- 72) *SAQ*, p. 295.
- 73) Hamíd, *Metaphysics* p. 344; Arabic text on p. 497f.
- 74) *SAQ*, p. 203.
- 75) Qur’án 36:82, Muhsin Khán trans.
- 76) Qur’án 68:1, Pickthall trans.
- 77) See Milani and Fananapazir, “Pen Motif.”
- 78) P. Walker, *Wellsprings* 51.
- 79) *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 80) For example, Qur’án 13:3, 36:35, 42:11, 43:12, 51:49, 53:45.
- 81) P. Walker, op. cit. p. 52.
- 82) *Ibid.* This equation is a reversal of tradition hylomorphism, but is a position in which he follows his predecessor, the Ismá‘ílí philosopher Abú ‘Abdalláh al-Nasafí (d. 942)—see Netton, *Alláh Transcendent*, p. 213. From Aristotle to the present, hylomorphism has been understood in terms of the constitution of all things of *passive* matter and *active* form. Hylomorphism was an integral feature of Islamic philosophy, where it was almost universally employed in the traditional, Aristotelian way. These early Ismá‘ílí authors are quite unusual in this sense. No other Islamic philosopher seems to have followed them in this respect, with one major exception: Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá‘í. Corbin makes a brief reference to this aspect of Shaykh Ahmad’s metaphysics (*History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 355). The fact the Sijistání and al-Nasafí represent earlier proponents of this theory has not been noted by Shaykh Ahmad’s modern commentator, Idris Hamíd, to whose work we are indebted for much the material related to Shaykh Ahmad used here. Hamíd notes, regarding the Shaykh’s unorthodox position on this question: “Here Shaykh Ahmad makes a philosophical commitment that is, as far as I know, unique in the history of philosophy of Muslim civilization as well as neoplatonism in general. Reversing traditional hylomorphism, Shaykh Ahmad asserts that *matter* is the active principle while *form* is the receptive principle. Reverse hylomorphism is one of the fundamental principles underlying Shaykh Ahmad’s entire metaphysics and cosmology, which is, in large part, an application of this principle” (*Metaphysics*, p. 392n 38).

This reversal of the traditional position appears to be much more prominent in Shaykh Ahmad’s thought than in either of the two

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- Ismá'ílís, but this question requires further research. The Bábí and Bahá'í writings also maintain that matter is active while form is passive.
- 83) Hamíd, *Metaphysics* p. 297f.
- 84) Afán, "Tafsír" p. 126.
- 85) *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 245n 188.
- 86) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Momen, "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary" p. 27. I have modified the translation of this passage, in which Momen gives "Fashioner" for *qábil* and "Fashioned" for *maqbul*. This rendering can be misleading. The two terms come from the same root, meaning to receive, assent, comply, be willing or passive in relation to something. From the root verb, these two forms correspond respectively to something that does the action (*qábil* is the "doer" of receptivity, i.e. is the "receiver") and the thing to which the action is done (*maqbul* is the thing that is "received"). To illustrate, the verb root *kataba*, meaning "to write," follows the same pattern: *kátib* is a writer, one who writes, while *maktúb* means "written" or something that is written. It is doubtless somewhat confusing to talk about the action of passivity, but "fashioner" seems to convey the opposite of this, and the result is that the reverse hylomorphism—so explicit in this passage—is obscured.
- 87) *Ibid.*
- 88) *SAQ*, p. 89.
- 89) *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- 90) *Ibid.*, p. 292.
- 91) Qur'án 36:82.
- 92) 3:47.
- 93) There are variants to this *hadíth*. Hamíd quotes a version from the famous collection of Imámí traditions by Kulayni, the '*Usul min al-kafi*': "Nothing in the Earth or in the Firmament comes to be except with seven dispositions [*khisál*]: a willing [*mashiyyat*], a desiring [*irádih*], a determining [*qadar*], an accomplishing [*qadá*], permission [*idhn*], a record [*kitáb*], and a term of duration [*ajal*]" (*Metaphysics*, p. 394n 45). This is also quoted in an article by M. Jadhábání on these seven stages in the Báb's writings. As Jadhábání notes, the order of the last two is reversed in the writings of the Báb, so that *kitáb* is the last term ("Marátib," part one, p. 38).
- 94) *Logos*, p. 54.
- 95) First [of the stages of the Act (fi'l) in relation to Its effects (maf'úlát)] is the stage of Will (*mashiyyat*). It is the first remembrance (*dhikr al-awwal*) as [Imám] ar-Ridá to Ild Yúnus. By this is meant that a thing, prior to the stage of *mashiyyat*, is without mention (*dhikr*) in any of the stages of possibility. The beginning of its mention is that it be known in its existence (kawn). . . . Second is Purpose (*irádih*), and this is the determination of what has been willed. This is its second mention, known in its essence ('ayn)"
- (*Shaykh* Ahmad's *Fawá'id al-Hikmiyyah*, in Hamíd, *Metaphysics* p. 434; my translation from the Arabic).
- . . . Origination (*ibdá'*)—or Invention (*ikhtirá'*)—is the first creation of God. He created it through itself, then created the letters through the Origination, and made them actually from it. To any thing, He says: 'Be (kun)! And it is.' The letter *káf* alludes to Invention, that is, to the Will (*mashiyyat*), and this is the *káf* that circles around itself, for it is the source of existence (kawn). The *nún* refers to Origination, that is, to Purpose (*irádih*), and it is the source of essence ('ayn)"
- (*Ibid.*, p. 438, my trans.).
- 96) Afán, "Tafsír" p. 126.
- 97) *PM*, p. 27.
- 98) *TB*, p. 140.
- 99) In a Tablet partially cited in *Ishráq-Khávarí*, op. cit., vol. 1 p. 47f.
- 100) See Rafáti, "Lawh-i-Hikmat" passim.
- 101) The quaternary of Will, Purpose, Determination and Decree are set forth as the divisions of the Divine Activity in *Shaykh* Ahmad's *Fawá'id*, fourth *fá'ida*. See Hamíd, *Metaphysics*, pp. 434-442 for the Arabic, translated on pp. 293-303.
- 102) The Bayánic quaternities and related symbolism in Bahá'í and *Shaykhí* texts, though relevant to the exploration of the mythic dimension of the Bahá'í Faith, would unduly expand the proportions of the present work if treated fully here. I am currently working on a study of this issue, and God willing, the preliminary results of this study will be presented at the 'Irfán Colloquium in Michigan in 2002.
- 103) *TB*, p. 141.
- 104) Saiedi, *Logos* p. 189f., summarizing Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Badí'* (Prague: Zero Palm Press, 1992), pp. 121-123.
- 105) *TB*, p. 183.
- 106) *GWB*, p. 61.
- 107) *PM*, p. 90.
- 108) *SWA*, p. 54.

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* For reasons of space, this list is limited to works cited or referred to in the notes to the article presented here. For a full list of works consulted in the writing of the book—in which this article forms the third of five chapters—see *Cosmos and Chaos*, forthcoming.

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Knowledge, Certitude and the Mystical Heart:
The Hidden Essence of God's Word

by LeRoy Jones

Number me not with them who read Thy words and fail to find Thy hidden gift which, as decreed by Thee, is contained therein, and which quickeneth the souls of Thy creatures and the hearts of Thy servants. —Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations¹

Pursuing knowledge in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh is no mere quest for learning, nor simply an exercise in logic and language. Instead, finding the true knowledge of Bahá'u'lláh grips the seeker in a delicate dance of words that pulls one into a web of allusion and intrigue. Unlike seeking a mechanical kind of knowledge that is somehow based on material reality, the pursuit of His knowledge entails action as one tries to tailor their own life to the commands and wishes of God in an ever unfolding drama of personal discovery. The beauty, force and grandeur of His words parallels any intellectual understanding as we realize that by aligning our lives the inner ear is opened to the incomparable splendor of the Nightingale's song of inner knowledge. This silent melody grows ever sweeter as we gradually unravel the hidden mysteries embedded in the subtleties of these Holy Words.

If this portrayal sounds too sensational or dramatic, we need only examine such passages as that in the Kitáb-i-*qán* when the "trumpet blast of knowledge" awakens the seeker's heart, soul and spirit. But, this occurs only after that seeker has reached a state of "longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy."² Not the normal state we assume in preparation for study. Bahá'u'lláh also refers to the "ethereal cup of true knowledge,"³ suggesting this knowledge is delicate and other worldly. We see no mere intellectual knowledge when perusing this verse from that same book.

Such are the mysteries of the Word of God, which have been unveiled and made manifest, that haply thou mayest apprehend the morning light of divine guidance, mayest quench, by the power of reliance and renunciation, the lamp of idle fancy, of vain imaginings, of hesitation, and doubt, and mayest kindle, in the inmost chamber of thine heart, the new-born light of divine knowledge and certitude.⁴

Most western conceptions treat knowledge as though it has objective reality. We accrue it, organize it, disseminate it, utilize it, disregard it and forget it. All the while there is in some minds the lurking realization that this world of ideas and thought is not nearly so tangible and under control. Thus the philosophers ask, "What is this stuff we call knowledge anyway?" Considering the never-ending, varied, and prodigious number of answers, one realizes that this is no simple question.

The Bahá'í Faith accepts much of what is typically considered knowledge. For example, high praise is given for science and philosophy. Yet Bahá'u'lláh reserves special distinction for what He terms divine or true knowledge. Rather than being something we manipulate, this true knowledge is dynamic and seems to embrace us in a transforming process of realization and empowerment.⁵ The precise nature of this knowledge is not clear, however, it may be that true knowledge has two dimensions. The outer knowledge, the written word, when used constructively helps isolate preconceived ideas and traditions, allowing our minds to embrace new perspectives and paradigms. It provides guidance on how to come closer to God. Linked to the proper use of outer knowledge is the inner spiritual knowledge. These two types of knowledge can either oppose each other or act synergistically. Much of Bahá'u'lláh's writing emphasizes that those who misunderstand the outer form of God's word fail to grasp its inner message. This failure of understanding is based on a spiritual condition, because only the pure in heart can use the outer message to access the inner reality, thereby opening our inner self to ever deeper levels of divine knowledge and certitude.

At this point in Bahá'í development, any statements defining what might be termed Bahá'í knowledge must

be considered tentative. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the possibility that accessing this true knowledge may have more to do with beauty and longing than with the world of the senses and logic. Inner knowledge is hidden and is beyond words and thought. Bahá’u’lláh speaks of hidden mysteries and subtle allusions that draw us to the deep heart’s core. This knowledge involves spiritual communion and a language of the heart that pulls one ever closer to God. Magically embedded in the words of the Manifestation, this knowledge is disclosed only to the pure in heart.

Bahá’u’lláh often links true knowledge with certitude. Interestingly, the Kitáb-i-^qán, “Book of Certitude,” covers true or divine knowledge as a major theme. Literal definitions of the word “certitude” indicate that it is a sense or feeling of certainty, whereas definitions of “certainty” describe it as conclusions or data that are beyond doubt. Certainty is an intellectual state, whereas certitude is a spiritual state more like faith. In fact, in the following verse He compares certitude to faith, implying that true or divine knowledge is more spiritual than intellectual. Beginning His discussion of knowledge and certitude in the Kitáb-i-^qán Bahá’u’lláh states:

[T]hey that tread the path of faith, they that thirst for the wine of certitude, must cleanse themselves of all that is earthly—their ears from idle talk, their minds from vain imaginings, their hearts from worldly affections, their eyes from that which perisheth. They should put their trust in God, and, holding fast unto Him, follow in His way. Then will they be made worthy of the effulgent glories of the sun of divine knowledge and understanding, and become the recipients of a grace that is infinite and unseen, inasmuch as man can never hope to attain unto the knowledge of the All-Glorious, can never quaff from the stream of divine knowledge and wisdom, can never enter the abode of immortality, nor partake of the cup of divine nearness and favour, unless and until he ceases to regard the words and deeds of mortal men as a standard for the true understanding and recognition of God and His Prophets. [all emphases added]⁶

Bahá’u’lláh associates divine knowledge with “a grace that is infinite and unseen,” as well as entering the “abode of immortality,” and “divine nearness and favour.” Divine knowledge appears almost synonymous with the “knowledge of the All-Glorious” and the “recognition of God.” To access divine knowledge we must completely detach ourselves from all that is earthly as well as the words and deeds of mortal men. Nowhere in this passage does He emphasize study or learning.

Later in the Kitáb-i-^qán He notes:

O my brother, when a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse and purify 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.⁷

A few lines before these words in the Kitáb-i-^qán, Bahá’u’lláh indicates that divine knowledge can “blossom nowhere except in the city of a stainless heart,”⁸ suggesting that divine knowledge is the same as the “knowledge of the Ancient of Days.” He defines the heart as the “seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God” indicating a link between true knowledge and the “inner mysteries.” Obviously, this is not the material heart, but a spiritual organ which is our mystical center and a channel for the knowledge of God. He clarifies this idea in these words.

The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge.⁹

The first thing a seeker of divine knowledge must do is “cleanse and purify his heart” from “all acquired knowledge.” In the previous paragraph of the Kitáb-i-^qán Bahá’u’lláh states, “Thus will these mysteries be unraveled, not by the aid of acquired learning, but solely through the assistance of God and the outpouring of His grace.”¹⁰ Apparently acquired knowledge is equivalent to acquired learning and is something we must be wary of as we try to penetrate these mysteries and gain or develop true knowledge.

In many other places Bahá’u’lláh says that we cannot rely on human learning,¹¹ which creates an interesting dilemma. As we study the words of Bahá’u’lláh and grasp their concepts, even if we memorize those words, can we categorize the results of these efforts as anything other than acquired learning? Bahá’u’lláh says

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we must cleanse our hearts of *all acquired learning*. Taking this argument to its extreme, one could conclude that as we learn the words of Bahá' u'lláh, that process alone does not impart true knowledge. If that is the case, then His words and verses in and of themselves, as well as the intellectual understanding they impart, are not true knowledge.

Another common perspective cautions us not to let the traditions and presuppositions of past religions cloud our views. We must purge our minds of this type of acquired learning and allow the teachings of the new Manifestation to take root. These new teachings and realizations are considered true knowledge. Passages from the Kitáb-i-*qán* such as the following are used to support this view.

And their conviction is such that were a person to be made manifest with all the promised signs and to promulgate that which is contrary to the letter of the law of the Gospel, they must assuredly renounce him, refuse to submit to his law, declare him an infidel, and laugh him to scorn. This is proved by that which came to pass when the sun of the Muhammadan Revelation was revealed. Had they sought with a humble mind from the Manifestations of God in every Dispensation the true meaning of these words revealed in the sacred books—words the misapprehension of which hath caused men to be deprived of the recognition of the Sadratu'l-Muntahá, the ultimate Purpose—they surely would have been guided to the light of the Sun of Truth, and would have discovered the mysteries of divine knowledge and wisdom. [all emphases added]¹²

Obviously, a person must seek the Manifestation with a humble mind and open heart. In this state a person will not be deprived of recognition and of the discovery of divine knowledge. However, does this mean that “the true meaning of these words revealed in the sacred books” is true or divine knowledge? Verses such as this could indicate that the new, insightful interpretation of the signs or their “true meaning” is divine or true knowledge. However, there are other verses that suggest true knowledge is an ethereal reality beyond words. While this ethereal reality is the focus of this paper, I do not want to dismiss the possibility that the outer form, the words of the verses, is a kind of outer true knowledge that parallels an inner true knowledge that is concealed within the words. Divine inner knowledge is a language of the heart and does not use words or utterance. Like certitude, this inner knowledge is not simply a cognitive state. In addition, recognition of the Manifestation is the result of a proper understanding of the signs and, as we shall see later, recognition is related to divine knowledge.

The next few passages strongly indicate that there is a divine language that is veiled and concealed, however, that the outer form can be considered true knowledge is not so clear. Bahá' u'lláh states:

It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion. Such are the unveiled traditions and the evident verses already mentioned. The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed. . . This is the divine standard, this is the Touchstone of God, wherewith He proveth His servants. None apprehendeth the meaning of these utterances except them whose hearts are assured, whose souls have found favour with God, and whose minds are detached from all else but Him. In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended. Thus it is recorded: “Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá'im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth.” He also saith: “We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain.”¹³

Bahá' u'lláh says the “inner language is veiled and concealed.” No one will understand this language except those who are pure of heart, “whose hearts are assured.” The outer language gives clear guidance so that the “wayfarer,” the seeker who is far from God, may move toward “reunion.” This reunion may be likened to the distraught lover finally finding his beloved. The outer language is likely the guide for someone pursuing the truth of the inner language—a seeker struggling to discover the mysteries locked in the heart, and let loose their power.

The tradition {hadith} which maintains there are seventy-one meanings in each word of Revelation might

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also indicate a sealed language which goes beyond words. Does Bahá’u’lláh really want us to search each word for seventy-one symbolic meanings or is this entire verse a symbolic reference to the inner meanings of the heart—a range of spiritual significance which is vast in its scope?

How can there be a language or a knowledge which transcends words? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

[Y]ou desire to approach the presence of God and to become informed of the realities and precepts of God. It is my hope that you may put forth your most earnest endeavor to accomplish this end, that you may investigate and study the Holy Scriptures word by word so that you may attain knowledge of the mysteries hidden therein. Be not satisfied with words, but seek to understand the spiritual meanings hidden in the heart of the words.¹⁴

The “presence of God,” we will see later, is likely the knowledge of God. So, to approach the presence or knowledge of God ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encourages us to seek the mysteries hidden in the words. Compare the above passage to these words from the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf.

It is now incumbent upon them who are endowed with a hearing ear and a seeing eye to ponder these sublime words, in each of which the oceans of inner meaning and explanation are hidden, that haply the words uttered by Him Who is the Lord of Revelation may enable His servants to attain, with the utmost joy and radiance, unto the Supreme Goal and Most Sublime Summit—the dawning-place of this Voice.¹⁵

Clearly there is an inner significance which must be sought and is available to those with inner faculties. In another verse of the Epistle Bahá’u’lláh expands on this theme.

O thou who art named Dayyán! This is a hidden and preserved Knowledge. We have entrusted it unto thee, and brought it to thee, as a mark of honor from God, inasmuch as the eye of thine heart is pure. Thou wilt appreciate its value, and wilt cherish its excellence. God, verily, hath deigned to bestow upon the Point of the Bayán a hidden and preserved Knowledge, the like of which God hath not sent down prior to this Revelation. More precious is it than any other knowledge in the estimation of God—glorified be He! He, verily, hath made it His testimony, even as He hath made the verses to be His testimony.¹⁶

Once again we see there is a hidden knowledge that is imparted to one whose “heart is pure.” More interesting however, is that He makes a distinction between this “hidden and preserved Knowledge” and His “verses.” He refers to each of these as His testimony. Bahá’u’lláh makes a similar distinction elsewhere.

The first and foremost testimony establishing His truth is His own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other He hath established the words He hath revealed as proof of His reality and truth. This is, verily, an evidence of His tender mercy unto men. He hath endowed every soul with the capacity to recognize the signs of God. How could He, otherwise, have fulfilled His testimony unto men, if ye be of them that ponder His Cause in their hearts.¹⁷

If we assume that both “His truth is His own Self,” as well as, “His Revelation” are more closely linked to true and hidden knowledge, as opposed to “the words He hath revealed” or His verses, then a very different idea of knowledge must follow. This shift in perspective is supported by the following.

Behold, how lofty is the station, and how consummate the virtue, of these verses which He hath declared to be His surest testimony, His infallible proof, the evidence of His all-subduing power, and a revelation of the potency of His will. He, the divine King, hath proclaimed the undisputed supremacy of the verses of His Book over all things that testify to His truth. . . . Their excellence is unrivalled, their virtue nothing can surpass. They are the treasury of the divine pearls and the depository of the divine mysteries. They constitute the indissoluble Bond, the firm Cord, the ‘Urvatu’l-Vuṭḥqá, the inextinguishable Light. Through them floweth the river of divine knowledge, and gloweth the fire of His ancient and consummate wisdom. . . no manifestation greater than the Prophets of God hath ever been revealed, and no testimony mightier than the testimony of their revealed verses hath ever appeared upon the earth. Nay, this testimony no other testimony can ever excel, except that which the Lord thy God willetth.¹⁸

Bahá’u’lláh obviously elevates the status of His verses in this passage. Is it simply because of their message and guidance? Or, is an equally important part of their distinction that they are a “treasury” and a “depository” of divine and knowledge and wisdom. Not simply an intellectual argument or set of rules, but, “Through [these verses] floweth the river of divine knowledge, and gloweth the fire of His ancient and consummate wisdom.”

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Somehow, enshrined within these words, flows a hidden river of knowledge and wisdom.

What is contained in this hidden river? In the following passage, after establishing the shortcomings of learning, the Báb defines “true knowledge”:

True knowledge, therefore, is the knowledge of God, and this is none other than the recognition of His Manifestation in each Dispensation.¹⁹

That recognition is more than simple detection, identification, or even acceptance is made clear in the opening words of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*:

The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws . . . It behoveth everyone who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.²⁰

Bahá'u'lláh clarifies this theme:

The first and foremost duty prescribed unto men, next to the recognition of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, is the duty of steadfastness in His Cause . . . The spirit that animateth the human heart is the knowledge of God, and its truest adorning is the recognition of the truth that “He doeth whatsoever He willeth, and ordaineth that which He pleaseth.” Its raiment is the fear of God, and its perfection steadfastness in His Faith.²¹

After recognition we must be steadfast in His laws. He links steadfastness to the “knowledge of God,” which the Báb called “true knowledge.” This knowledge “animateth the human heart.” If obedience is inseparable from recognition we can conclude that the “knowledge of God” or “true knowledge” is closely linked to steadfastness. Through the ongoing process of obedience to the Manifestation we can delve ever deeper into this ethereal realm. The core of this realm is the spiritual or mystical heart, the human faculty which connects us to God.

The concept of unity is also linked to this divine knowledge.

[T]he time when the . . . Tree of knowledge and wisdom will have vanished . . . when the portals of divine unity and understanding—the essential and highest purpose in creation—will have been closed, when certain knowledge will have given way to idle fancy.²²

This essential purpose is the same as the recognition of the Manifestation.

[T]hey have been deprived of the recognition of the essential Purpose and the knowledge of the Mystery and Substance of the Cause of God. For the highest and most excelling grace bestowed upon men is the grace of “attaining unto the Presence of God” and of His recognition.²³

“Essential and highest purpose,” “first and foremost duty,” and the “highest and most excelling grace” are not only connected to recognition but to knowledge as well. “Divine unity and understanding” are also compared to recognition, which is the “knowledge of God” or “true knowledge.” Divine or true understanding is compared to true knowledge in the *Kitáb-i-‘Aqás*. With Bahá'u'lláh coupling unity and understanding we see unity, one of the most important themes of the Bahá'í Faith, linked to “true knowledge.”

Recognition and communion are intimately connected to true knowledge the forces of knowledge and certitude, that are likely concealed within our spiritual selves. In the *Hidden Words Bahá'u'lláh* states:

Out of the essence of knowledge I gave thee being, why seekest thou enlightenment from anyone beside Me? Out of the clay of love I molded thee, how dost thou busy thyself with another? Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.²⁴

The true seeker of knowledge must access his heart as the “seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God.” In this *Hidden Word Bahá'u'lláh* states He gave us being “out of the essence of knowledge.” We must turn unto ourselves to find Bahá'u'lláh within. Our own hearts are the sanctuary of this power, the seat of the presence of God or the knowledge of God, where the mysteries are unveiled as the heart is made pure. A focus on the heart imparts a sense of intimacy, likely related to the mystic feeling or state of spiritual communion which the Guardian referred to as the core of religion.²⁵ In another passage Bahá'u'lláh states,

Such are the words with which My Forerunner hath extolled My Being, could ye but understand. Whoso reflecteth upon these verses, and realizeth what hidden pearls have been enshrined within them, will, by the righteousness of God, perceive the fragrance of the All-Merciful wafting from the direction of this Prison and will, with his whole heart, hasten unto Him with such ardent longing that the hosts of earth and heaven would be powerless to deter him. Say: This is a Revelation around which every proof and testimony doth circle. Thus hath it been sent down by your Lord, the God of Mercy, if ye be of them that judge aright. Say: This is the very soul of all Scriptures which hath been breathed into the Pen of the Most High, causing all created beings to be dumbfounded, save only those who have been enraptured by the gentle breezes of My loving-kindness and the sweet savours of My bounties which have pervaded the whole of creation.²⁶

Bahá'u'lláh calls His verses the “very soul of all Scriptures which hath been breathed into the Pen of the Most High, causing all created beings to be dumbfounded, save only those who have been enraptured by the gentle breezes of My loving-kindness.” Notice that those who “realizeth what hidden pearls have been enshrined within” these verses will hasten unto Him with such “ardent longing” and will be “enraptured” not simply by the scriptures but by the soul of the Scriptures. Bahá'u'lláh makes clear that there is a power within His verses that goes far beyond the words themselves.

They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful in the most melodious of tones will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty of earth and heaven can never be compared. From them they will inhale the divine fragrance of My worlds—worlds which today none can discern save those who have been endowed with vision through this sublime, this beauteous Revelation. Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion.²⁷

These verses draw the pure in heart to spiritual worlds which cannot be expressed in words. But there is more.

Teach your children the verses revealed from the heaven of majesty and power, so that, in most melodious tones, they may recite the Tablets of the All-Merciful in the alcoves within the Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs. Whoever hath been transported by the rapture born of adoration for My Name, the Most Compassionate, will recite the verses of God in such wise as to captivate the hearts of those yet wrapped in slumber. Well is it with him who hath quaffed the Mystic Wine of everlasting life from the utterance of his merciful Lord in My Name—a Name through which every lofty and majestic mountain hath been reduced to dust.²⁸

Pure hearted souls who have been drawn in rapture to these ineffable spiritual worlds, when reciting the verses melodically will also attract other hearts. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá further links knowledge to ecstasy and attraction, “I beg of God that the power of the Spirit will cause in thee such ecstasy and attraction that thou . . . mayest hold a cup of knowledge of God in thy hand.”²⁹ He suggests that knowledge and certitude come with love, ecstasy and rapture, “I beg of Him to bestow His confirmations upon those loved ones . . . their hearts filled with ecstasy and fervour and yearning love, with knowledge and certitude, with steadfastness and unity, their faces beauteous and bright.”³⁰ He also couples this ecstasy with love, “Briefly, if to the knowledge of God is joined the love of God, and attraction, ecstasy and goodwill, a righteous action is then perfect and complete.”³¹

Once the heart is drawn to God in a state of rapture, ecstasy and devotion, that heart manifests true knowledge and thus fulfills its reality as the “seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God.” The “path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days” ends with the heart in a state of “earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy,” when the “lights of knowledge and certitude envelop” the seeker. “At that hour will the mystic herald . . . through the trumpet blast of knowledge” awaken that seeker to an entirely new world, revealing the “hidden mysteries” and opening a “door that leadeth him to the stations of absolute certitude.”³²

Perhaps the most important question is, how can we use this hidden and mystical knowledge? Does it have import for our day-to-day lives? Is it a systematic process or something we wait and hope for? Anything more than a cursory analysis of these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless, it is important to note that divine knowledge is not simply an impractical or exclusive search for esoteric knowledge. The path to this hidden knowledge is at the very heart of our success as Bahá'ís—all individual and collective Bahá'í endeav-

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ors rely on this search. The following passage from the Guardian suggests a systematic approach.

I . . . feel that the greatest stress must be laid upon the necessity of exemplifying in a most liberal and practical manner the driving power hidden in this Divine Revelation, rather than upon the idle reiteration of a set of principles, however exalted and unique in their character.³³

“Exemplify” means demonstrate and embody. Shoghi Effendi is clear that we must exemplify the “driving power hidden in this Divine Revelation.” Over reliance on the notable and vital social principles of the Bahá’í Faith will not build the New World Order. There are many indications that this hidden driving power is linked to true and hidden knowledge. However, this is a topic requiring further analysis. No matter, it is clear that we must have a primary focus on the hidden elements of this Faith and if this hidden power is related to hidden divine knowledge we have an important clue regarding the nature of our mission as Bahá’ís, revealing a subject that deserves special attention as we explore and implement the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh.

We must make every effort as individuals and as institutions to understand the implications and process of pursuing the hidden mysteries. Reading, learning, and then adhering to the verses of Bahá’u’lláh are essential, for every word is charged with a deep beauty and import that initiates a continuing process of self realization—an ever deepening connection to the true knowledge of Bahá’u’lláh. “These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion.”³⁴

*We have harkened to what the nightingale of knowledge
sang on the boughs of the tree of thy being,
and learned what the dove of certitude
cried on the branches of the bower of thy heart . . .
whosoever mounteth into the heaven of knowledge,
and whose heart is refreshed by this,
that the wind of certitude
hath blown over the garden of his being. . .
—Bahá’u’lláh³⁵*

Notes

- 1) *Prayers and Meditations*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 6th printing 1974), p. 83.
- 2) *Kitáb-i-‘qán*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 6th ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 196.
- 3) *Ibid.* p. 118.
- 4) *Ibid.* p. 49.
- 5) In all fairness, many have commented on the dynamic and empowering nature of knowledge. However, in the West the idea of knowledge as stuff is dominant and the notion of its empowering capability has more to do with how we use the knowledge than the power of the knowledge itself.
- 6) *Ibid.* pp. 3, 4.
- 7) *Ibid.* p. 192.
- 8) *Ibid.* p. 191.
- 9) *Ibid.* p. 70.
- 10) *Ibid.* p. 192.
- 11) “O thou who art reputed for thy learning! . . . Thou, who art gone far astray, art indeed wrapt in a thick veil.” (Bahá’u’lláh: *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 80) “[B]ehold how ye have allowed your learning to shut you out, as by a veil, from Him Who is the Day spring of this Light . . .” (Bahá’u’lláh: *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 129) “Let not thine ignorance in human learning and thy inability to read or write grieve thine heart. The doors of His manifold grace are within the mighty grasp of the power of the one true God.” (Bahá’u’lláh: *Gleanings*, p. 312)
- 12) *Kitáb-i-‘qán*. pp. 27, 28.
- 13) *Ibid.* pp. 254, 255.
- 14) *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, compiled by Howard MacNutt. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 459.
- 15) *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Trans. Shoghi Effendi. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971) p. 147.

- 16) *Ibid.* pp. 175, 176.
- 17) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, fifth printing, 1971), pp. 105, 106.
- 18) *Kitáb-i-[^]qán*, pp. 204, 206.
- 19) *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, trans. Habib Taherzadeh, 1st ed. (Great Britain: W & J Mackay Limited, 1976), p. 89.
- 20) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, (Haifa: The Bahá'í World Center, 1992), p. 19.
- 21) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 290, 291.
- 22) *Kitáb-i-[^]qán*, p. 29.
- 23) *Ibid.* p. 138. Emphasis added.
- 24) *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Reprint 1979), p.13. Emphasis added.
- 25) Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í News 102*, August 1936, p. 3 in *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, pp. 237, 238. Emphasis added.
- 26) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 67, 68. Emphasis added.
- 27) *Ibid.* p. 61. Emphasis added.
- 28) *Ibid.* p. 74. Emphasis added.
- 29) *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 4, (Chicago, 1909), p. 721.
- 30) *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. (Trans. Committee at the Bahá'í World Center. [Chatham, Great Britain: W & J Mackay, 1978]) p. 260.
- 31) *Some Answered Questions*, p. 302.
- 32) *Kitáb-i-[^]qán*, pp. 192-196.
- 33) *Bahá'í Administration*, Shoghi Effendi. (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Ill, 1974 ed.), p. 96. Emphasis added.
- 34) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 68.
- 35) *Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Marzieh Gail (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Ill, 1971 ed.) pp. 2, 4.

The Báb's Epistle on the Spiritual Journey towards God

by Todd Lawson

Introduction to the translation

The preliminary translation offered here is of the *Risála fi's-sulúk* (Tehran Bahá'í Archives Ms. 6006. C., pages 73-74, 23 lines per page), one of the Báb's earliest extant Writings—perhaps the earliest.¹ The *Risála* begins on the seventh line of page 73. I am grateful to Stephen Lambden who years ago supplied me with a xerox of this privately published “edition.” I have no knowledge of its manuscript base. Denis MacEoin in his *Sources for Early Bábí Doctrine and History*, pp. 44, 196 (n.b. under *Risálat at-tasdíd*) lists five privately published “editions” for the *Risála* (among which this is one) and observes that the original Work “appears to have been written during the later years of Sayyid Kázim Raṣhtí's life (and thus before the commencement of the Báb's own career).” (p. 44) Here MacEoin has chosen to translate *sulúk* as “right behavior,” but the contents and concerns of this brief piece strongly suggest that a more accurate rendering would be “journey,” “spiritual search,” or even “mystic quest.”

The first translation of the text, below, is offered without the encumbrances of copious notes and references, except as indicated by small caps (indicating a quotation from the Qur'án) and quotation marks (indicating a quotation from the *hadíth*) and other minor punctuation (Arabic has no punctuation system analogous to English usage). Much of this same Qur'anic and *hadíth* material will continue to figure prominently in later Writings of the Báb. For example, the relatively lengthy quotation from the *Hadíth Kumayl* in this short work is noteworthy because it shows the importance the Báb attached, from the beginning, to this celebrated and widely-commented-upon short sermon of 'Alí ibn Abí Tálib, the first Imám of the Shí'a and prime bearer of post-prophetic spiritual authority and charisma (*waláya*). The *Hadíth Kumayl* is also known as the *Hadíth má'l-haqíqa*, viz, the sacred words in answer to the question “What is divine reality?” It should be noted, also, that this very important *hadíth* is not found in the canonical *Nahj al-balágha*. Reference to it by the Báb is significant because it shows that He was deeply engaged in the long, venerable and exceedingly rich Shí'í mystical—or gnostic—discourse associated with it. Indeed, the Báb also wrote a separate commentary devoted solely to this sermon (*Sources*, p.199). In the Bábí/Bahá'í tradition, interest in the *Hadíth* did not stop with the Báb; one of His more prominent followers eventually adopted one of its distinctive formulations, *subh-i-azal*, “Dawn of Eternity,” as an honorific title. Bahá'u'lláh Himself also makes repeated reference to this sermon throughout His Writings as when, in referring to another one of the sermon's distinctive ideas, He speaks of the “veils of glory” (*subuhát al-jalál*, “delusions of grandeur”). The literal meaning, “lofty praises of divine glory,” suggests that one must rigourously avoid equating one's understanding of sublime divine qualities with the absolute unknowable essence of God. “Veils of glory” is a symptom of spiritual disease diagnosed originally by 'Alí.

The translation offered here also demonstrates, if such were necessary, how important the Qur'án was for the Báb. It is most important to point out that while many of the Qur'anic quotations or references are very brief, their appearance in this text is also meant to stimulate in the mind of the reader the immediate scriptural context that they represent in addition to the relevant distinctive Shí'í exegetical tradition. Therefore, in the accompanying notes some of the unquoted Qur'anic context is supplied.

Finally, this *Risála* shows quite clearly the interest the Báb had in and His attachment to the teachings of *Shaykh* Ahmad and Sayyid Kázim. Apart from the explicit mention of the latter, the basic quaternary structure of the discourse reflects *Shaykhí* teachings. The understanding of the “next world” (Paradise or Hellfire) as spiritual conditions, rather than places, is also a distinctive *Shaykhí* teaching and shows how that synthesis combined the languages of Sufism and Shí'ism. I plan to offer a fuller account of these features of the *Risála* in a future article which will contain, in addition to a translation of the *Hadíth Kumayl*, the Báb's separate commentary on it, a study of Shí'í exegesis of the text and a discussion of the Qur'anic and other *Hadíth* material in addition to a discussion of related writings from the masters of the *Shaykhí* school.

In some cases, the translation violates strict literalness in the interest of readability. Qur'án translations are based upon those of Yusuf Ali. I should like to record my debt to Dr. Muhamed Afnan who years ago kindly agreed to look over a preliminary edition of the Arabic text and offer several valuable suggestions based upon his precious and intimate knowledge of the Báb's writings and manuscripts of the *Risála* not available to me. All errors in the translation are mine and mine alone.

For those who would like to pursue a more detailed study of the *Risála* I offer a second translation (following the first, below). This one does have a few notes scattered throughout the text and is more technical in general. In this connection, it is important to mention the manner in which the Báb expresses His ideas through the poetic and "musical" use of a few key Arabic roots, the most frequent being *Q-W-M* (straightness, rising, standing), *B-W-B* (gate), *W-H-D* (oneness). Here, again, the Composition would appear to follow the rules of improvisation.

The Spiritual Journey towards God

The Báb's "Journey towards God": the Risálah fi's-Sulúk ilá Alláh*

IN THE NAME OF GOD, THE MERCIFUL , THE COMPASSIONATE**

Be steadfast, O seeker of piety, in the station of affirming the divine unity. As God, exalted be He, has said:

AS FOR THOSE WHO SAY "OUR LORD IS GOD" THEN CONTINUE STEADFAST, THE ANGELS DESCEND UPON THEM SAYING "FEAR NOT, NOR BE GRIEVED, AND RECEIVE GOOD NEWS OF THE GARDEN WHICH YE WERE PROMISED!"

Know ye that "the paths to God are as numerous as the breaths of the creatures" yet, there is NO SOUL but ONE and there is no religion but the one religion, and it is the CAUSE OF GOD. AND OUR COMMAND IS BUT A SINGLE ACT.

SO SET THOU THY FACE STEADILY TO THE TRUE FAITH—THE NATURE MADE BY GOD—IN WHICH HE HAS MADE MEN. THERE IS NO ALTERING GOD'S CREATION.

Verily, Religion is supported by four pillars:

- 1) Affirming the divine unity
- 2) Prophethood
- 3) Guardianship, and
- 4) The community of true believers

These are four gates, none of which is of any use without the others.

And all of this is the FACE OF GOD WHICH WILL NEVER PERISH. And this is the love of the Family of God which is the same as the love of God. This is the Hidden Treasure to which the Prophet, upon Him and His family be peace, openly alluded when He said: "Above each good is another good until one loves us, and when one loves us there is no good higher."

So love, beloved, lover, and Beloved are four divine signs appearing from the radiant self-manifestation of the family of God in you and in your soul. Whenever these four signs are remembered within you and your heart is illumined, and your soul stirred, and your spirit moved and your body quakes with longing, then you are truly among the people of paradise and the companions of the Commander of the Faithful, upon him be peace.

Indeed, at such a time you are in conformity with the TRUE RELIGION and the TRUE BALANCE and the obvious and clear PATH. Above this station there is no good.

Thus one ascends unto the abode of the permanence of God.

There is no end to the love of God and no finish.

This is the guiding principle of the search.

There can be no question, the Sharí'ah in its entirety is one method in the quest of the servant for his Lord, but it must be according to the guiding principle and goal as I have described.

As for the road to attaining the guiding principle—know that attainment to the station of your own sign is attainment to your Lord. And this is the station of pure piety towards God, exalted be He, as when one of the prophets asked of God, praised be He, "How can we attain to Thee?" God, may He be exalted, said, "Cast away thyself and rise to Me."

And this is why the station of the novices is conditional upon denying the self what it passionately desires and forcing upon it what it detests because there is no veil more base for the servant than his own self.

* This is a provisional translation for presentation and discussion at 'Irfán Colloquia. It is not to be reproduced or further distributed in any form or medium.

** Text in SMALL CAPS indicates Qur'anic content

Lights of 'Irfán

By God! If you struggle against your self you will by and by send it to the station of nearness and remembrance and intimacy in the shade of your Beloved and adore Him above all else, to the extent that even if you were cut to shreds you would not be negligent of His station. Because, the [true] knower is he whose heart is with God; such a one has no speech, thought, nor act except in, by, with and about God, exalted be He.

Neglect not your personal struggle and thereby forfeit THY PORTION IN THIS WORLD BUT DO THOU GOOD AS GOD HAS BEEN GOOD TO THEE .

And if you are neglectful it will be your great loss on the Day of the Return and you will say: “AH! WOE IS ME!—IN THAT I NEGLECTED MY DUTY TOWARDS GOD!”

So pass on whither we have been ordered and fear not THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO FIND FAULT. THIS IS THE GRACE OF GOD WHICH HE WILL BESTOW ON WHOM HE PLEASETH AND GOD IS THE OWNER OF ALL GRACE AND THE ALL-KNOWING .

Flee from whatever distracts you from God. Indeed such is a deadly poison which will consume you in flames though you be unaware.

NAY, WERE YOU TO KNOW WITH CERTAINTY OF MIND YOU WOULD BE AWARE . YOU SHALL CERTAINLY SEE HELLFIRE . AGAIN YOU SHALL SEE IT WITH CERTAINTY OF SIGHT

It is incumbent upon you to abandon the world and all that is in it. Indeed, it is the chief of all evils. And in your quest do not linger in any one station. Thus a dog of the Jews is better than the people of the marketplace because the people of the marketplace are the people of spiritual torpor. Verily, this lingering is the source of that negligence which bars access to God.

Verily, the world and the hereafter are two spiritual states. If you turn towards God, exalted be He, then you are in paradise and if you are occupied with your self then you are in hell and in the world. Therefore understand these allusions and sever thyself from all unworthy habits and lusts. Endure patiently the alienation of people and the blame of the companion and the *Schadenfreude* of the enemy from among family and offspring.

And when you have begun your quest according to this METHOD of search, then the gate of God will open to your soul and you will request entrance into the realm of the holy one.

For the people of insight these subtle allusions will suffice:

“Rend the veils of glory and allusions and efface the idle fancies and rend the veils and be attracted to the exclusive unity—the quality of affirming the divine unity until the light of dawn shines forth from” the sun of thy reality and YOU ENTER THE CITY OF UNITY WHILE ITS PEOPLE ARE UNAWARE “and extinguish the lamp” of everything that has veiled you from God, exalted be He, so that you will attain to the PRAISED STATION that God, exalted be He, has promised the people who glorify God at night—that is to say the turning towards the absolute divine unity in the midst of intense darkness, as in the verse: IT MAY BE THAT THY LORD WILL RAISE THEE UP TO A PRAISEWOR THY STATION .

And THIS BOOK , on the WAY of search, is kept brief for those possessed of insight and in it is that which will be sufficient for the pure amongst the affirmers of the divine unity. The particulars have been fully written about by my master, my support, my teacher, the pilgrim Sayyid Kázim al-Rashú, may God lengthen his life and bring forth from it good results. So seek the WAY OF YOUR LORD MADE SMOOTH FOR THEE . THERE COMETH FORTH FROM THEIR BELLIES A DRINK DIVERSE OF HUES , WHEREIN IS HEALING FOR MANKIND AND A MERCY ; WHILE THE OPPRESSORS INCREASE ONLY IN RUIN .

The Spiritual Journey towards God

Annotated translation of The Báb's "Journey towards God": the Risálah fi's-Sulúk ilá Alláh

IN THE NAME OF GOD, THE MERCIFUL, THE COMPASSIONATE²

Be steadfast (*QWM*),³ O seeker of piety (*TQW*),⁴ in the station (*QWM*) of affirming the divine unity (*WHD*).⁵ God, exalted be He, said:

AS FOR THOSE WHO SAY "OUR LORD IS GOD" THEN CONTINUE STEADFAST (*QWM*), THE ANGELS DESCEND UPON THEM SAYING "FEAR NOT, NOR BE GRIEVED, AND RECEIVE GOOD NEWS OF THE GARDEN WHICH YE WERE PROMISED!" (Qur'án 41:30; cf. 46:13)

Know ye that "the paths to God are as numerous as the breaths (*anfás*) of the creatures,"⁶ while there is NO SOUL but ONE (*nafs wáhida*; *WHD*; cf. Qur'án 4:1; 31:28; 39:6), and that there is no religion but the one religion (*dín wáhid*; *WHD*), and it is the CAUSE OF GOD (*amr Alláh*; Qur'án 33:37; 49:9 and *passim*). AND OUR COMMAND (*amruná*) IS BUT A SINGLE (ACT) (*wa má amruná illá wáhida*; *WHD* Qur'án 54:50; the second half of the verse, not quoted here by the Báb, continues: AS THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE).

SO SET THOU (*fa-'aqim*; *QWM*) THY FACE STEADILY TO THE TRUE FAITH—THE NATURE MADE BY GOD (*fitra alláh*)—IN WHICH HE HAS MADE MEN. THERE IS NO ALTERING GOD'S CREATION. (Qur'án 30:30; cf. the end of this verse and Qur'án 30:31-32 alluded to here but not explicitly quoted by the Báb: THAT IS THE RIGHT RELIGION (*al-dín al-qayyim*; *QWM*), BUT MOST PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW. 31: TURN YE BACK IN REPENTANCE TO HIM AND FEAR HIM (*ittaquhu*; *TQW*), ESTABLISH REGULAR PRAYERS (*wa'aqímú al-salát*; *QWM*), AND BE NOT OF THOSE WHO JOIN GODS WITH GOD (*wa lá takínú min al-mushrikín*). 32: THOSE WHO SPLIT UP THEIR RELIGION AND BECAME MERE SECTS (*shí'an*), EACH PARTY REJOICING IN WHAT THEY HAD WITH THEM.)

Indeed, (true) Religion is supported (*mutaqawwam*; *QWM*) by four pillars.

- 1) *Tawhíd* (affirming the divine unity)
- 2) *Nubuwwa* (prophethood)
- 3) *Waláya* (guardianship), and
- 4) *Shí'a* (the community of true believers)

These are four gates (*abwáb*, sing. *báb* *BWB*) of which no one is of any use without the others.

And all of this is the FACE OF GOD (*wajh Alláh*) WHICH WILL NEVER PERISH. (cf. Qur'án 28:88).⁷ And it (i.e. this "face of God") is the love of the Family of God (*hubb ál Alláh*)⁸ which is the same as the love of God (*wa huwa nafs hubb Alláh*). This is the Hidden Treasure⁹ to which the Prophet, upon Him and His family be peace, openly alluded when He said: "Above each good is another good until one loves us, and when one loves us there is no higher good above it."¹⁰

So love (*hubb*), beloved (*habíb*), lover (*muhibb*), and Beloved (*mahbúb*) are four divine signs (*áyát*) appearing from the self-manifestation of the family of God (*tajallí ál Alláh*) in you and they are your soul.¹¹

Whenever these four signs are remembered within you and your heart is illumined, and your soul stirred, and your spirit moved and your body quakes with longing (*shawq*), then you are truly (*haqqan*) among the people of paradise and the companions of the Commander of the Faithful,¹² upon him be peace.

At such a time you are indeed upon the TRUE RELIGION (*al-dín al-qayyim*, Qur'án 30:30; *QWM*) and the TRUE BALANCE (*al-qistás al-mustaqím*, Qur'án 17:35 and 26:182; *QWM*) and the obvious and clear PATH (*al-sirát al-wádh al-mubín*). Above this station (*QWM*) there is no good (*hasana*).

Thus one ascends unto the abode of the permanence of God (*baqá' Alláh*).¹³

There is no end to the love of God and no finish.

This is the guiding principle (*qutb*) of the search.¹⁴

Indeed the *Sharí'a* in its entirety is a method for the quest of the servant for his Lord, but by movement

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according to the guiding principle (*qutb*) as I have described.

As for the road to attaining the guiding principle (*qutb*)—know that attainment to the station (*QWM*) of your sign is attainment to your Lord. And this is the station of pure piety (*TQW*) towards God, exalted be He, as when one of the prophets asked of God, praised be He, “How can we attain to Thee?” God, may He be exalted, said, “Throw down thyself and rise to Me.”¹⁵

And this is why the station (*QWM*) of the novices (*al-mubtadi’ín*) is conditional upon denying the self what it passionately desires and forcing upon it what it detests because there is no veil more base (*awhāsh*) for the servant than his own self.

By God! If you struggle against your self and thereby send it to the station of nearness and remembrance and intimacy in the shade of your Beloved and adore Him above all else, even if you were cut to shreds you would not be negligent of His station because the knower is he whose heart is with God and he has no speech, allusion nor act except in, by, with and about God, exalted be He.

Neglect not your personal struggle (*ijtihād*) and thereby forfeit THY PORTION IN THIS WORLD BUT DO THOU GOOD AS GOD HAS BEEN GOOD TO THEE.¹⁶

And if you are neglectful it will be your great loss on the Day of the Return and you will say: “AH! WOE IS ME!—IN THAT I NEGLECTED MY DUTY TOWARDS GOD!” (Qur’án 39:56)¹⁷

So pass on Whither We Have Been Ordered¹⁸ and Fear Not¹⁹ THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO FIND FAULT. THAT IS THE GRACE OF GOD WHICH HE WILL BESTOW ON WHOM HE PLEASETH AND GOD IS THE OWNER OF ALL GRACE AND THE ALL-KNOWING . (Qur’án 5:54)²⁰

Flee from whatever distracts you from God. Indeed such is a deadly poison which will consume you in flames while you are unaware. NAY, WERE YOU TO KNOW WITH CERTAINTY OF MIND (*ilm al-yaqín*) (YOU WOULD BE AWARE). YOU SHALL CERTAINLY SEE HELLFIRE . AGAIN YOU SHALL SEE IT WITH CERTAINTY OF SIGHT (*‘ayn al-yaqín*). (Qur’án 102:5-7)

It is incumbent upon you to abandon the world and all that is in it. Indeed, it is the chief of all evils. And in your quest do not linger in any station. Verily, a dog of the Jews is better than the people of the marketplace because the people of the marketplace are the people of lingering (*ahl al-wuqúf*). Verily, such is the source of that negligence which bars access to God.²¹

Indeed, the world and the hereafter are two spiritual states.²² If you turn towards God (19), exalted be He, then you are in paradise and if you are occupied with your self then you are in hell and in the world. Therefore understand these allusions (*ishárát*) and sever thyself from all habits and lusts. And endure patiently the alienation of people and the blame of the companion²³ and the *Schadenfreude* of the enemy from among family and offspring.

And when you have begun your quest along this path of search, then the gate of God (*báb Alláh*; *BWB*) will open to your soul and you will request entrance into the realm of the the Most Generous (*mulk al-karím*).

For the people of insight these subtle allusions [will suffice]:²⁴

“Purge” to the highest possible degree “the sublime praises of divine glory” of “allusions” and “efface the idle fancies and rend all veils and be attracted to the divine exclusive unity—[by] the quality of affirming the divine unity until the light of dawn shines forth” from the sun of thy reality and YOU ENTER THE CITY of unity WHILE ITS PEOPLE ARE UNAWARE²⁵ and extinguish the lamp²⁶ of everything that has veiled you from God, exalted be He, so that when you attain to a PRAISED STATION²⁷ (*QWM*) such as God, exalted be He, has promised the people who glorify God at night²⁸ that is to say the turning towards the absolute divine unity in the midst of intense darkness, SOON THY LORD WILL RAISE THEE UP TO A PRAISEWORTHY STATION . (*QWM*)²⁹

And THIS WRITING on the METHOD (*sabíl*) of search, is kept brief for those possessed of insight and in it is that which will be sufficient for the pure amongst the believers in the divine unity. The particulars have been fully written about by my master, my support, my teacher, the pilgrim Sayyid Kázim al-Rashdí, may God lengthen his life and bring forth from it good results. So seek the WAY³¹ OF YOUR LORD MADE SMOOTH FOR THEE. THERE COMETH FORTH FROM THEIR BELLIES A DRINK DIVERSE OF HUES , WHEREIN IS HEALING FOR MANKIND AND A MERCY ; WHILE THE OPPRESSORS INCREASE ONLY IN RUIN . (Qur’án 16:69)

Appendix

Hadíth Kumayl*

Kumayl bin Ziyád asked ‘Alí:

“What is reality?”

‘Alí replied: “What are you compared to reality?” (i.e., “How dare you ask such a question!”)

Kumayl said: “Are you not the master of your own secret knowledge?” (i.e., “What is the matter, can’t you answer my question?”)

‘Alí replied: “Most certainly (*balá*)! But you will receive only a few drops of the ocean of knowledge that overflow from the abundance of my own knowledge.”

Kumayl: “Is it like you to disappoint a questioner?”

‘Alí responded: “reality is dispersing the clouds of glory without allusion.” (*al-haqíqat kashf subhát al-jalál min ghayr ishára* = [The perception of] reality [is achieved only in] dispelling one’s delusions of grandeur in vain attempts to compare that reality with anything whatsoever.)

Kumayl said: “Explain this further!”

‘Alí said: “It is the effacement of vain imaginings with clear consciousness of that which is known.”

Kumayl said: “Explain this further!”

‘Alí said: “It is the rending of the curtain and being overwhelmed by the divine secret.”

Kumayl said: “Explain this further!”

‘Alí said: “It is the irresistible attraction of the exclusive divine unity [achieved] by means of the quality of affirming the divine unity.”

Kumayl said: “Explain this further!”

‘Alí said: “A light shines forth from the dawn of eternity and it radiates its effects upon the temples consecrated to affirming the divine unity.”

Kumayl said: “Explain this further!”

‘Alí said: “When the dawn breaks, extinguish the lamp.”

* From Sayyid Haydar Ámulí, *Jámi’ al-asrár wa manba’ al-asrár*, edited by H. Corbin and O. I. Yahyá. Bibliothèque iranienne, vol. 16, Institut Français de Recherche en Iran: Tehran, 1989 (first published 1969), p. 170.

Notes

- 1) An earlier version of this translation was posted on H-Bahai a few years ago. It is available, along with the unedited Arabic text, at www2.h-net.msu.edu/bahai/trans/vol2/suluk/suluktr.htm
- 2) Invocation at the beginning of every Qu’anic súra but one: *bismilláhir-rahmánir-rahím*. It is widely used through the length and breadth of Islamic written culture to begin a piece of writing or speech. The Báb would continue to employ the symbolism of this phrase, known as the *basmala*, throughout His ministry. The Letters of the Living are understood to be the living manifestations of its eighteen letters.
- 3) *’istaqim*: This imperative of the 8th form of the verb *Q-W-M* is noticed here to demonstrate two features of the *Risála*. First, this usage shows that the Báb is directly addressing an anonymous male, probably the same person who asked the Báb about *sulúk* in the first place (see next note). Second, this also is the first instance of the several appearances of the root *Q-W-M* in the *Risála*. Among the various words that are derived from this root, two would gain greater and greater prominence as the Báb’s ministry unfolded: (1) *qiyáma*: Resurrection, the Shí’í eschaton; and (2) *qá’im*: Resurrector, One Who Arises, according to Shí’í tradition, in order to replace the injustice of the world with justice. Note, in this regard, the closing Qur’anic quotation of the *Risála*.
- 4) *yá sá’il al-tuqá*: Note that the root from which the word for piety is derived *T-Q-W* recurs throughout the text.
- 5) *maqám al-tawhíd*: traditional Sufi terminology: *maqám* is usually translated as “station.” Depending upon the schema, there may be 4, 7, 8 or any number of “stations” that a seeker might expect to achieve and master in the quest or journey towards God. In each station, it should be noted, the seeker may also expect to encounter various spiritual changes referred to as “states” —

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ahwál, singular *hál* (see below note 21). *Tawhíd* is frequently mistranslated as “unity.” It is important to stress here that it is an active participle, not a noun. The perfect performance of this act is the goal of all believers in the divine unity. See below the references to the *Hadíth* Kumayl (and the Appendix where this *Hadíth* is translated). Here the central subject is precisely guidance, from the Imám ‘Alí to another questioner, Kumayl ibn Ziyád, on how to properly affirm the divine unity.

- 6) *Hadíth*, also quoted in the Báb’s *Tafsír súrát al-baqara ad 2:38*, frequently quoted in the Sufi tradition.
- 7) The idea of the “face of God” is mentioned several times in the Qur’án. Its interpretation, like many other important Qur’anic words and phrases, is highly controversial. One of the more frequently-quoted verses in which the “face of God” is mentioned is in the context of the story of the changing of the Qiblah from Jerusalem to Mecca. At 2:115, the Qur’án says: UNTO GOD BELONG THE EAST AND THE WEST, SO WHITHERSOEVER YE TURN, THERE IS THE FACE OF GOD. LO! GOD IS ALL EMBRACING, ALL KNOWING. “Face of God” has been interpreted a number of ways. The Manifestation is the “face” of God in the sense that He represents the visible aspect of the divine, the Deus Revelatus, as distinct from the eternally hidden aspect of God, the divine Essence, the Deus Absconditus. There is another sense in which “face” can be understood. The root *W-J-H* denotes surface and direction. The derivative *jihá* means aspect or sense (cf. the French *sens* “direction” as in the word for “one way [street]”: *sens unique*. Looked at this way, then the “face” of God, far from denoting or even connoting any crude anthropomorphism, means “God’s direction.” Thus, the above verse says all directions lead to God. This is in accord with the partial *hadíth* quoted below by the Báb. The direction in which God may be sought is therefore a perfect topic in an epistle devoted to the best way of journeying towards God. Cf. also *jihát*, *wajh/wujúh* as technical terms in *tafsír*. A verse may be said to have several *wujúh*, or “approaches”: several different meanings or intentions.
- 8) *hubb ál Alláh ál Alláh*, “Family of God,” is most immediately understood as the Prophet Muhammad, His daughter Fátima and the twelve Imáms. There is also a feature of this usage that indicates “*ál*” (as distinct from “*ahl*”) can also include faithful followers whether related or not. The epithet is frequently used by the Báb throughout His Writings.
- 9) Cf. the *Hadíth* Qudsí known as *kuntu kanzan makhfiyan* “I was a Hidden Treasure” and the commentary on this important *hadíth* by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá translated and commented on by Moojan Momen available on the World Wide Web at www.northill.demon.co.uk/relstud/kkm.htm
- 10) Although the relevant sources are full of countless traditions enjoining the believers to love the Prophet and His Family, I have not found a source for this *hadíth*. Note here, however, that the Báb, in the course of His epistle on the topic of the mystic quest also provides an interpretation of two key Islamic texts: (1) the “face of God” and (2) the identity of the “Hidden Treasure.”
- 11) The text is difficult to read here. Previously, I saw it as *fika wa fí nafsika*. Now I think it is really *fika wa hiya nafsika*. One awaits other *mss.* to compare this reading with.
- 12) ‘Alí ibn Abí Tálib, the first Imám of the Shí‘a, cousin and half-brother of the Prophet Muhammad, husband of Fátima and “father” of all the other Imáms.
- 13) Traditional Sufi technical term, usually seen paired with its conceptual opposite “annihilation,” *faná’*. See, for example, Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness. The basic idea is that one seeks to annihilate (*faná’*) the self, ego (*nafs*) so that nothing remains (*baqá’*) except divinity.
- 14) *Qutb* is another traditional Sufi technical term. It typically refers to an individual who is the bearer of spiritual authority (*waláya*). It means “axis,” “pivot,” and “center.” (The North Pole is called, in Arabic *al-qutb al-shamálí* [*shamálí* = “north”]) Although it is generally thought that the word acquired its meaning central spiritual authority in a more or less purely Sufi context, it is important to note that in one of the most widely celebrated sermons from the *Nahj al-balághh* ‘Alí refers to himself as the “pivot of the community” (*qutb al-rahá*). The Báb’s use of this term demonstrates one of the more important features of the *Shaykhí*-Bábí-Bahá’í tradition, namely that it continued a process of using mystical terminology in a Shí‘í context. The idea of “center” figures prominently in the later *Qayyúm al-asmá*. See my article “The Coincidentia Oppositorum in the Qayyúm al-asmá” available on the World Wide Web at www2.h-net.ms.u.edu/bahai/bhpapers/vol5/tatanj/tatanj.htm
- 15) In the Sufi tradition, this *hadíth* is ascribed to al-Kharráz, the important ninth-century mystic of Baghdad.
- 16) Cf. Qur’án 28:77, the story of Qárún. This reference may be a clue to the social class, if not the identity, of the recipient of the tablet. This verse continues: AND SEEK NOT OCCASIONS FOR MISCHIEF IN THE LAND. FOR GOD LOVES NOT THOSE WHO DO MISCHIEF.
- 17) Qur’án 39:56 *má farrattu fí janb alláh (janb* is a metaphor implying threshold and by extension door or gate, viz., *báb*). The verse continues: AND WAS BUT AMONG THOSE WHO MOCKED!
- 18) Paraphrase of Qur’án 15:65.
- 19) Qur’anic diction.
- 20) The Báb deviates, with remarkable deftness, from the Qur’án in this citation. Again, it is important to note the mention of the TRUE FRIEND (*walí*) in the verse immediately following (but unquoted by the Báb) as well as the other elements of the *Shaykhí* four supports: YOUR REAL FRIENDS (*awliyá*, plural of *walí*: guardian) ARE NO LESS THAN GOD, HIS MESSENGER AND THE FELLOW-SHIP OF THE BELIEVERS. . . . Qur’án 5:55.
- 21) That is “lingering/loitering/hesitation” —*wuqúf*—is “the source of that negligence which bars access to God.” The root meaning of *WQF* is the diametric opposite of the root meaning of *SLK* from which *sulúk*.
- 22) *Hál* = Traditional Sufi technical term perhaps transformed here in a distinctive usage influenced by Hikmat-i-iláhi eschatology.
- 23) *malámat al-qarín*, cf. Qur’án 37:51; 43:36; 43:38; 4:38 where *qarín* is frequently an evil companion.
- 24) “People of Insight” = *ahl al-basíra*

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- 25) Reference to Qur'án 28:15 and the story of Moses' act of murder.
Shortly, at 28:18, there is a mention of DAWN or MORNING. See the following.
- 26) This is a brief running commentary, beginning here with the word "purge" and ending with the Qur'anic word STATION on an oft-cited portion of the famous Hadíth Kumayl (see appendix). The Báb also wrote a commentary on this hadíth (*Sources*, p. 199 lists 5 "mss." of this early work.)
- 27) *maqám mahmúd*, cf. Qur'án 17:79 and the later use of this epithet by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Four Valleys*.
- 28) *ahl al-tahajjud fí al-layl*
- 29) Qur'án 17:79. N.b. the uncited previous verse: ESTABLISH WORSHIP AT THE GOING DOWN OF THE SUN UNTIL THE DARK OF NIGHT, AND THE RECITAL OF THE QUR'ÁN AT DOWN. LO! THE RECITAL OF THE QUR'ÁN AT DAWN IS EVER WITNESSED. AND SOME PART OF THE NIGHT AWAKE FOR IT (*fa-tahajjad bihi*), A LARGESS FOR THEE (Qur'án 17:178). This connects the Báb's language, mentioned in the previous note to the Qur'án. His reader was expected to grasp the allusion without His having to explicitly cite the precise language. Perhaps, though, the most important allusion His interlocutor was expected to understand was the one to the following verse (17:80): SAY "O MY LORD! LET MY ENTRY BE BY THE GATE OF TRUTH AND HONOR, AND GRANT ME FROM THY PRESENCE AN AUTHORITY (*sultán*) TO AID ME.
- 30) Qur'án 2:2: *dhálika al-kitáb* may also be translated as THAT IS THE BOOK (IN WHICH THERE IS NO DOUBT). Here the Báb shows an early instance of putting His Writings in the same category as the Qur'án. This would become one of the most prominent features of His Work as represented, for example, in the later *Qayyúm al-asmá*.
- 31) Different grammar but can have the same meaning as the beginning of following Qur'anic quotation.

From Adam to Bahá'u'lláh:
The Idea of a Chain of Prophecy*

by Zaid Lundberg

Contemplate with thine inward eye the chain of successive Revelations that hath linked the Manifestations of Adam with that of the Báb . . . —Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings XXXI

The purpose of this paper is to briefly present a preliminary¹ contextualization of the Bahá'í *idea of a chain of prophecy*, which is an intimate and important feature of the Bahá'í doctrine of progressive revelation.²

Although the term “prophecy” commonly is understood as *fore-telling*, in academia it is better known as *forth-telling*,³ i.e., it has to do with “prophetology” rather than with “futurology” (although prophecy, admittedly, sometimes includes this dimension as well). The technical term “chain of prophecy” can be found in various religious contexts other than in the Bahá'í Faith, and is not specifically a Bahá'í term. Generally speaking, a chain of prophecy refers to a sequence (linear and/or cyclical) of mediators (prophets, messengers, *avatars*, etc). It can be defined as “a sequence of religious mediators who operate between divine (supramundane) and earthly (mundane) realms.”

This paper argues that variations, or family-resemblances,⁴ of such an idea of a chain of prophecy can be located in the following religious contexts, including some major and well-known religions of the world (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism), as well as a few less well-known religions (Bábism, Manichaeism, and Jainism), and branches, or sects, of religions (Shaykhism, Pseudo-Clementines, Elkesaites, and Ebionism).

The Bahá'í Faith

The opening passage from the Kitáb-i-*qán* above may serve as an example where Bahá'u'lláh explicitly states the idea of an unending *succession* of revelation, ranging from *Adam to the Báb*.⁵ Two main themes that are relevant for this paper are therefore the closely related ideas of:

- the *chain of successive* revelations
- the *linkage* of Adam and the Báb (and ultimately Bahá'u'lláh)

It is also significant that it is within this immediate context of the quoted passage of Bahá'u'lláh where Shoghi Effendi first employs the technical term *progressive revelation*.⁶

A similar statement “from Adam” is also found elsewhere in the Kitáb-i-*qán* where Bahá'u'lláh refers to “all the Prophets, from Adam even unto the ‘Seal,’ [Muhammad].”⁷ The idea of a chain of prophecy can also be found in statements by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, e.g., “From time immemorial the divine teachings have been *successively revealed*, and the bounties of the Holy Spirit have ever been emanating.”⁸ More specifically, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of “From the days of Adam” while implying the idea of a chain of prophecy:

From the days of Adam until today, the religions of God have been made manifest, one following the other, and each one of them fulfilled its due function, revived mankind, and provided education and enlightenment.⁹

In another passage ‘Abdu'l-Bahá explicitly identifies various religious figures while expressing the idea of a chain of prophecy:

For the position of Adam, with regard to the appearance and manifestation of the divine perfections, was in the embryonic condition; the position of Christ was the condition of maturity and the age of reason; and the rising of the Greatest Luminary [Bahá'u'lláh] was the condition of the perfection of the essence and of

the qualities. This is why in the supreme Paradise the tree of life is the expression for the center of absolutely pure sanctity—that is to say, of the divine supreme Manifestation. From the days of Adam until the days of Christ, They spoke little of eternal life and the heavenly universal perfections. This tree of life was the position of the reality of Christ; through His manifestation it was planted and adorned with everlasting fruits.¹⁰

In the last passage it is clear that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses various organic metaphors (embryo, tree, fruits) to convey the accumulative growth of religion/revelation. He writes more elaborately on the idea of a chain of prophecy in the following passage:

All these holy, divine Manifestations are one. They have served one God, promulgated the same truth, founded the same institutions and reflected the same light. Their appearances have been successive and correlated; each One had announced and extolled the One Who was to follow, and laid the foundation of reality . . . the divine religions They established have one foundation; Their teachings, proofs and evidences are one; in name and form They differ, but in reality They agree and are the same.¹¹

In connection with describing the Bahá’í Faith, Shoghi Effendi states that “The Faith of Bahá’u’lláh should indeed be regarded . . . as the culmination of a cycle, the final stage in a series of *successive*, of preliminary and progressive *revelations*.”¹² Shoghi Effendi is even more specific than both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá since he uses the chain metaphor in conjunction with a description of the Bahá’í Faith and progressive revelation in at least two occasions:

It [the Bahá’í Faith] should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man’s collective life on this planet.¹³

[The Bahá’í Faith] readily and gratefully recognizes their [previous Dispensations] respective contributions to the gradual unfoldment of one Divine Revelation, unhesitatingly acknowledges itself to be but one link in the chain of continually progressive Revelations . . .¹⁴ [emphases added]

More explicitly, Shoghi Effendi clearly connects the idea of a chain of prophecy with the doctrine of progressive revelation:

It [the Bahá’í Revelation] regards them [the religions that have preceded it] . . . as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part. . . . the fundamental principle which constitutes the Bedrock of Bahá’í belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final.¹⁵

With regard to Adam, Shoghi Effendi states that “There are no Prophets, so far, in the same category as Bahá’u’lláh, as He culminates *a great cycle begun by Adam*.” [emphasis added]¹⁶ In the following passage it is possible to see how Shoghi Effendi refers to progressive revelation and the chain of prophecy while simultaneously employing an organic metaphor:

. . . the series of progressive Revelations starting with Adam and concluded by the Revelation of the Seal of the Prophets, marked by the successive appearance of the branches, leaves, buds, blossoms . . .¹⁷

In addition, Shoghi Effendi also refers to Islam as “the succeeding link in the chain of Divine Revelation.”¹⁸

The terms “Prophet” and “Messenger”¹⁹ are frequently utilized by especially Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, but the term “Manifestation of God”²⁰ appears to be the most commonly used epithet. The Manifestation of God²¹ is also, according to Cole, at the center of the teachings of Bahá’í.²² Similarly, Saeidi states that:

The doctrine of manifestation, the concept of manifestation, is a fundamental, central, theological, philosophical, and sociological concept of the Bahá’í Faith. . . . Everything should be understood, can be understood in terms of this fundamental category, in terms of this fundamental concept. [It is] not just one concept among other concepts, but the central conceptual category of the Bahá’í Faith.²³

Although it may be correct to infer that the concept of the Manifestation of God plays a very central role in Bahá’í, it is argued that this concept is integral of a much larger and more central doctrine—that of progres-

sive revelation.²⁴

The terminology, which is connected with the Manifestations of God, is rather exhaustive. The following citation by Bahá'u'lláh may illustrate the abundant and complex variety of titles and metaphors that are associated with this concept:

It hath, therefore, become manifest and evident that within the tabernacles of these Prophets and chosen Ones of God the light of His infinite names and exalted attributes hath been reflected, even though the light of some of these attributes may or may not be outwardly revealed from these luminous Temples to the eyes of men. That a certain attribute of God hath not been outwardly manifested by these Essences of Detachment doth in no wise imply that they who are the Day Springs of God's attributes and the Treasuries of His holy names did not actually possess it. Therefore, these illuminated Souls, these beautiful Countenances have, each and every one of them, been endowed with all the attributes of God. [emphasis added]²⁵

In addition to the above stated designations, Bahá'u'lláh entitles the Manifestation of God as: "Tabernacles of holiness," "Primal Mirrors," "Essences of Being," "Day Stars of His divine guidance," "symbols of His divine unity," "sanctified Beings," "Manifestations of His wondrous Essence," "the Luminaries of truth," "Manifestations of the Sun of Truth," "Manifestations of Holiness," "Birds of the celestial Throne" etc. Further, the concept of "manifestation" occurs also in connection with other epithets. In the next passage Bahá'u'lláh enumerates various titles of the Manifestations of God and states that they are all essentially identical:

By virtue of this station they have claimed for themselves the Voice of Divinity and the like, whilst by virtue of their station of Messengership, they have declared themselves the Messengers of God. In every instance they have voiced an utterance that would conform to the requirements of the occasion, and have ascribed all these declarations to Themselves, declarations ranging from the realm of Divine Revelation to the realm of creation, and from the domain of Divinity even unto the domain of earthly existence. Thus it is that whatsoever be their utterance, whether it pertain to the realm of Divinity, Lordship, Prophethood, Messengership, Guardianship, Apostleship, or Servitude, all is true, beyond the shadow of a doubt.²⁶

Although Bahá'u'lláh above seems to include a variety of titles under the epithet of Manifestation of God, in His Kitáb-i-*qán* He elevates the "Prophet endowed with constancy" who has revealed a "Book" and which suggests the advent of a new revelation and the establishment of a new religion.²⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá is more explicit on this point since He clearly distinguishes between two kinds of prophets:

Universally, the prophets are of two kinds. One are the independent Prophets Who are followed; the other kind are not independent and are themselves followers. The independent Prophets are the lawgivers and the founders of a new cycle . . . The Manifestations of universal Prophethood Who appeared independently are, for example, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. But the others who are followers and promoters are like Solomon, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. For the independent Prophets are founders; They establish a new religion and make new creatures of men; They change the general morals, promote new customs and rules, renew the cycle and the Law. Their appearance is like the season of spring, which arrays all earthly beings in a new garment, and give them a new life. With regard to the second sort of Prophets who are followers, these also promote the Law of God, make known the Religion of God, and proclaim His word. Of themselves they have no power and might, except what they receive from the independent Prophets.²⁸

Here one can see an important difference in that the independent Prophets,²⁹ i.e., Abraham to Bahá'u'lláh, are "founders" of "a new religion."³⁰ These kinds of Prophets are also referred to as "universal Prophets."³¹ The "second sort of Prophets" is *dependent*³² upon the former for whom they are "followers and promoters."³³ In other words, the latter kind of prophets (Salomon to Ezekiel),³⁴ does not establish a new religion since they do not reveal a "Book." They do, however, "promote the Law of God" and "make known the Religion of God." Consequently, only Prophets "endowed with constancy," or the "universal" and "independent Prophets," are upheld as Manifestations of God.

In the example above 'Abdu'l-Bahá enumerates six universal Prophets, or Manifestations of God, but other sources mention additional religious figures, and therefore the following names can be added to the sequence:

Adam, Noah, Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Húd, Sálìh, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh.³⁵

If one were to include both kind of prophets (independent and dependent) that Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi mention in their writings, one could enumerate thirty-two religious figures (in alphabetical order):

1) Adam 2) Abraham 3) The Báb 4) Bahá’u’lláh 5) Buddha 6) Confucius 7) Daniel 8) David 9) Elijah 10) Ezekiel 11) Hud 12) Isaac 13) Isiah 14) Ishmael 15) Jacob 16) Jeremiah 17) Jesus Christ 18) Jethro 19) Job 20) Joel 21) John the Baptist 22) Joseph 23) Joshua 24) Krishna 25) Lot 26) Moses 27) Muhammad 28) Noah 29) Sálìh 30) Solomon 31) Zachariah 32) Zoroaster

Yet, neither Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, nor Shoghi Effendi specify a limited number of Manifestations of God. On the contrary, the number of Manifestations of God appears to be unknown or unlimited. On this theme Bahá’u’lláh states:

[T]he Manifestations of His Divine Glory . . . have been sent down from time immemorial, and been commissioned to summon mankind to the one true God. That the names of some of them are forgotten and the records of their lives lost is to be attributed to the disturbances and changes that have overtaken the world.³⁶

[T]he manifold bounties of the Lord of all beings have, at all times, through the Manifestations of His divine Essence, encompassed the earth and all that dwell therein. Not for a moment hath His grace been withheld, nor have the showers of His loving-kindness ceased to rain upon mankind. [emphasis added]³⁷

Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that

there have been many holy Manifestations of God. One thousand years ago, two hundred thousand years ago, one million years ago, the bounty of God was flowing, the radiance of God was shining, the dominion of God was existing.³⁸

From these examples it should be clear that the forgoing mentioned number of *six* Manifestations of God is not an exclusive number, since Bahá’u’lláh states that they “have been sent down from time immemorial,” “in every age,” and even that “the names of some of them are forgotten.” Similarly, the quote by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá above supports this conclusion since He states that the Manifestations of God existed even as far back as “a million years ago.” The appearance of a Manifestation of God, according to this view of prophecy, may be a rare event, but it is not a unique phenomenon in the history of mankind. Although the list of religious figures above seems to be limited to the Near and Far East regions, Bahá’u’lláh also says that “Unto the cities of *all* nations He hath sent His Messengers.”³⁹ Together with the above sentence “encompassed the earth” it is possible to interpret such passages as an allusion to a *global* scheme of revelation. Consequently, the revelatory process does not seem to be restricted to any specific time period or geographic locality.

Although the examples above are predominantly oriented toward the *past* it is relevant to turn the attention to the *future* perspective of the Manifestations of God. Thus, for example, in His Súriy-i-Sabr, Bahá’u’lláh addresses this issue and states that “God hath sent down His Messengers to succeed to Moses and Jesus, and He will *continue* to do so till ‘the end that hath no end’; so that His grace may, from the heaven of Divine bounty, be *continually* vouchsafed to mankind.”⁴⁰ Thus, Bahá’u’lláh only claims to be the *latest*, not the last, in a sequence of Manifestations of God.

The Middle Eastern and Iranian Contexts

Babism

Bahá’u’lláh was an early and distinguished adherent of the Báb (1819-1850), the Prophet-founder of the Bábí religion,⁴¹ though the two never physically met. That the Báb was a promulgator of the idea of continuous revelation is foremost seen in His claim of being the Qá’im/Mahdí of Islam.⁴² The following passage the Báb conveys clearly the idea of a chain of prophecy, not only in the past but in the future as well:

In the time of the First Manifestation the Primal Will appeared in Adam; in the day of Noah It became known in Noah; in the day of Abraham in Him; and so in the day of Moses; the day of Jesus; the day of Muhammad, the Apostle of God; the day of the ‘Point of Bayán’ [the Báb]; the day of Him Whom God shall make manifest; and the day of the One Who will appear after Him Whom God shall make manifest.

Hence the inner meaning of the words uttered by the Apostle of God, 'I am all the Prophets,' inasmuch as what shineth resplendent in each one of Them hath been and will ever remain the one and the same sun.⁴³

Here the Báb explicitly asserts a chain of prophecy. However, this chain does not end with him, but He prophesies a subsequent *man yuzhiruhu'lláh* (Him Whom God shall make manifest):

For everything shall be set aside except His Writings, which will endure until the following Revelation. And should anyone inscribe with true faith but one letter of that Revelation, his recompense would be greater than for inscribing all the heavenly Writings of the past and all that has been written during previous Dispensations. Likewise continue thou to ascend through one Revelation after another, knowing that thy progress in the Knowledge of God shall never come to an end, even as it can have no beginning. [emphasis added]⁴⁴

Another, and more elaborate passage, can be found in Báb's Persian Bayán:

It is clear and evident that the object of all preceding Dispensations hath been to pave the way for the advent of Muhammad, the Apostle of God. These, including the Muhammadan Dispensation, have had, in their turn, as their objective the Revelation proclaimed by the Qá'im. The purpose underlying this Revelation, as well as those that preceded it, has, in like manner, been to announce the advent of the Faith of Him Whom God will make manifest. And this Faith—the Faith of Him Whom God will make manifest—in its turn, together with all the Revelations gone before it, have as their object the Manifestation destined to succeed it. And the latter, no less than all the Revelations preceding it, prepare the way for the Revelation which is yet to follow. The process of the rise and setting of the Sun of Truth will thus indefinitely continue—a process that hath had no beginning and will have no end⁴⁵

The probably clearest example of a chain of prophecy is found in the Báb's Kitáb-i-Panj Sha'n (Book of the Five Grades)⁴⁶ where He explicitly writes of nine *man yuzhiruhu'lláh* (Him Whom God shall make manifest):

His [God's] exteriority in [the Qur'án] is Muhammad, the Messenger of God; in the Bayán it is [the Báb]; in the Gospel it is Jesus, the Spirit of God; in the Psalms it is David, the upright of God; in the Torah it is Moses, the One Who conversed with God. And after the Bayán it is [1] *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*; and after *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*, [2] *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*; and after *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*, [3] *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*; and after *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*, [4] *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*; and after *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*, [5] *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*; and after *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*, [6] *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*; and after *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*, [7] *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*; and after *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*, [8] *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*; and after *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*, [9] *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*.⁴⁷

Although the Báb here explicitly mentions nine *man yuzhiruhu'lláh*, this number should not be taken at face-value but rather as a symbolic figure. Thus, Lambden writes that the Báb "did not simply speak of one future appearance of Manifestations of God but nine or more such theophanies. In fact, He did not limit the number of their successive and progressive Divine Manifestations in the world."⁴⁸ The following passage of the Báb implies that the number of future Prophets indeed is indefinite:

God hath raised up Prophets and revealed Books as numerous as the creatures of the world, and will continue to do so to everlasting.⁴⁹

Shaykhism

The Báb had been a student of Siyyid Kázim Rashtí (d. 1843) who in turn had been the foremost disciple of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í (d. 1825), the founder of Shaykhism.⁵⁰ The Báb was thus well versed in the Shaykhí school of prophetology. Thus, for example, Rafati writes the following about the Shaykhí view of continuous and successive revelation:

According to the Shaykhí theory, a prophetic cycle began with Adam and continued to the Prophet Muhammad. During this Adamic cycle, six major prophets appeared: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. While most Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last prophet, Shaykh Ahmad maintains that Muhammad was the last prophet only within this cycle. . . . Shaykh Ahmad's view of Muhammad as the final prophet only within the Adamic cycle implies a continuing divine revelation through a succession of prophets in a series of cycles; while each cycle has a beginning and an end, the cyclical process itself is progressive and continuous.⁵¹

Rafati explains that Shaykh Ahmad uses the analogy of the development of an embryo with humanity's spiritual progress and were various prophets play central roles:

According to the Shaykhí view, the six stages of embryonic development corresponds to the six prophets who appeared in the Adamic cycle: the stage of the life-germ corresponds to Adam; the stage of the clot, to Noah; the stage of the morsel of flesh, to Abraham; the stage of the bones, to Moses; the stage of the flesh, to Jesus, and the stage of another creation, to Muhammad. Following the analogy further, as the first five stages of embryonic development are prerequisite to the entrance of the spirit into the body, the first five religions are perceived as performing a preparatory function for the religion of the Prophet Muhammad. The last stage of the development of an embryo is final only in respect to its life in the womb, for the now completely developed embryo will be born into another world. Likewise, although the sixth stage of the Adamic cycle, i.e., the Prophet Muhammad, is the last stage of its cycle, it is, at the same time, the beginning of a new phase in the spiritual development of humankind and marks the inception of a new cycle.⁵²

Here we can clearly see that although Muhammed is regarded as the "last Prophet" He is this only within a cycle, i.e., the "Adamic cycle." Thus, in Shaykhism we can enumerate the following six Prophets:

- 1) Adam, 2) Noah, 3) Abraham, 4), Moses, 5), Jesus, 6) Muhammad

Islam

Shaykhism emerged within the Shí'í branch of Islam that historically has emphasized the continuity of revelation *after* Muhammed. Yet, this succession was mainly restricted through the succession of Imáms. However, what is of importance in this context is once again the idea of a chain of prophecy. An example is the Isma'ílís who believe that

Prophets come in cycles which comprise a "great week" of seven thousand years. Each cycle is presided over by one of the Prophets . . . (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad), as well as by an "intermediary" (wási), (Seth, Shem, Ishmael (Ismá'íl), Aaron, Peter, 'Alí), and a "permanent Imám" (Imám-Qá'im). . . .⁵³

Similarly, the Ahl-i-Haqq "believe in seven successive manifestations of God, coming to dwell 'in a garment.'"⁵⁴ It is also possible to locate passages of an esoteric identification with previous prophets. For example, in the *hadíth al-Sahába*, 'Alí⁵⁵ is supposed to have made the following claim:

I am Adam, I am Noah, I am Abraham, I am Moses, I am Jesus, I am Muhammad; I move through the forms as I wish—whoso has seen me has seen them, and whoso has seen them has seen me."⁵⁶

According to Nicholson, Rúmí (1207-1273) believed that "in every era there is a new manifestation of God," and in his *Díwán*, Rúmí states that "every instant the Loved One assumes a new garment, now of age, now of youth."⁵⁷ According to this view, the Spirit has appeared in various forms as: Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Jesus. Nicholson further writes that "In every generation he [the Spirit] was coming and going, until at last he appeared in Muhammad and ruled the world and he became 'Alí with his sword."⁵⁸

The Iranian al-Mukanna' (fl. 755-85) went one step further and identified himself not only with various prophets but with *God*:

I am your God and the God of the whole world. I call myself by whatever name I wish. I am he who manifested himself in the creation in the guise of Adam, and later in the guise of Noah, later in the guise of Abraham, later in the guise of Moses, later in the guise of Jesus, later in the guise of Muhammed, and later in the guise of Abu Muslim, and finally in the appearance you now behold.⁵⁹

Although the Shí'í branch's interpretations of an idea of a chain of prophecy is not accepted in the Sunni and majority branch of Islam, both the term and the idea of a "chain of prophets"⁶⁰ can clearly be located. Waldman, writing on the topic of *Nubúwah* (prophethood) in Islam, states for example that it

has been God's primary means of communicating with humankind, involving a long and continuous chain of revelation-bearers who were related both functionally and genetically . . . The chain stretched from the first human, Adam, to the deliverer of the Qur'án, Muhammad. . . .⁶¹

The idea of a chain of prophecy is further and lucidly depicted in several *súrah*s of the *Qur'án*.⁶² For exam-

ple:

Say ye: "We believe in God, and the revelations given to us, and to Abraham, Ismá'íl, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all Prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them . . ." (2:136)

We have sent thee inspiration, as We sent it to Noah and the Messengers after him: We sent inspiration to Abraham, Ismá'íl, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some Apostles We have already told thee the story; of others We have not—and to Moses God spoke direct—apostles who gave good news as well as warning . . . (4:163-65)

The two most common terms for "prophet" in the *Qur'án* are *rasúl* (messenger) and *nabí* (prophet). According to *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, the former is a Prophet "who brings a new religion or a major new revelation" and the latter is a prophet "whose mission lies within the framework of an existing religion."⁶³ Some of the prophets are also referred to as *úlu-l-'azm* (prophets endowed with constancy; *Qur'án* 46:35).

The following twenty-six prophets (in alphabetical order) can be found in the *Qur'án*:

1) Adam 2) Alaysa' (Elisha) 3) Ayyúb (Job) 4) Dá'úd (David) 5) Dhú-l-Kifl (Ezekiel) 6) Húd 7) Ibrahím (Abraham) 8) Idrís (Enoch) 9) Ilyás (Elijah, Elias) 10) 'Isá (Jesus) 11) Isaiáh 12) Isháq (Isaac) 13) Ismá'íl (Ishmael) 14) Luqmán 15) Lút (Lot) 16) Muhammad 17) Músá (Moses) 18) Núh (Noah) 19) Sálíh 20) Shu'ayb (Jethro) 21) Sulaymán (Solomon) 22) Yúnus (Jonah) 23) 'Uzair (Ezra) 24) Yahyá (John the Baptist) 25) Ya'qúb (Jacob) 26) Yúsuf (Joseph)⁶⁴

Yet, the number of prophets does not seem to be exhausted by the ones listed above, since some traditions give the symbolic number of 124,000 prophets,⁶⁵ and, more importantly, because the *Qur'án* (10:48; 16:36) also states that prophets/messengers have been sent to *every* nation/community. It is also significant that some authors even use the term "progressive revelation"⁶⁶ and "progressive disclosure"⁶⁷ in the context of Islamic revelation.

However, although Islam clearly recognizes a chain of prophecy, a progressive disclosure of revelation, and that a prophet has been sent to every nation, one of the basic doctrines of Islam is that Muhammad is *khátim al-anbiyá'* (the Seal of Prophets, *Qur'án* 33:40), and that Islam is the perfected religion (*Qur'án* 5:3-5). This is often interpreted as if there will be no other prophet after Muhammad and, consequently, that there will be no future religion other than Islam. On this point, for example, Zaki writes that "the *Qur'án* abrogates all previously revealed scriptures just as Muhammad's prophethood supersedes the missions of all previous prophets, which are now rendered otiose of his universality" and that Muhammad therefore "retrospectively annuls . . . all the prophets who had preceded Him and at the same time invalidates the claim of any future claimant to the title."⁶⁸ Similarly, Nadwi writes that "It was perfectly logical as well as inevitable, too, that after the complete and final guidance had been vouchsafed to the Prophet of Islam, *the chain of prophecy* should come to an end with him."⁶⁹

This idea that Muhammad is completing a chain of revelation can further be seen in the following *hadíth* recorded by al-Bukhárí (810-870):

Narrated Abu Huraira: Alláh's Apostle said, "My similitude in comparison with the other prophets before me, is that of a man who has built a house nicely and beautifully, except for a place of one brick in a corner. The people go about it and wonder at its beauty, but say: 'Would that this brick be put in its place!' So I am that brick, and I am the last of the Prophets."⁷⁰

By using this brick/house analogy, Muhammad is depicted as "the last brick" and thereby completing the "house of revelation." He is thus seen as "the last of the Prophets." In other words, although it is clearly possible to find a chain of prophecy in Islam, this chain is seen as *ending* with the Prophet Muhammad.

Manichaeism

Having briefly reviewed the Bábí-Bahá'í and Islamic views of prophecy, it is significant to note that Andrae asserts that "Mohammed's conception of revelation . . . betrays a relationship to the Ebionitic-Manichaeic doctrine which cannot be accidental."⁷¹ What is especially significant with the religion of Mání (216-276) is that here it is possible to locate a prophet-founder's first and explicit claim of being a part of a chain of prophecy.

An example of this claim can be found in the writings of al-Bírúní (973-1048), who cites the following from Mání's *Shábúhragán*:

Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind by the apostles of God. So in one age they have been brought by the apostle called Buddha to India, in another by Zarathustra to Iran, in another by Jesus to the West. Thereupon this revelation has come down, this prophecy in this last age through me, Mání, the apostle of the God of truth to Babylonia.⁷²

In this passage it is clear that Mání sees himself as one of the apostles who have been sent "from time to time" and to different countries. Thus, he recognizes the following series of prior prophets:

1) Buddha 2) Zoroaster 3) Jesus

However, al-Sháhrastání⁷³ lists another sequence of prophets:

1) Adam 2) Seth 3) Noah 4) Abraham 5) Buddha 6) Zoroaster 7) Jesus Christ 8) Paul

Other sources also list Shem, Sem, Enosh, and Nikotheos⁷⁴ as prophets. For example, Lieu writes that:

We learn from the first discourse in the Kephalaia that Mani regarded Seth (or Sethel), the son of Adam, as the first of a line of special prophets from the Father. He was followed by Enosh, Enoch and Shem. After them came Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus and Paul. After Paul, mankind was gradually led astray into sin until the time when there appeared again a just man who belonged to the 'kingdom'. Together with another righteous person they gave strength to the church. . . . After they had descended to the Land of Light, the church again degenerated and became like a tree which was deprived of its fruits. It was then that Mani's apostleship began, as he was the Paraclete of Truth who was promised by Christ to this last generation.⁷⁵

Thus, a more complete list of the successive prophets of Manichaeism would include the following twelve prophets:

1) Adam 2) Seth 3) Enosh 4) Enoch 5) Noah 6) Shem 7) Abraham 8) Buddha 9) Zoroaster 10) Jesus Christ 11) Paul 12) Mání

What makes Manichaeism especially interesting in the context of the Bahá'í Faith is that Mání "believed he was promulgating a new universal religion that would supersede all others."⁷⁶ Mání, however, did not only uphold that his religion was a continuation or succession of previous religions, but that it was superior and *final*. Consequently, Lieu states that Mání saw himself "as part of a *chain of revealers* which finally terminated with him."⁷⁷ Thus, it is small wonder that Mání, centuries before Muhammad, used the epithet *khátimu'n-nabíyín* (the seal of the prophets).⁷⁸ Although Manichaeism seem to have influenced Islam, it is also important to note that Mání grew up in an Elkesaite environment.

Pseudo-Clementines, Ebionites, and Elkesaites

Another context in which the chain of prophecy occurs is the Judeo-Christian sects that flourished around the first four centuries C.E. The Pseudo-Clementines refers to a collection of early Christian writings⁷⁹ (325-380) that were clearly influenced by Ebionism. The Ebionites were Christians who maintained the Jewish law and claimed Ebion as its founder, but this term is more likely derived from *ebyóním* (the poor).⁸⁰ Earlier it was seen that Andrae referred to "the Ebionitic-Manichaean doctrine." Both the Ebionites (c. 200 C.E.) and the Elkesaites (c. 100 C.E.) identify Adam and Christ as prophets. They also believed in a series of successive incarnations.⁸¹ The Pseudo-Clementines and Ebionites also speak of a reincarnated *verus propheta* (true prophet).⁸² This "True Prophet" is viewed in a recurring fashion as "the seven pillars of the world" and which can be enumerated as:

1) Adam 2) Enoch 3) Noah 4) Abraham 5) Isaac 6) Jacob 7) Moses

The eighth and final pillar is that of Christ.⁸³ However, the idea of seven pillars that the world rests upon is, according to Schoeps, derived from the old Jewish *Haggadah*. He further states that:

All the seven are alike in that each is a saddiq (righteous man), i.e., a true prophet. Also, the picture of the wandering Shekinah (the glory of God) was widely known and frequently associated with the seven righteous men. The names change, but the patriarchs and Moses are constant members of the group; in them the glory of God returns to the earth after the sins of the earliest period had driven it away. The later cabala developed these views into a doctrine of the reincarnation of the original man Adam Kadmon.⁸⁴

Schoeps refers to this chain of prophecy as “cyclical succession of the Spirit of revelation.” In discussing its range of influence he states that it “extends from Elkesai, the Mandaeans, Mani, and Mohammed, to the Shi'ite Imám-doctrine of the Hadíth” and that it subsequently was “translated back into Judaism.”⁸⁵ Above it was seen that this idea of a chain of prophecy could be extended forward to Shaykhism, Bábism, and the Bahá'í Faith. The rest of this paper will show that this idea can be extended even further backwards to encompass not only Christianity and Zoroastrianism, but also Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism.

Christianity

Although Schoeps does not mention Christianity, it is clear that at its center is the belief that Jesus is the eschatological and soteriological *Masih* (Christos) of Judaism. Thus, from a Christian perspective, He is promised and prophesied in the Jewish scriptures (TNK)—the “Old Testament” —and the “New Testament” is the testimony and the fulfillment of this promise. For example, in John 5:46 Jesus is supposed to have said: “If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for He wrote about Me” which probably is an allusion to Dt. 18:15-19 “Yahweh your God will raise up for you a *Prophet like Me* from among your own brothers.”⁸⁶ Jesus is indeed also referred to as a “prophet” many times in the New Testament⁸⁷ and John (7:40) even makes a reference of Jesus as “*the prophet*.” More importantly, Jesus refers to Himself twice as a “prophet.”⁸⁸

At the time of Jesus it was also thought that some of the ancient prophets Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah would appear as a prophet *revidus* before the coming of the Messiah.⁸⁹ This is apparent in the dialogue of the “Transfiguration” passages in e.g., Matt. 17:1-13:⁹⁰

After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus . . . The disciples asked Him, “Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize Him, but have done to Him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that He was talking to them about John the Baptist.⁹¹

Although this passage suggests a more esoteric view of the chain of prophecy, it may allude to Jesus' prophetic stature being on par with the theophanies of Moses,⁹² Elijah,⁹³ and John the Baptist.⁹⁴ A perhaps more explicit example of a chain of prophecy is “The Parable of the Tenants”:⁹⁵

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one [1], killed another [2], and stoned a third [3]. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son [4] to them.⁹⁶ “They will respect my son,” he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, “This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.” So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.⁹⁷

Commenting on this passage Aune writes that “The series of messengers represents the prophets who were prosecuted and killed by a rebellious Israel, while the beloved son is *Jesus, the last in a long series of prophetic messengers* who have experienced rejection by the people.”⁹⁸ Aune also writes of Jesus as “the final messenger of God.”⁹⁹ Another passage, which is often employed by Christian adherents of a continuous and progressive revelation between the OT and the NT is Heb. 1:1:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.

Judaism

Although Schoeps refers to that the idea of a “cyclical succession of the Spirit of revelation” this idea was eventually “translated back into Judaism.” Yet, the idea of a chain of prophecy can clearly be found even in the ancient Hebrew religion (from which Rabbinical Judaism is the only surviving offspring). Thus, for example, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* boldly asserts:

There is . . . no analogy to the Israelite chain of prophecy . . . which produced a successive line of prophets spanning several centuries who guided and taught the people, reproved and censured them for their sins, and threatened impending destruction or promised future restoration.¹⁰⁰

This, however, could be questioned since both Christianity and Islam make claims of being heirs to this “successive line of prophets.” Still, Judaism is different from both Christianity and Islam since it has no *single* founder or unique soteriological mediator, although Abraham and, especially Moses— “the paragon of prophets”¹⁰¹ and “the master of the prophets”¹⁰²—play extraordinary roles. Thus, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* states that “The classical prophets . . . considered themselves successive links in *the chain of divine messengers* extending back to Moses.”¹⁰³

Judaism has a variety of terms for “prophet” e.g., *náví* (prophet), *‘ish ha-‘Elóhím* (man of God), *ró’eh* and *hózeh* (seer).¹⁰⁴ That the prophets have played an important role in Judaism can be seen in the very name of the *TaNak*¹⁰⁵ where N stands for *Nevi'im* (Prophets). However, the prophets can be further subdivided into *nevi'im rishonim* (“former” or “earlier” prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings), and *nevi'im aharonim* (“latter” or “major” prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel; and the twelve “minor” prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micha, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephania, Haggai, Zehariah, and Malachi).¹⁰⁶

The following list of fifty-five prophets is based on the *Talmud* and *Rashi*: 1) Abraham, 2) Isaac, 3) Jacob, 4) Moses, 5) Aaron, 6) Joshua, 7) Pinchas, 8) Elkanah, 9) Eli, 10) Samuel, 11) Gad, 12) Nathan, 13) David, 14) Solomon 15) Iddo, 16) Michaiiah son of Imlah, 17) Obadiah, 18) Ahiyah the Shilonite, 19) Jehu son of Hanani, 20) Azariah son of Oded, 21) Jahaziel the Levite, 22) Eliezer son of Dodavahu, 23) Hosea, 24) Amos, 25) Micah the Morashtite, 26) Amoz, 27) Elijah, 28) Elisha, 29) Jonah ben Amittai, 30) Isaiah, 31) Joel, 32) Nahum, 33) Habakkuk, 34) Zephaniah, 35) Uriah, 36) Jeremiah, 37) Ezekiel, 38) Shemaiah, 39) Barukh, 40) Neriah, 41) Seraiah, 42) Mehseiah, 43) Haggai, 44) Zehariah, 45) Malachi, 46) Mordecai Bilshan, 47) Oded, 48) Hanani, 49) Sarah, 50) Miriam, 51) Deborah, 52) Hannah, 53) Abigail, 54) Huldah, 55) Esther

Although both Adam and Noah have been considered as prophets in the above reviewed religions it is noteworthy that neither one is regarded as a prophet in Judaism. Yet, even though fifty-five prophets can be listed, the *Talmud* also states that the number of prophets was *innumerable*, or more precisely, twice the number of Jews who left Egypt, estimated as being 600,000. Thus, the number of prophets would amount to 1,200,000.¹⁰⁷

Zoroastrianism

In the above contexts it was seen that Zoroaster was only mentioned in the Bahá'í and Manichean contexts. The life-time of Zoroaster, or more precisely, Zarathustra (Spitaman), has never been satisfactorily resolved since scholars are divided into two groups: (1) Boyce who estimates 1700-1200 B.C.E, and (2) Zaehner and others who claim 628-551 B.C.E. Moreover, later Parsi tradition dates Zarathustra to have lived 6000 B.C.E., but this date is not accepted by Western scholars. Thus, there is a great variance from 6000-600 B.C.E. However, most scholars agree that Zarathustra was an *historical* figure and some even suggest that He may have been the very first prophet or apoclypt in history,¹⁰⁸ or the “oldest known millenarian prophet.”¹⁰⁹ From the extant Zoroastrian writings it is clear that He was *zaotar* or *áthravan* (priest)¹¹⁰ and that He also saw himself as *saoshyant* (saviour),¹¹¹ and *mathran* (prophet).¹¹² Nyberg states that Zoroastrianism’s greatest innovation was its prophetology and that “Zarathustra was the first who thought good, spoke good, acted good. He was the first *áthravan*, the first *rathaésr* (chariot-fighter), the first *vástryó.fsuyant* (shepherd),” and “mankind’s first lawgiver and teacher of the heavenly command.”¹¹³

In the context of the idea of a chain of prophecy it is interesting that a scheme of ten incarnations exists in the *Avesta*.¹¹⁴ It states that *Véréthraghna* (glorious power) appeared as follows:

- 1) Váta (wind), 2) Golden-horned bull, 3) White horse, 4) Male camel, 5) Boar, 6) Young man, 7) Váregan-bird, 8) Ram (?), 9) Goat, 10) Warrior¹¹⁵

What is especially significant in this context is that Nyberg writes that *Véréthraghna* “has wandered through time and makes the unifying bond in the history of Iran.”¹¹⁶ Further, there is the notion of *kavis* (priest-kings) who are seen as forerunners of Zoroastrianism, and Nyberg states that “even very old Avesta-texts may have had a fixed series of such pre-zoroastrian rulers and heroes.”¹¹⁷ Moreover, both Nyberg and Widengren describe Zarathustra as “primordial man reincarnated,”¹¹⁸ which suggests the notion of pre-existence. Indeed, this idea

can be seen in the division of the development of the cosmos and its three protagonists:

- 1) Gayó-maretan (primordial man),¹¹⁹ 2) Zarathustra, and 3) Saoshyant.

This idea was also seen above in that Zarathustra was seen as the first priest, chariot-fighter and shepherd. Thus, these examples illustrate the notion of a series of succession, although it is unclear if they have had any soteriological function.

The idea of the *Saoshyant* (savior) can be found at several places in the oldest Zoroastrian texts—the *Gáthás*.¹²⁰ Gnoli states that “the concept of the future saviour is one of the fundamental notions of Zoroastrianism” and that “the doctrine . . . had already taken shape in the Achaemenid period (sixth to fourth centuries B.C.E.).”¹²¹ For example, in *Yasht* 19:89 the *Saoshyant* is labeled as a “messenger of Ahura Mazda.”¹²² Yet, the identification of *Saoshyant* with a *future* savior is quite misleading since Zarathustra, as was seen above, also refers to himself as *Saoshyant*.¹²³ However, as was also stated earlier, Zoroastrianism recognizes three successive soteriological mediators *after* Zarathustra, although it is believed that the number of three *Saoshyants* was a later development.¹²⁴ It is possible to enumerate the three future and successive soteriological mediators of Zoroastrianism as:

- 1) Ushedar (Uchshyatereta), 2) Ushedarmah (Uchshyat-nemah) 3) Saoshyant (Astvatereta).

The three *Saoshyants* are depicted as “sons” of Zarathustra although it is clear that they are born during the last two millennia (i.e., the years 10,000-12,000 in the Zoroastrian calendar). The eleventh millennium is inaugurated with the arrival of Ushedar, who will “renew the prophet’s [Zarathustra’s] revelation and defeat the forces of evil.”¹²⁵ Here Boyce implies that it is the original revelation that is renewed. The twelfth millennium is inaugurated with Ushedarmah, and the final *Saoshyant* (Astvatereta) arrives at the end of the final millennium—in the year 11943.¹²⁶ Thus, it is important to note that the time-span between the three saviors is approximately 1,000 years, i.e., a millennium. Yet, it is possible to note, as Nyberg states, that “Zarathustra makes a continuous series with his mythical sons, the apocalyptic saviours” and that “the appearance of Zarathustra is the prelude to the eschatological event.”¹²⁷

Further, the last *Saoshyant* is, in the *Pahlavi*-literature, always identified simply as “Soshyant,” but the *Avesta* refers to him as Astvatereta (he who embodies righteousness).¹²⁸ Nyberg writes that Astvatereta is “the pinnacle and completion of humanity.” As was stated above, Nyberg sees “Zarathustra as primordial man reincarnated” and likewise are “the apocalyptic saviours Zarathustra reincarnated.”¹²⁹ The evidence for this, according to Nyberg, is *Yasna* 46:3 where Zarathustra identifies himself with the Saoshyants.¹³⁰ Similarly, Widengren sees the three *Saoshyants* as “incarnations of Zarathustra as the divine Primordial Man” and that it is therefore possible to discern “a clear series of four saviour-figures: Zarathustra, Hushetar, Hushetarmah and Soshyans.”¹³¹ Although *Gayó-maretan* may not have functioned as a soteriological figure in the mythical past, he may, since he is regarded as the incarnation of Zarathustra, still be included in the series of soteriological mediators. It is therefore possible to summarize and enumerate the following series of five successive soteriological mediators of Zoroastrianism as follows:

- 1) *Gayó-maretan* (primordial man), 2) Zarathustra, 3) Ushedar 4) Ushedarmah 5) Saoshyant (Astvatereta)

The Indian context

Having briefly reviewed and discussed the idea of a chain of prophecy in the Middle Eastern and Iranian contexts, we will now turn to three religions of Indian context: Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism.

Buddhism

The central figure of Buddhism is Siddharta Guatama (566-486/560-480 B.C.E.)¹³² or “the Buddha.” Yet, on this point Parrinder writes that “We commonly speak of Gotama as *the* Buddha, but every Buddhist, Theraváda, as well as Maháyána, believes that there are numerous Buddhas, past and to come.”¹³³ Thus, the theme in Buddhism which is most relevant in this context of the idea of a chain of prophecy is the idea of successive Buddhas, or *Buddhavamsa* (Lineage of Buddhas). This idea seems to be specifically Indian and ultimately influenced by the Hindu *avatara*-scheme, and most probably, indirectly influenced by Jainism,¹³⁴ although Gautama “Quite early . . . is perceived as one of several Buddhas in a series that began in the distant past.”¹³⁵ Related to this is the idea from the *Játaka* tales which states that the Buddha has gone through five-hundred

previous births¹³⁶ and that, in a sense, there are Buddhas in preparation.¹³⁷

The idea that a Buddha is born in various epochs can, for example, be found in the *Digha Nikaya*:

Know, Vasettha, that (from time to time) a Tathagata is born into the world, a fully Enlightened One, blessed and worthy, abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy, with knowledge of the world, unsurpassed as a guide to erring mortals, a teacher of gods and men, a Blessed Buddha.¹³⁸

Moreover, in a passage from the *Saddharmapundarika* (*Lotus Sūtra*), the Buddha supposedly said “I am repeatedly born in the world of the living.”¹³⁹ However, Parrinder writes that the idea of succession of Buddhas is already established in the oldest part of the Buddhist *Pāli* canon, the *Sutta Pitaka*,¹⁴⁰ mentions six previous Buddhas where Gautama is the seventh, but the future Buddha—Maitreya—is *not* mentioned here (although He is mentioned elsewhere in the *Pāli* canon). Thus, in the oldest canon it is possible to identify the following succession of Buddhas:

1) Vipassi, 2) Sikhi, 3) Vessabhu, 4) Kakusandha, 5) Konágamana, 6) Kassapa, 7) Gautama, 8) Maitreya

The first Buddha, Vipassi, is supposed to have lived eighty thousand years ago. Later texts, e.g., *Buddhavamsa*, does not mention only *six* different Buddhas but *twenty-five*, where Gautama is identified as the twenty-fifth Buddha and where eighteen Buddhas existed before Vipassi. The Buddhas are as follows:

1) Dipankara, 2) Kondanna, 3) Mangala, 4) Sumana, 5) Revata, 6) Sobhita, 7) Anomadassin, 8) Paduma, 9) Narada, 10) Padumuttara, 11) Sumedha, 12) Sujata, 13) Piyadassi, 14) Atthadassi, 15) Dhammadassi, 16) Siddhattha, 17) Tissa, 18) Phussa, 19) Vipassi, 20) Sikhi, 21) Vessabhu, 22) Kakusandha, 23) Konágamana, 24) Kassapa, 25) Gautama

So far it has been shown that the concept of the Buddha is highly ambivalent and that Buddhism recognizes a limited number in the succession of Buddhas. Yet, other Buddhist writings do not limit the Buddhas but enumerate either a greater number or an infinite number of Buddhas in the universe. For example, although the *Mahāvastu* views Sidhartha Gautama as the last in a succession in the present cycle, it still names *thousands* of other Buddhas. Other texts e.g., the *Lalitavistara* and the *Saddharmapundarika*, mention *millions* of Buddhas.¹⁴¹ Again the *Mahāvastu* treat the “Buddha-lands” and “Buddha-fields” as *asankhyeya* (innumerable) and that the *Buddhas* are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges.¹⁴² Finally, the *Lotus Sūtra* states that:

At that time Shákyamunibuddha’s emanations in the eastern quarter, Buddhas of the lands equal in number to the sands of a hundred thousand myriad of millions of Ganges rivers, each Buddha preaching Dharma, assembled in this place, Buddhas of ten directions all gathering in order and sitting in the eight quarters.¹⁴³

Although the previous paragraphs convey the multiplicity of Buddhas there are still Buddhist writings which points in the other direction i.e., towards an underlying unity beyond the multiplicity of Buddhas. For example, the *Milindapanha* states that:

There is not distinction between any of the Buddhas in physical beauty, moral habit, concentration, wisdom, cognition and insight . . . for all Buddhas are exactly the same as regards Buddha-dhammas.¹⁴⁴

This text only treats the physical, moral and mental qualities, but the *Sarvatathágatatattvasaṅgraha* and the *Lankavatára Sūtra* teach the unity of all the Buddhas.¹⁴⁵ Parrinder writes that the unity and identity of all the Buddhas is implied in the concept of the *Dharma-kāya* (Truth or Cosmic Body), and “therefore *the* Buddha was actually *all* the Buddhas of the past.” He labels this idea as a sort of “universal pantheism or rather pan-Buddhism.”¹⁴⁶ Similarly, but writing about the five celestial Buddhas, Lamb also states that:

Buddhism came close to Hindu monism, not to say, monotheism, with the development of the notion of a primordial buddha behind the five celestial buddhas [Vairocana, Akshbhya, Ratnasmbhava, Amitábha, Amoghasiddhi].¹⁴⁷

Moreover, the *Lotus Sūtra* depicts the *vyúha* (manifestations, emanations) of the Buddha.¹⁴⁸ Although the two authors write about different areas of Buddhism, they reach the conclusions that there is the concept of a transcendental Buddha who unifies either the Buddhas of the past or the celestial Buddhas. Parrinder summarizes succinctly what has been said above as follows:

The Buddha is not an Incarnation or Avatar of God or any other superior being. He incarnates himself by himself. Yet there is a transcendental element, and the Buddha is a substitute-deity. The Buddha himself, or the reality behind all the Buddhas, or the Dharma-body, is ultimate and omnipotent. He is either utterly transcendent and absolute, like Brahman, or both transcendent and personal like Vishnu. In Maháyána there are countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, yet as in Theraváda there is a determined move to show that fundamentally they are all one. This is not in the sense that there is only one Buddha at a time, to guarantee his supremacy, but there is a need to get the bewildering multiplicity of Buddhas to their unity in the one Buddha or Dharma.¹⁴⁹

Jainism

The religion of Jainism was founded by Vardhamana (599-527 B.C.E.), better known as Mahávira (great hero), or Jina (victor, conqueror). The most important concept in Jainism in the context of an idea of a chain of prophecy is the doctrine of the *Tírthankaras* (one who builds the ford, ford-finders, crossing-makers). They are also referred to as *Jinas*, or *Arhants* (saints). Together with the *Cakravartins* (wheel-turners) and other such heroes, they form the class of the venerated sixty-three personages of the Jain universal history. Together they are called *Mahápurushas* (great men).¹⁵⁰ Caillat refers to the *Tírthankaras* as “Prophets who periodically teach the world the truth of the imperishable Jain tradition” and that “Mahávira was one of an unending succession of *tírthankaras*.”¹⁵¹ Moreover, it is noteworthy that the Jain tradition is referred to as “imperishable,” which could be seen as synonymous with an “eternal” tradition. However, what is interesting is the notion that the *Tírthankaras* occur *periodically* and in a *succession*. Thus, Jainism enumerates twenty-four *Tírthankaras* who “are said to appear at given periods in selected regions.”¹⁵² Parrinder states that this succession may be the oldest and is perhaps the origin of the development of the twenty-five Buddhas of Buddhism.¹⁵³ The twenty-four *Tírthankaras* can be enumerated as follows:

- 1) Rishabha 2) Ajita, 3) Sambhava, 4) Abhinandana, 5) Sumati, 6) Padmaprabha, 7) Supárshva, 8) Candraprabha, 9) Suvidhi (Pushpadanta), 10) Shítala, 11) Shreyámsa, 12) Vásupújya, 13) Vimala, 14) Ananta, 15) Dharma, 16) Shánti, 17) Kunthu, 18) Ara, 19) Malli,¹⁵⁴ 20) Munisuvrata, 21) Nami, 22) (Arista)nemi, 23) Párshva, 24) Mahávira

According to the Jain tradition, the first *Tírthankara*, Rishabha, lived eight million years ago.

Hinduism

The idea of a chain of prophecy can in Hinduism best be found in the doctrine of avatars. The concept of *avatára* is often thought of as equivalent to “incarnation,”¹⁵⁵ but etymologically speaking, the word means rather “descent” or “down-coming.”¹⁵⁶ It is also interesting that the term was historically coined fairly late and that the word *prádurbháva* (manifestation) is rather more frequent in the older texts.¹⁵⁷ Some authors suggest that the “germ of the doctrine of the Avatar” can be derived from the *Purusha*-sukta in *Rig Veda*.¹⁵⁸ Yet, the word *avatára* neither occurs in the four *Vedas*, nor in the classical *Upanishads*, but it is implicitly referred to in the later *Upanishads*.¹⁵⁹ A classic list over the *dashávatára* (ten avatars) was later established in an appendix to the great Indian epic *Mahábhárata*, called *Harivamshá* (c. 600 C.E.). The names and the numbers of the *avatars* differ in various works (from ten, twenty-two, and thirty-nine, or innumerable), but according to the *ten-avatar*-scheme¹⁶⁰ the common avatars of Vishnu are:

- 1) Fish (*matsya*), 2) Tortiose (*kúrma*), 3) Boar (*varáha*), 4) Man-Lion (*Nara-simha*), 5) Dwarf (*vámana*), 6) Ráma with the axe (Parashu-Ráma) 7) Ráma of the Rámáyana, 8) Krishna, 9) the Buddha, 10) Kalkin.

Although this scheme clearly differs from the Zoroastrian scheme on several points, one can still recognize a few similarities: the fact that there are *ten* “incarnations,” the Boar (*varáha*), and that both Vishnu and *Vérétraghna* appear in both animal and human forms. It is also possible to recognize a few animals that are associated with the Jain *Tírthanakaras*, e.g., Bull, Horse, Boar, and Goat. Moreover, the fourteenth *Tírthanakara*, Anantanatha, is sometimes associated with the Falcon, and *Vérétraghna* also appears as the *Váregan*-bird.

The twenty-two-*avatar*-scheme enumerates the following:

- 1) Primeval man (*Purusha*), 2) Boar (*varáha*), 3) Nárada, 4) Nara and Naráyána, 5) Kapila, 6) Dattátreya, 7) Yajna, 8) Rishabha,¹⁶¹ 9) Prithu, 10) Fish (*matsya*), 11) Tortiose (*kúrma*), 12) Dhanvan-tari, 13) Mohiní,

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14) Man-Lion (*Nara-simha*), 15) Dwarf (*vámana*), 16) Ráma with the axe (*Parashu-Ráma*), 17) Veda-Vyása, 18) Ráma, 19) Bala-ráma, 20) Krishna, 21) Buddha, 22) Kalkin.

As was seen in Zoroastrianism, each *Saoshyant* was associated with “his own time” (millennium) and the three soteriological mediators after Zarathustra were concentrated to and identified with the *last* two millennia, but the Indian schemes associates a soteriological mediator with *each* age or cycle.¹⁶²

Comparisons and Conclusions

Having reviewed the idea of a chain of prophecy in the Middle Eastern, Iranian and Indian contexts, it should by now be clear that the idea of a chain of prophecy—above defined as “a sequence of religious mediators who operate between divine (supramundane) and earthly (mundane) realms”—is not the exception but rather the rule in some of the world’s great religions. Yet, it has also been shown that in the great Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) no Indian or Iranian figures could be found. Conversely, in the three Indian religions reviewed (Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism) neither Semitic nor Iranian figures could be located. Moreover, in Zoroastrianism no Semitic or Indian figures could be identified, although a few parallels could be noted between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism. Even though it appears as we have three independent religious “strands” (Semitic, Iranian, Indian) it is significant that they all have, nevertheless, developed a family-resemblance of an idea of a chain of prophecy.

If one were to compare which prophets that are the most common in the Semitic strand¹⁶³ with that of the Bahá’í Faith, one would immediately recognize many of the above reviewed religious figures (except Krishna and the Báb). This comparison could be depicted as follows:

The Semitic Strand and the Bahá’í Faith					
Judaism	Christ	Pseudo	Mani	Islám	Bahá’í
		Adam	Adam	Adam	Adam
		Noah	Noah	Noah	Noah
Abraham	Abraham	Abraham	Abraham	Abraham	Abraham
Moses	Moses	Moses		Moses	Moses
	Jesus	Jesus	Jesus	Jesus	Jesus
				Muhammad	Muhammad
			Zarathustra		Zarathustra
			Buddha		Buddha

The only figure that occurs across all the religions in the Semitic strand is Abraham. Jesus appears in all traditions except Judaism. As was mentioned earlier it is noteworthy that neither Adam nor Noah appears in Judaism. Similarly, it is peculiar that Moses does not appear as a prophet in Manichaeism.

The Iranian Strand and the Bahá’í Faith	
Zoroastrianism	Bahá’í
<i>Gay-marctan</i>	(Adam) ¹⁶⁴
Zarathustra Ushedar	Zarathustra
Ushedarmah <i>Saoshyant (Astvatereta)</i>	(Shah Bahráam) ¹⁶⁵

The Indian Strand and the Bahá’í Faith			
Hinduism	Jainism	Buddhism	Bahá’í
Rishabha	Rishabha		
Krishna Buddha		Gautama	Krishna Buddha
Kalkin		Maitreya	(Kalkin/Maitreya) ¹⁶⁶

One major difference, however, between these three strands is that the Semitic and Iranian are predominantly *linear* whereas the Indian is *cyclical*. Moreover, it was also seen that of all the religious contexts reviewed, two religions—Manicheism and the Bahá'í Faith—clearly included prophets/Manifestations of God from *all three* strands.

Thus, Mání includes from the

- *Semitic* strand: Adam, Seth, Enosh, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Christ, Paul
- *Indian* strand: Buddha
- *Iranian* strand: Zarathustra

Similarly, but more extensively, the Bahá'í Faith includes from the

- *Semitic* strand: Adam, Abraham, Daniel, David, Ezekiel, Hud, Isaac, Isaiah, Ishmael, Jacob, Jeremiah, Jesus Christ, Jethro, Job, Joel, John the Baptist, Joseph, Joshua, Lot, Moses, Muhammad, Noah, Sálíh, Solomon, Zachariah
- *Indian* strand: Krishna (Kalkin) and Buddha (Maitreya)
- *Iranian* strand: Zarathustra and the Báb
- *Chinese* strand: Confucius

Although Manichaeism and the Bahá'í Faith draw from similar strands, the emphasis is in both cases clearly on the *Semitic* strand. One striking difference, however, is that the Bahá'í Faith does not include Mání in its chain of prophecy.¹⁶⁷ Another difference is that Bahá'í Faith includes a *fourth* strand—the Chinese—although Confucius is *not* regarded as a Manifestation of God in the Bahá'í Faith.¹⁶⁸

Even though it was stated that we could speak of three independent strands, it is clear that scholars of religion believe that these different traditions have directly or indirectly influenced each other. For example, writing on the influence of Zoroastrianism on Judaism, Duchesne-Guillemin states that:

[T]he influence of Zoroastrianism on the evolution which came to light in Judaism from the time of the Exile onwards and through the manifold contacts with Iran which were to follow. The development in Palestine of the doctrines of Apocalypse, Kingdom of God, Last Judgment, Resurrection, Man and Son of Man, Prince of this World, or Prince of Darkness, and Saviour, was to prepare a milieu capable of receiving and interpreting the message of the life, the word, and the death of Jesus.¹⁶⁹

Similarly, Amanat writes of the “Perso-Mesopotamian melting pot of the formative Islamic age” where “the Mahdí of Muslim eschatology acquired many features of his Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian predecessors.”¹⁷⁰ Amanat thus seems to be in agreement with other scholars of religion who have noticed that the idea of the *Mahdí*¹⁷¹ is part of a greater and assimilated religious heritage where the Iranian tradition of Zoroastrianism and the Semitic traditions¹⁷² have mixed and recycled ideas in a syncretistic fashion. Thus, although we may see the Semitic and Iranian traditions as distinct, we could also, as Hodgson calls it, speak of “the Irano-Semitic tradition.”¹⁷³

Yet, the idea of “the Irano-Semitic tradition” does not explain the development of the idea of a chain of prophecy in an Indian context. On this point Lamb writes that:

All Buddhists accept the phenomenon of Maitreya the future Buddha, who, according to most views, abides in Tusita heaven as a bodhisattva. Early on, Buddhism may have come under the influence of Zoroastrianism. By the beginning of the Christian era the cult of a Buddhist Messiah was widespread.¹⁷⁴

Thus, Lamb suggests a Zoroastrian influence on Buddhism. Although the Zoroastrian view of cosmos is linear, Widengren calls this the “doctrine of cyclic revelation” and he goes much further than Lamb when he states that this doctrine

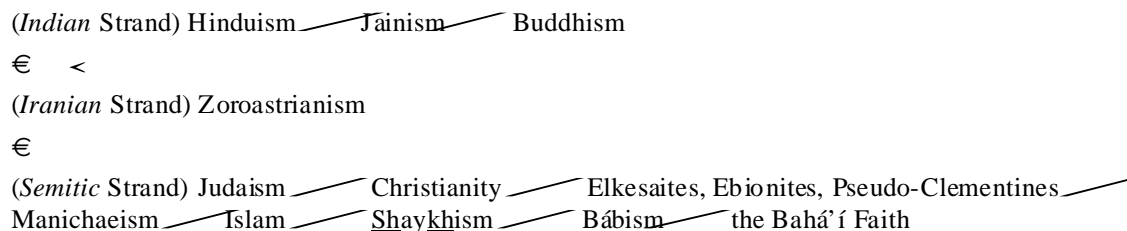
is so intimately bound up with the original Zoroastrian teaching of the four successive saviours, viz. Zarathustra and the three Saoshyants, that its ancient Iranian origin cannot well be challenged . . . And last but not least: the doctrine of cyclic revelation, as an Iranian phenomenon, shows so much resemblance with the Indian avatara speculation that, in all probability, we are able to assume the existence of an ancient Indo-Iranian dogma of revelation as the real background of the doctrine of Mani in this case.¹⁷⁵

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In other words, we may speak not only of “the Irano-Semitic tradition” but of an “Indo-Iranian dogma of revelation.” Buck seems to be in agreement with this when he also refers to the concept of “cyclic revelation”:

The later Elkesaite movement had adopted Jewish-Christian ideas of cyclic revelation which show a strong affinity with the Ebionite-Christian concepts found in the Pseudo-Clementines. It appears from all of this evidence that the doctrine of cyclic revelation itself cyclically recurs, e.g. in the doctrines of Zoroastrianism, Ebionite Christianity, Manichaeism, Islam, and the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, as well as in Buddhist thought and Hindu apocalypse.¹⁷⁶

To oversimplify, a few scholars of religion seem to suggest a pattern of influence in the following manner:¹⁷⁷



In this view the “Indo-Iranian dogma of revelation” lies at the core and eventually influences “the Irano-Semitic tradition.” Such a tradition is clearly expressed by Mání in the Second Century C.E. who is well aware of not only the Semitic and the Iranian strands but the Indian as well. Being a native of Babylon (Mesopotamia/modern Iraq) he was geographically situated between the Semitic and Indian strands. Aware of Zarathustra, the Buddha and the Christ, he claimed to be their fulfillment. Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh, seventeen centuries later, and although a native of Iran, it was in Baghdad, Iraq where he claimed to be the fulfillment of *all* previous prophets and manifestations of God.

Notes

* This revised and edited paper was originally presented as *The Chain of Prophecy: Progressive Revelation as a Theory of Relativity*.

- 1) I certainly hope that scholars of religion who are competent in the various religious traditions mentioned in this paper and in comparative religion one day will study this idea more in depth.
- 2) Lundberg 1996, 2000.
- 3) Etymologically the word “prophet” comes from the Greek *pro-phéta*, meaning “one who declares, an expounder.” Interestingly, the word prophet is etymologically derived from the Indo-Germanic root *BHÁ* (Skeat 1984:415) which is structurally similar to the three radicals in the Arabic *Bahá* “beauty, magnificence, splendor; brilliancy” (Wehr 1976:80).
- 4) Wittgenstein 1953.
- 5) It is noteworthy that Bahá'u'lláh here combines the words “contemplate” and “inward eye.” I ultimately interpret this to be an esoteric or meditative exercise. Although Bahá'u'lláh does not state, “look with thine outward eyes,” I will show that the idea of a chain of prophecy also can be located in various exoteric religious contexts.
- 6) “And when this process of *Progressive Revelation* culminated . . .” *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 74-75, italics added.
- 7) *Kitáb-i-[^]qán* 244.
- 8) *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 313-314.
- 9) *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá* 51, italics added.
- 10) *Some Answered Questions* 124, italics and clarification added.
- 11) *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 15.
- 12) *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 103, italics added, 163; *God Passes By* 10.
- 13) *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 163, italics and clarification added.
- 14) *God Passes By* 100, italics and clarification added.
- 15) *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 114-115.
- 16) From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and New Zealand, December 26, 1941, italics added.
- 17) CF 82, italics added.

- 18) PDC 120.
- 19) These terms are sometimes used synonymously. See *Kitáb-i-`qán* 51, 152; *Gleanings* 48; *Some Answered Questions* 23.
- 20) Ar. *mazhar-i-iláhi*. See *Kitáb-i-`qán* 33; *Gleanings* 26, 50, 59; *Some Answered Questions* 127-128.
- 21) *Gleanings* 26, 49-50. For a more detailed study on this concept see Cole 1982.
- 22) Cole 1982:1; Boykin 1982:15.
- 23) Saiedi 1997.
- 24) See *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 114-115, 103; Lundberg 2000.
- 25) *Gleanings* 48-49, italics added.
- 26) *Gleanings* 55-56.
- 27) See *Kitáb-i-`qán* 216:220.
- 28) *Some Answered Questions* 164-166:149-150.
- 29) Ar. *nabí-bi-istiqlál*.
- 30) *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 361-362, Towfigh 1989:171-74; Schaefer 1995:129.
- 31) *Some Answered Questions* 164-166.
- 32) Ar. *nabí ghayr mustaqill*.
- 33) See e.g., Towfigh 1989:171-74; Schaefer 1995:129
- 34) However, both David and Joseph are accounted as Prophets, Messengers, or “Messengers of the Word of God” in *Kitáb-i-`qán* 51, 255.
- 35) *Kitáb-i-`qán* 7-11; *Some Answered Questions* 47; 165-166, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 197-198, 221-222, 346.
- 36) *Kitáb-i-`qán* 174, italics added; *Gleanings* 20.
- 37) *Kitáb-i-`qán* 14, italics added.
- 38) *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 463.
- 39) *Gleanings* 145, italics added. Cf. *Qur`án* 6:42; 10:46, 16:33; 16:63; 35:19.
- 40) Quoted in *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*:116, italics added.
- 41) For more in-depth analyses of the Bábí religion see e.g., Browne 1918; Amanat 1989.
- 42) For a discussion on the Qá'im/Mahdí in Shí'í Islam see e.g., Sachedina 1981; Halm 1991.
- 43) SB:126, clarification added.
- 44) SB:91, italics added. Cf. SB:89.
- 45) SB:105-106.
- 46) I want to thank Dr. Stephen Lambden for this information.
- 47) Lambden 1992:135-136. Cf. MacEoin 1986:142, footnote 48.
- 48) Lambden (personal communication March, 1997).
- 49) SB:125.
- 50) For more in-depth analyses of Shaykhism see e.g., MacEoin 1979; Rafati 1990.
- 51) Rafati 1990:106, italics added.
- 52) Rafati 1990:106-108.
- 53) *El* “Ismá‘ílís” 196.
- 54) Parrinder 1970:197-98.
- 55) In Shí'í Islam it is especially the “extremist sects” (*ghuluw*) which have not only portrayed Imám ‘Alí as *superior* to the Prophet Muhammad, but have even asserted his apotheosis. See e.g., Moo sa 1988.
- 56) Quoted in MacEoin 1986:103. Cf. Abú Yazíd al-Bistámí’s claim “They said: ‘God has servants instead of Abraham, Moses and Jesus . . .’ He [Abú Yazíd] said: ‘I am all of them.’” See ‘Attár 1905:171; Friedmann 1989:144-45.
- 57) Nicholson 1950:142.
- 58) Nicholson 1950:142ff, clarification added.
- 59) Widen gren 1973:44-45.
- 60) Biljefeld 1969: 17.
- 61) *ER* “Nubúwah” : 2, italics added.

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- 62) *Qur'án* 2:87; 3:84; 40:78.
- 63) *CEI* 1989.
- 64) For a list of the prophets mentioned in the *Qur'án* see e.g., 3:36; 4:161; 6:33; 17:57.
- 65) Askari 1991:96.
- 66) Parrinder 1970:268; Biljefeld 1969:40.
- 67) Zaki 1991:42, 50.
- 68) Zaki 1991:50. See also Nadwi 1979:151-217; Noori 1981; Friedmann 1989:49-82.
- 69) Nadwi 2001, italics added.
- 70) Al-Bukhārī *Sahīh, Kitāb al-manāqib* 18 (vol. 2, p. 390).
- 71) Andrae 1960:107.
- 72) Cited in Widengren 1973:43.
- 73) *ERE* 398. See also Augustine's *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, xix, 3.
- 74) Asmussen 1975:12; Lieu 1985:23, 65.
- 75) Lieu 1985:85.
- 76) *ER* 170.
- 77) Lieu 1985:156, italics added.
- 78) Asmussen 1975:11-12; *ER* Manichaeism 166.
- 79) Erroneously attributed to Clement of Rome, the first of the "Apostolic Fathers" (d. ca. 100 C.E.), and hence the name "Pseudo-Clementines."
- 80) Cf. Matt. 5:3; Luke 4:18, 7:22.
- 81) *EER* 144.
- 82) *ABD* 261.
- 83) *ERE* "Ebionism" 145. See also Andrae 1960:100.
- 84) Schoeps 1969: 70.
- 85) Schoeps 1969: 71.
- 86) italics added. See e.g., Acts 3:22-23; 7:23.
- 87) Mark: 6:14-15; Luke 24:19; John 4:19; 6:14; 7:52.
- 88) Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24.
- 89) See Aune 1983: 124-124, 154, 187. See also Matt. 16:13-20; Mark: 6:14-16; 8:27-30; John 1:19-23.
- 90) Cf. Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-31.
- 91) italics added.
- 92) Niehaus 1995.
- 93) 1 Kings 17-19.
- 94) Matt. 11:10-14 "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. . . . For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John . . . He is the Elijah who was to come."
- 95) Cf. Mark 12:1-9; Luke 20:9-16.
- 96) Cf. Matt. 3:17 "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."
- 97) Matt. 21:33-41; italics and clarifications added. Cf. Neh. 9:26; Matt. 5:12; 23:34; Luke 11:49; Thess. 2:15.
- 98) Aune 1983: 158, 192, italics added.
- 99) Aune 1983: 175-6.
- 100) *EJ* 1160, italics added.
- 101) *EJ* 1170.
- 102) *EJ* 1175.
- 103) *EJ* 1164, italics added.
- 104) *EJ* "Prophets and Prophecy" 1154.
- 105) An acronym of *Torah* (the Law), *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (the Books).
- 106) *EJ* "Prophets and Prophecy" 1151. *UJC* "Prophets and Prophecy" 658.

- 107) *EJ* "Prophets and Prophecy" 1176.
- 108) Nyberg 1937:298, Duchesne-Guillemin 1952:18.
- 109) Boyce in *EI* "Apocalypht" 155.
- 110) *Yasht* 13:94.
- 111) The term *saoshyant* is, according to Nyberg 1937: 258, derived from the verb *sav-*, which also is at the root for the noun *savah* (*savá*) "salvation through the ordeal." The term *saoshyant* could be translated as "the one who provides *savah* (salvation)," in other words, a "saviour." Gnoli *ER* 69 translates *saoshyant* as "future benefactor"
- 112) *Yasna* 50:6. See also Nyberg 1937:181, Ringgren & Ström 1968:197-198.
- 113) Nyberg 1937: 337, my translation.
- 114) *Yasht* 14.
- 115) Nyberg 1937:78.
- 116) Nyberg 1937:82, my translation.
- 117) Nyberg 1937:33, my translation.
- 118) Nyberg (1937:32, 338, 437, my translation; Widengren 1971:275, 268-269.
- 119) Literally "mortal life." See also *ER* "Zoroastrianism" 584.
- 120) *Yashts* 19:86-96 and *Yasna* 46:3.
- 121) Gnoli *ER* 69. See also Gnoli's article in *ER* "Zoroastrianism" 586.
- 122) *Yasht* 19:92-93; Boyce 1984: 90.
- 123) Nyberg 1937:259.
- 124) Gnoli *ER* 69.
- 125) Boyce *EI* "Apocalypht" 156.
- 126) Nyberg 1937:34-35; Boyce 1984:21.
- 127) Nyberg 1937:34-35, my translation.
- 128) According to Boyce 1978:42 the name is derived "after Zoroaster's own words: 'May righteousness be embodied,'" which can be found in *Yasht* 43:16. Gnoli *ER*:586 translates *Astvatereta* as "he who embodies truth."
- 129) Nyberg 1937:32, my translation. See also 341-343.
- 130) Nyberg 1937:259.
- 131) Widengren 1971:268-269, my translation.
- 132) According to the Sri Lankan sources, *Dípavansa* and the *Mahávansa*, the dates Buddha's life can be estimated as 624-544 B.C.E. However, other sources (Chinese and Indian) estimate the dates 448-368 B.C.E. Thus, the discrepancies ranges to up to almost two hundred years! See *ER* 321.
- 133) Parrinder 1970:149.
- 134) Parrinder 1970:150.
- 135) *ER* 327.
- 136) By using simple arithmetic and calculating 500 (incarnations) x 80 years (an expected life-time) would amount to a time frame of a minimum of 40,000 years!
- 137) Parrinder 1970:151.
- 138) Momen 1995:35.
- 139) Parrinder 1970:173, my emphasis. This passage is reminiscent of Lord Krishna's statement in the *Bhagava Gita* 4:5-8.
- 140) Cf. the *Maháavadána Sutta* (Discourse on the Great Legend) and the *Samyutta Nikáya* which mention seven Buddhas (except Maitreya).
- 141) See Parrinder 1970: 157.
- 142) See Lamb 1994: 14.
- 143) Quoted in Lamb 1994:14. Cf. The *Avatansaka Súra* which states that "Within each atom are inconceivably many Buddhas."
- 144) Conze 1954:110-111.
- 145) Lamb 1994:20.
- 146) Parrinder 1970:178.
- 147) Lamb 1994:21, clarification added.
- 148) Parrinder 1970:179.

- 149) Parrinder 1970:180.
- 150) *ER* 535.
- 151) *ER* 535.
- 152) *ER* 535.
- 153) Parrinder 1970:181.
- 154) The *Tírthankaras* are usually only male (according to the *Digambaras*), but the nineteenth, Malli, is a female (according to the *Shvetambaras*).
- 155) For a detailed discussion on the relationship between avatar and incarnation see Parrinder 1970 who has titled his book *Avatar and Incarnation*. Gonda 1960:269 defines an avatar as an “appearance” rather than an incarnation.
- 156) “From a verb *trí*, to cross over, attain, save, with the prefix *ava*, down; and so *ava-trí*, descend into appear, become in carnate.” Parrinder 1970:19. It is interesting here to note that the verb *trí* also can mean “save.” Thus, even from an etymological point of view, to label the *avatars* as “soteriological mediators” appears to be fair.
- 157) See Abegg 1928:39 and Parrinder 1970:20. According to Parrinder 1970:71 even such a late work as the *Harivamsha* “speaks of an incarnation as a ‘manifestation’ (*pradúr bháva*) rather than *avatára*, which is a popular term.” Parrinder 1970:230, 226 further states that “It is a modern Hindu belief that the Avatars are . . . *manifestations of God* in them” or that they are “theophanies, *manifestations of the divine* in visible form.” It is also important to note that not all Hindus believe in the *avatar*-scheme as depicted in the classical texts. Parrinder 1970:100 writes that some of the modern Indian movements, e.g. Prarthana Samáj states that ‘God does not incarnate himself’ and that according to the Árya Samáj ‘the doctrine of *avatáras*, or divine incarnations, is denied’.
- 158) Parrinder 1970:16-17. *Rig Veda* 10: 90.
- 159) Parrinder 1970:20.
- 160) The different lists on the ten-avatar-scheme varies. See e.g., *Mahábhárata* (XII. 389, 104, *EM*), *Váyu Purána*, and the entry on “*Avatára*” in *ER* pp. 14-15.
- 161) Rishabha is the first Jaina *tírthankara*.
- 162) Widengren 1971:268-269.
- 163) Omitting Shaykhism and Bábism due to lack of space, but still noting that both of these enumerate the identical prophets as Islam above.
- 164) As was noted earlier *Gayó-maretan* was referred to as “primordial man,” Adam is also sometimes, e.g., *Promulgation of Universal Peace*:229, seen in the Bahá’í Faith as the progenitor of mankind.
- 165) Shoghi Effendi *God Passes By*:94-95 claims that Bahá’u’lláh is the fulfillment of the Zoroastrian expected savior Sháh Bahram. For a more in-depth analysis of this relationship see Buck 1998.
- 166) Shoghi Effendi *God Passes By*:94 claims that Bahá’u’lláh is the fulfillment of the Hindu expected savior Kalkin (“reincarnation of Krishna”) and the Buddhist Maitreya (“fifth Buddha”). For a more in-depth analysis of this relationship see Buck 1981, 1986.
- 167) One explanation of this could be that Manichaeism was a religion that ultimately “failed.”
- 168) “Confucius was not a Prophet. It is quite correct to say he is the founder of a moral system and a great reformer.” *Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand*, p. 41.
- 169) Duchesne-Guillemin 1952:2.
- 170) Amanat 1989:2.
- 171) From *al-Mahdí* (the guided one) and which refers, according to the twelfth *Imám* of the twelver Shí’ah, Muhammad b. Hasan al-’Askari (b. 869), also known as Muhammad al-Mahdí. The *Mahdí* is also known as *al-Qá’im* (the one who will arise, the ariser), *al-Muntazár* (the awaited one), *al-Qá’im al-Muntazár* (the awaited Qá’im), *al-Hujja* (the Proof), *Sáhib al-Amr* (Master of Command), *Sáhib al-Zamán* (Master of the Age). Other frequent terms that are related with the reappearance of the Mahdí are *qiyám* (rise), *qiyáma* (resurrection), *zuhúr* (appearance, emergence), *raj’a* (return) and *khurúj* (coming forth). See Sachedina 1981; Halm 1991; *EI* “AL-MAHDS.”
- 172) The religion of Mání and the subsequent development of Manichaeism was in itself a great example of a highly syncretistic religion, combining elements from both the Judeo-Christian and Zoroastrian traditions. See e.g., Widengren 1945, 1973; Lieu 1985, 1994.
- 173) Hodgson 1974.
- 174) Lamb 1994:31.
- 175) Widengren 1945:66.
- 176) Buck 1981: footnote 9, emphasis original.
- 177) However, the influence of the idea of the chain of prophecy must not be seen as a *direct* and unilinear process of influence. Fowler 1982:43 makes an important point in this context: “In generic resemblance, the direct line of descent is not so dominant

that the genre theory can be identified with source criticism. We need to leave room for polygenesis . . . and for more remote influences . . . Codes often come to a writer indirectly, deviously, remotely, at haphazard, rather than by simple chronological lines of descent.”

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The Wronged One: Shí'í Narrative Structure in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Visitation
for Mullá Husayn
by William McCants

To understand the significance of the martyrdom of Husayn for the Shí'í community and the religious literature it occasioned, one must look at the accounts of his pitiful death following his betrayal by his supporters in Kufah; his decision born of indomitable will to stand alone and unaided, save for a small band of followers, against an army of 5,000; the thirst which afflicted his family; their subsequent slaughter at the hands of his enemies; the pathetic scene of Husayn clutching his murdered son in his arms; and his final death and humiliation at the hands of Shamir, who placed his head on a pike and carried it to Yazíd, the Umayyad Caliph. It was a gruesome parade, the marching dirge of which was crafted from the wails of the few women left to mourn the dead.

Some historians might question the carefully constructed narrative of the events and cast suspicion upon the act of memory colored by more sectarian concerns. This, thankfully, is not the province of our inquiry. Rather, it is precisely the structure of this account that demands our attention, as it is the basis of later devotional activities. Indeed, the account itself may be seen as a devotional act, a sacralizing narrative played out again and again in commemorations of Husayn's martyrdom in the Shí'í world and in private visitations to his grave.

The central position of Husayn's martyrdom in the formation of Shí'í identity can find no greater parallel in religious writing than the Passion of Jesus of Nazareth. Both men, as portrayed in later accounts, were betrayed by their followers. Both were left to die alone and abandoned, pierced with wounds and mourned by a few pious women. Death, however, was merely a vehicle for victory in both narratives, granting lasting influence to the men who had offered up their lives for Truth and thereby demonstrated the falsity of their persecutors' acts. This core narrative of betrayal, abandonment, suffering, martyrdom, and victory forms the emotional center of both Christianity and Shí'í Islam.

These observations, of course, are not original and have been explicitly expounded by contemporary scholars of religion. What has not been heretofore discerned, however, is the important role that these *topoi* play in the narrative structure of the works of Bahá'u'lláh. One may even argue that they are the defining structure underlying most of His epistles and homilies. Proving such an assertion, however, is not possible in a single article. Therefore, I have chosen to begin the study of this narrative structure in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets by focusing on a single devotional text, a Tablet of Visitation for Mullá Husayn, and its Shí'í antecedents. After a comparative analysis, I will offer some tentative observations about the importance of this narrative structure in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

To understand the kinship between Bahá'u'lláh's Writings and Shí'í narratives of the martyred Imám, we must first examine the structure of devotional texts used during visitations of Husayn's grave. As will be seen, these devotions parallel the structure of the narrative of his martyrdom. Although some elements of the narrative may be more pronounced in one text, or absent in another, all of these texts generally conform to the following outline (the elements of which will be indicated in the text, following, in <angle brackets>):

List of Elements:

1. Praise and greetings for previous Prophets, Muhammad and finally his primogeny, particularly the Imáms.
2. The virtues and station of Husayn or the other Imáms
3. The struggling (*mujáhadá*) of Husayn in the path of God
4. The patience of Husayn during his afflictions
5. Loneliness of Husayn
 - a. The abandonment of Husayn and the lack of supporters
 - b. Promise of God's aid and assistance, which will lead to ultimate victory
 - c. Promise of revenge on Husayn's enemies

- 6 The suffering of Husayn
- 7 The weeping of his followers, the heavens and the angels at his martyrdom
- 8 The recognition of Husayn’s spiritual authority or authority of the Imáms (*wiláya*)
9. The recognition of the purity of the Imám
10. The supplicant asks to be numbered among Husayn’s companions
11. The supplicant asks to be counted among those that were martyred with Husayn
12. The supplicant asks to be accounted among the faithful
13. The cursing (*la’ñ*) of Husayn’s enemies
14. A final prayer (*du‘á*) to Husayn which consists of:
 - a. Asking Husayn for intercession (*shifá‘a*)
 - b. Asking for blessings and forgiveness for supplicant and for the supplicant’s parents and family

Intermingled with the prayers of visitation are a series of genuflections that are composed of the recital of “Alláh-u-Akbar” (*takbír*), the raising of the hands in supplication (*qunút*), bending at the waist and placing the hands upon the knees (*rak‘a*), prostration (*sajda*), and, in some texts, the recitation of Qur’anic verses. These genuflections indicate that the recital of the prayers of visitation are not only an inner, spiritual act, but also a performance, or a series of movements that embody and reinforce the narrative of the text and highlight the renewal of the covenant between the supplicant and the martyred Imám.

In order to substantialize this adumbration of the various prayers of visitation for Husayn, I have further summarized two basic Shí‘í devotional texts below. I have chosen these texts because they are different enough to illustrate the provisional nature of the outline I have provided above, but they also contain the basic themes common to most devotional texts of the genre. Further, they are fairly far apart in time and differ in authorship so as to give an indication of the maintenance of these themes throughout Shí‘í history.

The first sample is from a fourth-century (AH) text recorded in the *Kámil az-Ziyárát* by Ja‘far b. Muhammad b. Qulawayya al-Qummí, a Shí‘í Muslim who died in 368 AH. The text, which is purported to be related from the sixth Imám, Ja‘far as-Sádiq, begins with a *salám* (greetings and blessings) upon Husayn, the angels, who are identified as “they who are drawing nigh unto God” (*al-muqarríbún*), and the Muslims. <Element 1, above> The supplicant then affirms that Husayn was righteous in his beliefs and is God’s blood-ransom among humanity (*thár alláh*). <Element 2> This ransom can only be redeemed through belief in the Imáms (*awliyá’*). <8> The supplicant then asks to be endeared to the Imáms both in this world and the next.

At this point, the supplicant walks a little, says “Alláh-u-Akbar” seven times, and stands before the grave of Husayn. He then praises God and asks to be counted among Husayn’s party (*wafd*). <Element 10> After this, the supplicant beseeches God to curse (*la‘ana*) the enemies of Husayn. <13> The supplicant then asks to be counted among the faithful, <12> after which he says “Alláh-u-Akbar” five times and walks a little.

Again, the supplicant asks to be numbered among the faithful and to be counted among those who were with Husayn and martyred with him. <10,11,12> At this point, the supplicant says “Alláh-u-Akbar” three times and then puts both of his hands on the grave. The supplicant then calls to mind the purity of Husayn and his status as the ransom of God. <2> After this, he puts both cheeks on the Imám’s grave and then seats himself and mentions to God that which he desires. After this, the supplicant returns to his previous position and puts both hands on his legs, whereupon he praises the Imám and acknowledges that God will kill those who killed him. <5c>

The supplicant then turns to Husayn’s son, ‘Alí, and mentions whatsoever he desires. The supplicant then stands facing the graves of the martyrs and gives them greetings (*salám*) and recognizes them as the most exalted of all martyrs. <1,2> After this, the supplicant places the grave between his hands and prays for that which is seemly for him. The supplicant then says that he is approaching God through Husayn, after which he says “Alláh-u-Akbar” eleven times without pause, walks a short way and then stands facing the Qibla. <14a> The supplicant then praises God and calls to mind Husayn’s martyrdom and speaks directly to Husayn of God’s promise to assist him and testifies before Husayn that God has been faithful to His pledge and destroyed his enemies. <5b/c>

After this, the supplicant says “Alláh-u-Akbar” seven times, walks a little, and then faces the grave of Husayn. The supplicant then testifies that Husayn was obedient to God’s commands and struggled (*jáhada*) in

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His path (*sabíl*).<3> After this, he recounts God's cursing of those who forsook Husayn and those who killed him.<13> Finally, the supplicant testifies to God's *wiláya* as passed down through the Imáms and beseeches God to curse those who disobeyed Husayn and spilled the blood of the Imáms.<8,13>¹

The structure of the prayer of visitation closely resembles that of the narrative arrangement of the story of the Imám's martyrdom, and is, in fact, a symbolic reconstruction of those events so that the supplicant might identify himself with the suffering of the martyred Imám and reaffirm his ultimate redemption in the hearts of the faithful. Further, the text also demonstrates the centrality of the *wiláya* of the Imám and his liminal position as a gateway of divine forgiveness and pardon.

These elements are even more strikingly apparent in a prayer of visitation attributed to the twelfth Imám and recorded in Majlísi's voluminous *Bihár al-Anwár*. The text of the prayer begins with a *salám* upon the prophets mentioned in the Qur'án, both major and minor, and upon the Holy Family (i.e. Muhammad, 'Alí, Fátima, Husayn and Hasan).<1> Greetings and blessings are also given to the angels that weep for Husayn and circumambulate his grave and to the signs of physical grief expressed on Husayn's behalf.<1> In a particularly moving passage, the supplicant states in the cadence of beautiful rhymed prose (*saj'*):

Peace be upon thee [Husayn] from he who is aware of thy sanctity [hurmatika] and is faithful to thine authority [wiláyatika] and is drawing nigh unto God through thy love and is free of (the sins) of thine enemies.<1,8> Greetings from his heart, lacerated through thy wounds, and from his tears shed at mention of thee. It is the greeting of the distraught, afflicted one who, if he had been with thee in Karbila, would have shielded thee with his own self from the blades of the swords and expended his last life breath for you, and struggled by thy side [jáhada bayn yadayka] and assisted thee [nasaraka] against whomsoever oppressed thee.<3> He would have offered up his spirit and his body, his kin and his possessions, as a ransom for thee. Verily, his spirit is a sacrifice [fidá'] for thy spirit and his family is (offered up as) a shield for thy family.<10,11>

However, the passage of time hath hindered me and that which hath been destined hath prevented me from aiding thee and I was unable to fight [muhárib] against whomsoever fought against thee and displayed enmity towards thee. Therefore, I lament (thy passing) morning and eve and weep for thee, exchanging tears for blood in sorrow over thee and regret for that which hath befallen thee, grieving until I die through the anguish of the wounded one . . . <5a>²

The supplicant then recounts the virtues of Husayn, stating that he was an observant Muslim and struggled in God's path.<2,3> Further, his relationship to the Holy Family is detailed and the supplicant testifies that he faithfully carried out God's trust.<2> The patience of Husayn during his afflictions is then described and the supplicant bears witness that he assisted the religion of God and made it victorious through his efforts.<4, 5b> At this point the supplicant praises the station of the Imám and recounts his suffering at the hands of his enemies, reemphasizing his fortitude and solitude in the midst of adversity.<2,4,6> The wailing of the women in Husayn's party after his death is recounted, as his head is raised aloft upon the point of a spear.<6,7> The supplicant then states that the suffering of Islam and Muhammad are due to Husayn's murder, which brought about the weeping of the heavens and the angels.<7>

After testifying to Husayn's sufferings, the *du'á'* portion of the prayer of visitation begins. The supplicant first asks for entrance to paradise through the intercession (*shifá'a*) of Muhammad and his family and implores them for favor and bounties, blessings and forgiveness.<14a> At this point in the prayer, there are a series of genuflections, consisting of two *rak'as* accompanied by a specified Qur'ánic Súra. The first part of the *shaháda* (the Muslim creedal statement of belief) is then recited: "There is no god but God." The supplicant then affirms his belief in God and His prophets and asks Him to bless the Holy Family and the Twelve Imáms. After this, he asks for blessings through the Imám Husayn, beseeching God for aid and assistance.<14a> The supplicant then affirms his weakness and God's power and acknowledges his personal waywardness. This acknowledgement is followed by a supplication to God through Husayn to grant forgiveness to the supplicant, his parents and all the believers, both living and dead.<14a/b>

At the end of the prayer, there are further genuflections, after which God is asked for blessings. The supplicant then prostrates upon the tomb and gives a final *salám* to Husayn. Once he has done this, the supplicant may then say a private prayer for himself, his parents and for whatsoever else he may desire.<14b>³

Raised as a Twelver Shí‘í Muslim, Bahá’u’lláh would have had knowledge of the various prayers for visitation of the Imáms and been familiar with the general outlines of Husayn’s martyrdom as performed during ‘Áshúrá reenactments commemorating his death. Therefore, it is not surprising that this reverence for the Imám Husayn is present in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh. What is surprising is the extent to which the narrative structure of Husayn’s death, as embodied in histories and devotional texts associated with it, permeates the Writings and the identity of Bahá’u’lláh. For Him, the narrative of Husayn’s suffering was made flesh and reenacted in His Person.

To illustrate this point, we will focus on a single text that neatly captures the narrative structure of the visitation prayers for the Imám Husayn and ties together a number of common elements found throughout Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. The text is a Tablet of Visitation written by Bahá’u’lláh for Mullá Husayn, the first person to believe in the mission of Sayyid ‘Alí Muhammad, the Báb.

Throughout His prophetic career, the Báb wrote a number of Tablets of Visitation (*ziyaratnáma*) for the Imáms and his followers. In the early days of His ministry, He wrote a Tablet of Visitation for the Imám ‘Alí and later wrote one for all of the Imáms known as the “Ziyára jámi ‘a al-kabíra.” The Báb also wrote a number of *ziyaratnámas* for the martyrs of Tabarsí and one for Fátima.⁴ In the Persian Bayán, the Báb limited tomb visitation (*ziyára*) to Himself and the 18 Letters of the Living, whom He regarded as the return of Muhammad, Fátima, the twelve Imáms and the four gates (with Himself as the “Primal Point”).⁵ In Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet of Visitation for Mullá Husayn, we find a confluence of all of these trends: a *ziyaratnáma* for one of the martyrs of Tabarsí who was regarded as the return of Muhammad.

The recipient of the Tablet, Varaqatu’l-Firdaws (“The Leaf of Paradise”), was the sister of Mullá Husayn and distinguished in her own right as an early believer in the Báb and as a learned companion of Táhirih, as evinced in the following account by her husband, the scholar Skaykh Abú Turáb of Qazvín:

“I married her three years ago in Kerbelá. She was then but an indifferent scholar even in Persian, but now she can expound texts from the Kur’án and explain the most difficult questions and most subtle points of the doctrine of the Divine Unity in such wise that I have never seen a man who was her equal in this time, or in readiness of apprehension. These gifts she has obtained by the blessing of His Holiness the Supreme and through converse with Her Holiness the Pure [Táhirih] (upon whom be the splendour of God!). I have seen in her a patience and resignation rare even in the most self-denying men, for during these years, though I have no sent her a single diúnár for her expenses, and she has supported herself only with the greatest difficulty, she has never uttered a word; and now that she has come to Teherán she refrains altogether from speaking of the past, and though, in accordance with the wishes of Jenáb-i-Bábu’l-Báb, she now desires to proceed to Khurásán, and has literally nothing to put on save the one well-worn dress which she wears, she never asks for clothes or traveling-money, but ever seeks reasonable excuses wherewith to set me at my ease and prevent me from feeling ashamed. Her purity, chastity, and virtue are boundless, and during all this while no unprivileged person hath so much as heard her voice.”⁶

Ishráq Khávarí adds a few more details to our scanty knowledge of Varaqatu’l-Firdaws’ life:

The young, respected sister [bíbí kúchak-i-hamshírih] of Jináb-i-Mullá Husayn, the Báb al-Báb, who was surnamed “The Leaf of Paradise” [varaqat al-firdaws]. She accompanied her brother and mother to Karbila, where she married the well-known Shaykh Abú Turáb. After the raising of the call [the declaration of the Báb], she became a believer in the blessed Cause and was among the companions of Táhirih. She accompanied Táhirih to Iran, and, after a brief stay in Qazvín and Tehran, she went to Khorásán and stayed in Mashhad. After hearing of the martyrdom of her brother at Fort Tabarsí, she left Mashhad with her mother for Bashrúiyih, where she provided service and resided in great difficulty. After a short period of time, she set out for ‘Ishqábád to offer (her) customary services until the time of her death.⁷

The key to understanding Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet of Visitation for Mullá Husayn is the multivalent persona of “Husayn” who is explicitly or obliquely referred to throughout the text. On one level, it is an allusion to Mullá Husayn, the first person to believe in the Báb. On another, it evokes the image of the Imám Husayn. On yet another, the persona refers to Bahá’u’lláh Himself, Mírzá Husayn ‘Alí. The two latter personae are particularly significant, as Bahá’u’lláh’s spiritual affinity for and identification with His namesake, which He often mentions in a number of Tablets, is beyond dispute.⁸ He may have also obliquely identified Himself with the Imám

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in many Tablets by referring to Himself as “the Wronged One” (*al-mathlúm*), an allusion to Husayn as the Wronged Martyr (*al-mathlúm ash-shahíd*). Bahá’u’lláh seems to allude to this equivalence in the opening passage of the Tablet:

This is a Book by the Wronged One, Who hath been named “the Glorious” [al-bahá’] in the kingdom of eternity [malakút al-baqá’], and “the Exalted, the Most High” [al-‘Alfí al-a ‘lá] in the dominion of loftiness [jabarút al-‘Alá’]. In the Unseen World [láhút al-‘amá’] He is known by all of the beautiful Names of God and in the world below [ard al-anshá’] He is known as Husayn, yet most of the people are wrapped in veils and idle fancies [wahn ‘athím].⁹

As in the Shí’í prayers of visitation for the Imám Husayn, Bahá’u’lláh begins the Tablet by mentioning the prophets and holy ones of old. However, He breaks with tradition by not only identifying Himself with their suffering, but by identifying Himself as their return.

Tellingly, the blur of the shifting identities in the Tablet is mirrored grammatically with the shift from third person singular, to second person singular, to first person singular, and finally to first person plural, all within the space of five lines:

Again He was slain as one oppressed upon the plain of Karbila and with Him they martyred those whom God hath related unto His Own sanctified and radiant Self, until such time that they cut off His head and banished His family [ahlahu] and paraded them throughout the land [dárúhum fí al-balád]. Likewise the hosts of the evil ones condemned Him and once again suspended Him in the air and He was martyred in the path of God, the Help in Peril, the All-Powerful, the Omnipotent. Once again Thou wert imprisoned in the land of Tá for four months, as is well-known, and the Pen of the Worlds [qalam al-‘álamín] is unable to recount that which befell Thee. After that they removed Me from the prison and exiled Me, along with my family, from the lands (of my birth) [al-awtán] until We entered Iraq and abided therein.

The next portion of the Tablet even more strongly echoes the visitation texts for the Imám Husayn. Bahá’u’lláh begins by recounting His suffering at the hands of the oppressors, even though He was solely occupied with spreading the glad-tidings amongst the people. Only God protected Him from their machinations and granted Him victory over His enemies, even though He was alone and unaided. In response to His loneliness and suffering, the inmates of heaven weep and the maids of heaven mourn his plight.

Like the visitation texts for the Imám Husayn, Bahá’u’lláh also dwells upon the spiritual station of Mullá Husayn. Here, there are parallels in tone as well as structure, as Mullá Husayn is praised in terms that were reserved for the Imáms in Shí’í Islam. At this juncture, Bahá’u’lláh refers to the station of the first believer in the Báb by his name, Husayn:

[T]hrough which the standards of ascendancy hath been manifested and the Sun of grace hath shone forth and the moon of bounty hath shed its splendor and the Ancient Beauty hath been established upon the Throne of His Name, the Exalted, the Most Great. Through it the Kingdom of Names hath been raised up and the Embodiments [hayákil] of the Divine Attributes and the Temple [haykal] of holiness hath been adorned with the ornament of His Name, the Most Ancient. Through it the Lord of Command [sultán al-amr] hath encompassed all created things and the Sun of bounty hath shone forth upon all beings. By means of this Name the two great rivers have flowed through the Twin Exalted Names [al-ismayn al-‘áyayn]. [304]

Surprisingly, Bahá’u’lláh characterizes Mullá Husayn in terms that closely mirror his descriptions of Manifestations of God that are found in other Tablets:

Visit Him before (thou visiteth) Me inasmuch as He was sent down [nuzzila] at that time from the dominion of God [jabarút alláh], the Holy, the Most Exalted, the All-Wise, the Omniscient. [305]

Mullá Husayn is also referred to as “the Dayspring of Names and their Fountain-Head and the Dawning-place of the Divine Attributes and their Depository” (305), and his resting place is called the “Court of Paradise, the place where the First Name (*ism al-awwal*) is buried, which God hath made the tomb (*mashhad*) of His Temple, the Most Holy, the All-Powerful, the Luminous” (305). As witnessed in the Tablets of Visitation by the Báb for the Letters of the Living, we have here one of the few instances in the Writings of Baha’u’llah of the expansion of the theophany to include notable believers.

After praising Mullá Husayn’s station, Bahá’u’lláh informs Varáqatu’l-Firdaws of the various genuflections and repetitions of the names of God that are part of the visitation ritual. Like the visitation texts for the Imáms, these genuflections and repetitions are integral parts of the communion with the Imám and a means of obtaining divine grace, as evinced in the following passage:

Praise God, thy Lord [say “Alláh-u-Akbar”], nineteen times and at each instance of praise, God shall open one of the doors of Rizvan upon thy face and waft the sweet savors of the All-Glorified [as-subhán] unto thee from the direction of Paradise. (305)

Finally, Bahá’u’lláh ends the Tablet with a prayer (*du‘á’*) to be said by the supplicant. The prayer begins with a testament to the power and authority of the Báb, and then again enumerates the lofty station of Mullá Husayn. Since the Tablet has been translated in full, I will not quote the passages glorifying the station of the first believer in the Báb.

After testifying to the station of Mullá Husayn, the supplicant then bears witness to his suffering and his struggle (*mujáhada*) in the path of God. Paralleling both the visitation prayers for the Imám Husayn and Bahá’u’lláh’s own words about himself at the beginning of the Tablet, the supplicant asserts that through God’s aid, Mullá Husayn helped bring about the manifestation of “the testimony of God and His proof, the power of God and His omnipotence, the majesty of God and His grandeur, and His sovereignty over all created things. . . .” (307) In language identical to that of the visitation prayers for the Imám Husayn, the supplicant blesses those who have fought with (*muhárabá*) Mullá Husayn against the enemies of God (presumably at Fort Shaykh Tabarsí) and recognizes his authority (*wiláya*). Further, the companions of Mullá Husayn are called the Party of God (*hizbu’lláh*), just as the companions of Imám Husayn are called the *wafd’u’lláh* (party, or group of God). Similarly, the trials and tribulations of Mullá Husayn are recounted, which are accompanied by the weeping of the denizens of heaven. Finally, in a most stunning parallel with the Shí’í visitation texts, the curse (*la’na*) of God is invoked against Mullá Husayn’s enemies.

As in most of the Shí’í prayers found in the visitation texts, the supplicant ends by asking God for the forgiveness of sins through “Husayn,” but in this case it is Mullá Husayn. The believer also asks Mullá Husayn and the martyrs of Fort Shaykh Tabarsí for intercession [*istishfá’*] with God.

When we compare the elements of this Tablet of Visitation with the outline of the structure of Shí’í devotional texts detailed above, we find that it clearly shares a formal pattern with the Imámí Shí’í prayers of visitation for the Imám Husayn. Not only is the flow of the narrative structure the same, but also the precise language used to describe Husayn’s martyrdom and ultimate triumph is appropriated by Bahá’u’lláh.

Significantly, this Tablet was not composed in the early days of Bahá’u’lláh’s ministry, where we could expect to find many of these structural elements which would be familiar to his immediate Shí’í/Bábí audience. However, the Tablet was written during Bahá’u’lláh’s exile in ‘Akká. So why would Bahá’u’lláh employ such a clearly Shí’í form in this devotional text so late in his ministry?

I believe it is due to the central importance of the narrative of Husayn’s martyrdom in the self-conception of Bahá’u’lláh. The suffering and loneliness of Husayn is the narrative that Bahá’u’lláh most strongly identified with throughout His life, going so far as to claim to be the return of the Imám Husayn in physical retelling of the Shí’í narrative of the Imám’s martyrdom. Further, these topoi, as arranged in the narrative structure of Shí’í histories and prayers associated with Husayn’s death, form the underlying pattern of many of Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablets to believers. Frequently, Bahá’u’lláh recounts in a single Tablet His patience during His afflictions at the hands of His enemies, relying solely upon God. The heavens weep and the angels sigh at His suffering, which He bore alone for the redemption of the world. Finally, ultimate victory is promised through the aid of God and the believers. Bahá’u’lláh will then write a prayer to be recited by the believers, beseeching God through Him for forgiveness and pardon, and asking to be accounted among the faithful.

The assertion that the Shí’í narrative of the martyrdom of Husayn is the master structure through which Bahá’u’lláh views His own life and patterns His writings is a broad one and to fully demonstrate the validity of this argument would require an entire monograph. I hope, however, that this paper will serve as a catalyst for a more detailed examination of one of the principle structural elements in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and its antecedents in Shí’í Islam.

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Tablet of Visitation for Mullá Husayn*

[p. 301] This Súra of Visitation [*súrat az-ziyára*] hath been sent down from the dominion of grace [*jabarút al-fadl*] on behalf of the First Name of God [*li-ism alláh al-awwal*] in order that the adoring one [*qánitat al-kubra*] and they who have believed in God and His verses may visit him by its means. They, verily, are of those who have attained.

He is the Powerful, the All-Mighty, the Exalted [*al-‘Alíy*], the All-Glorious [*al-abhá*]!

This is a Book by the Wronged One, Who hath been named “the Glorious” [*al-bahá*] in the kingdom of eternity [*malakút al-baqá*], and “the Exalted, the Most High” [*al-‘Alíy al-a‘á*] in the dominion of loftiness [*jabarút al-‘Alá*]. In the Unseen World [*láhút al-‘amá*] He is known by all of the beautiful Names of God and in the world below [*ard al-anshá*] He is known as Husayn, yet most of the people are wrapped in veils and idle fancies [*wahm ‘athím*]. None can recount that which hath befallen Him save God, the King, the Exalted, the Great. At one time He was brutally afflicted by Cain and was slain in the path of God and ascended unto Him as one oppressed. Such was the state of affairs in days gone by, as God hath known and born witness. At another time He was sorely tried at the hands of Nimrod and thrown into the fire. God made the fire as a light and mercy for Him and He, verily, doth protect His servants who have drawn nigh unto Him. Once again He was persecuted by Pharaoh and that which befell Him hath caused the hearts of the devoted ones to burn. Again, He was suspended upon the cross and ascended unto God, the Mighty, the Beautiful. Once more He was afflicted by Abu Jahl and by them who rose up against Him in dissension from among the people of hypocrisy. They inflicted upon Him that which He hath not mentioned in the Qur’án [*má lá yadhkuru bi-bayán*] and the Self of the Merciful was a witness thereunto and knew that which befell Him. Again He was slain as one oppressed upon the plain of Karbila and with Him they martyred those whom God hath related unto His Own sanctified and radiant Self, until such time that they cut off His head and [p. 302] banished His family [*ahlahu*] and paraded them throughout the land [*dárúhum fí al-balád*]. Likewise the hosts of the evil ones condemned Him and once again suspended Him in the air and He was martyred in the path of God, the Help in Peril, the All-Powerful, the Omnipotent. Once again Thou wert imprisoned in the land of Tá for four months, as is well-known, and the Pen of the Worlds [*qalam al-‘álamín*] is unable to recount that which befell Thee. After that they removed Me from the prison and exiled Me, along with my family, from the lands (of my birth) [*al-awtán*] until We entered Iraq and abided therein. None can recount that which befell us in that land at the hands of them who were created by My command. At every moment the shafts of the seditious were hurled [*ramy an-nifáq*], even though We concealed [*satarná*] the Cause and announced the glad-tidings [*mubashshir*] amidst the servants, calling them unto God, the All-Mighty, the Beautiful, until all of the religious communities [*kull al-milal*] rose up against Me with all of (their) might [*kull al-hayl*]. Truly, I was alone and betook myself to confront the enemies [*muqábilat al-a‘dá*] and My Lord caused Me to triumph inasmuch as I was obedient unto Him [*kuntu mustatí‘an ‘alayhi*] until He established [*haqqaqqa*] the Cause of God through His Words and thwarted the designs of those who join partners with God. Through that the fire of hatred was kindled in the breasts of those who profess faith in the Point of the Bayán. Likewise they allowed their souls to be seduced and Satan extolled their deeds [*zayyana lahum ash-shaytán ‘a‘málahum*] and they were among the heedless. I swear by God! There hath befallen me from those (people) that which hath befallen no one else. Wherefore the eyes of the helpless [*al-qásirát*] wept over me in the chambers (of heaven) and the hearts of the sincere ones cried out and behind them wept the eye of God, the Sovereign, the Omnipotent, the Exalted, the Wise. The ears of Him Whom God hath made victorious heareth the clamor of all created things and their lamentation in these days on account of that which befell Us at the hands of those who acknowledged God in His First Manifestation then disbelieved in Him after He came unto them in the Latter Beauty [*jamál ukhrá*], the Sovereign, the Most Manifest. Verily, We (dwelt) among them and among those who disbelieved among the religious communities of previous times, until [p. 303] the Sun of tribulation shone forth from the horizon of the Divine Decree and the judgment of exile came to pass according to that which hath been set down in the holy and preserved Tablets.

* This is a provisional translation for presentation and discussion at 'Irfán Colloquia. It is not to be reproduced or further distributed in any form or medium.

By the one true God! I arose to confront [*muqábila*] the enemies during the days when the hearts of the mystic knowers were perturbed and the pillars of every soul quaked, and those who were among us and those who professed Thy oneness quivered in fright [*iqsha'arra julúd*], until the hosts of aid and assistance descended from the dominion of God [*jabarút alláh*], the Help in Peril, the Mighty, the Great. He protected Me through the Truth and assisted Me with the angels of heaven and earth and the invisible hosts of (all) the worlds. We left the city with the ornament of Him (by) whom the wisdom of the wise and the hearts of the mystic knowers become bewildered. In every city the Ancient Beauty passed, the necks of they who glorify God [*al-mutak - abbirín*] were bowed in submission in the presence of His Manifestation. In every spot He came to, the necks of those who profess the unity of God and they who join partners with Him were (both) bowed low, until we came to this prison. God is aware of that which we endured at the hands of them who cherished ill-will in their hearts against this Youth, as if they lay in ambush upon a place of malice [*marsad al-ghill li-min al-muntathirín*]. Not a moment hath passed save that the calumnies of the darts of discord were hurled by the hosts of the perfidious. I swear by God! At all times I am slain by the swords of hatred, as the tongue of God, the Exalted, the Most High, hath born witness. The people are wrapped [*kunnina*] in great heedlessness and dissension. If the people will sanctify their ears, they, verily, shall hear at this time that which their Lord, the All-Glorious [*al-abhá*] is crying out in the realms above and shall be of those who harken. However, they are veiled [*ihtajaba*] from that which the Tongue of the Ancient of Days is saying in the dominion of utmost sorrow [*jabarút al-aghmam*] and they are of those who are heedless. They rose up against us in such wise that they have condemned Me to death without clear proof [*bayyina*] from God and a great Book. Verily, the hosts of (divine) aid and assistance were sent down again and again and God protected Me through them and made Me to speak forth with His remembrance and made Me manifest through His sovereignty and made Me to shine forth with the lights [p. 304] of the holiness of His grandeur and speak with the praise of His Own Self, the Exalted, the Most Great. Such is that which hath been decreed for us and we have recounted it truthfully that perchance the people might be numbered amongst those that have apprehended the truth.

O leaf of Paradise [*waraqat al-firdaws*]! When this radiant and resplendent Tablet hath reached thee, rise from thy seat and take it with the hand of submission [*yad al-khudú*], then inhale from it the fragrance of God, thy Lord and the Lord of all the worlds. Call to mind, then, my misfortunes which have been revealed in it that thou mayest be (numbered) among those women in the Tablets who make mention of God, the Help in Peril, the All-Mighty, the Omnipotent. Teach, then, the Cause of thy Lord among those women who are in thy company and among those men who are guided by the guidance of the Spirit [*hidáyat ar-rúh*] and accounted among the well-assured.

Drink with healthy relish, O leaf of Paradise, inasmuch as the breezes of the Spirit have wafted unto thee and attracted thee unto the Egypt of the Divine Presence, the spot of the recognition [*'irfán*] of thy Lord, the Almighty, the Peerless. Thou hast drunk from the chalice of the mercy of thy Lord and attained unto that which none in all the worlds have attained. Therefore, render thanks unto thy Lord, then raise thy hands in supplication [*uqnutí*], and then bend down with thy hands resting on thy knees [*irka'í*], and take hold of the Book of God through His power. Verily, it is a mighty Book [*kitáb 'athím*].

Well is it with thee inasmuch as God hath related thee unto his [Mullá Husayn's] name through which the standards of ascendancy have been manifested and the Sun of grace hath shone forth and the moon of bounty hath shed its splendor and the Ancient Beauty hath been established upon the Throne of His Name, the Exalted, the Most Great. Through it the Kingdom of Names hath been raised up and the Embodiments [*hayákil*] of the Divine Attributes and the Temple [*haykal*] of holiness have been adorned with the ornament of His Name, the Most Ancient. Through it the Lord of Command [*sultán al-amr*] hath encompassed all created things and the Sun of bounty hath shone forth upon all beings. By means of this name the two great rivers have flowed through the Twin Exalted Names [*al-ismayn al-a'íyayn*]. None have drunk from them save those whom God hath singled out for His Cause, those whom He hath enraptured among His servants and they whom He hath purified among His creatures and made the dawning-places [p. 305] of His Beautiful Names and the manifestations of His exalted Attributes. He hath numbered them among those who have attained unto the Presence of Him Who is the Inaccessible, Incomparable, the Omnipotent.

O leaf of Paradise! Visit Him before (thou visiteth) Me, inasmuch as he was sent down [*nuzzila*] at that time from the dominion of God [*jabarút alláh*], the Holy, the Most Exalted, the All-Wise, the Omniscient. When

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thou dost desire to begin thy visit to the Dayspring of Names and their Fountain-Head and the Dawning-place of the Divine Attributes and their Depository, arise and turn thy face unto the Court of Paradise, the place where the First Name [*ism al-awwal*] is buried, which God hath made the tomb [*mashhad*] of His Temple, the Most Holy, the All-Powerful, the Luminous. When thou hast turned (thy face), stand still and praise God [*kab-birí alláh*, i.e. say “Alláh’u-Akbar”], thy Lord, nineteen times and at each instance of praise, God shall open one of the doors of Ridván upon thy face and waft the sweet savors of the All-Glorified [*as-subhán*] unto thee from the direction of Paradise. In such wise hath the Command been decreed from the presence of the Almighty, the All-Wise. Repeat “Alláh’u-Abhá” [*tubahhá*] nine times with certitude in His Cause and acknowledgement of His sovereignty while glorifying His Own Self and submitting to His manifestation and drawing nigh unto the face of Him who is the Most Holy, the Most Resplendent [*at-Táli’*], the Most Manifest, the Effulgent [*al-báhir*], the Luminous [*al-lámihi*], the Radiant, the Refulgent. Then say: “I bear witness by my very soul and my essence, my being and my tongue, and by my heart and the limbs of my body, that there is none other God but Him and that the Point of the Bayán is, verily, His manifestation and His revelation [*burúz*] and His glory [*‘izzuhu*] and His honor [*sharafuhu*] and His grandeur for all who are in the Concourse on High. Moreover, He is His majesty and His might and His power [*iqtidáruhu*] among all that are in the heavens and on earth. Verily, He who hath been manifested through Truth is His sovereign over all who are in the heavens and on earth and His glory [*bahá’uhu*] over all who are in the dominion of Command and the world of creation [*jabarút al-amr wa al-khalq*].”

Say, then: “Upon Thee, O secret of the Divine Decree, be the first Spirit, made manifest from the repository of grandeur [*makman al-kibriyá’*], and the first mercy, which descended from the heaven of holiness from the right side of the throne, the seat of our Lord, the Exalted, the Most High, and the Temple of the irrevocable Purpose [*haykal al-amdá’*] and the Word of the Most Perfect in the dominion of eternity [*jabarút al-baqá’*] and the Most Great Name in the Kingdom of created things!

I bear witness by my own essence, [p. 306] and by my soul and my tongue, that Thou art the one through whom the Beauty of the Most Praised was established upon the Throne of His Name, the Most Merciful, and through whom the Primal Will hath been made manifest unto the people of the earth [*ahl al-akwán*] and through whom the melody of Paradise hath been sent down from the heaven of grace from the presence of Thy Lord, the Almighty, the Beneficent, and through whom the Cause of God, the Help in Peril, the Omnipotent, the Powerful, the Ordainer, hath been made manifest. I bear witness that Thou art the first light manifested from the Beauty of Oneness [*jamál al-ahadiyya*] and the first sun which shone forth from the horizon of Divinity [*ufuq al-iláhiyya*]. But for thee, the Beauty of the Divine Identity [*al-huwwiya*] would not have been manifest and the secrets of eternity [*as-Samadiyya*] would not have been revealed. I bear witness that through thee the birds of the hearts of them that long for thee have soared unto the atmosphere of nearness and reunion and the hearts of the lovers have tasted the sweetness of intimate communion and the beauty of the radiance of the sun of the Face of Thy Lord, the Majestic [*al-jalál*], the Glorious [*al-ajlál*]. But for thee, none would have known the Self of God and His Beauty nor would any soul have attained unto the shores of His nearness and His Presence. Contingent being would not have quaffed the water of his bounty and loving-kindness, and all created things would not have slaked their thirst through the wine of His grace and generosity. Through thee the veils of all existent things have been rent asunder and the Kingdom of Names and Attributes hath been made manifest. Through thee every soul hath been guided unto the shores of holiness and grandeur and through thee the Mystic Dove hath warbled upon the twigs [*afnán*] of eternity and the Bird of the Throne hath sung upon the branches [*aghván*] of the Sadrah of Bahá. Through thee the Beauty of the invisible world [*al-ghayb*] hath been made manifest through His Name, the Exalted, the Most High and through thee all Good [*kull khayr*] hath been sent down from the dominion of the Divine Essence [*jabarút al-‘amá’*] unto the kingdom of creation [*malakút al-badá’*] and every grace which the finger of God hath traced upon the Tablet of the Divine Decree. Through thee all created things have been encompassed by the mercy of God, the Mighty, the All-Knowing, the Most Great. But for thee, heaven would not have been upraised nor the earth inhabited. The oceans would not have appeared, nor the trees born fruit and the leaves would have remained bereft of verdure [p. 307] and the sun of grace would not have shone forth from the horizon of holiness and radiance. Through thee the breezes of forgiveness have been wafted upon all who are in the heavens and on earth. Through thee the gates of Paradise were flung open unto all people, and the hearts of them that have believed in God, the Almighty, the Most Powerful, the Generous, have been enraptured. Thou art the Word through which God hath decided

between all created things and distinguished the joyous [*as-sa'íd*] from the miserable [*ash-shaqá*] and the light from the darkness and the believer from him who hath joined partners with God, from that day to this, in which heaven hath been rent asunder. God hath come upon clouds [*thulal*] from (the world of) Command and around Him are a company of His chosen angels. When the veils are torn asunder and the Face cometh from behind the coverings with the hosts of power and glory [*ribwát 'izz 'athím*] and they who render thanks unto God, (the people) shall flee on the right and on the left and drunkenness shall seize all who are in the heavens and on earth save a few letters [*'iddat ahruf*] (belonging to) the face of thy Lord, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

I testify that thou hast born the trust of Thy Lord, the All-Merciful and hath known the Beauty of the All-Glorified [*jamál as-subhán*] before all existent things were created and that thou hast attained unto the presence of God in the day which none knew of save thee. This is due to a grace from God Who created thee through it before the creation of the heavens and the earth. I bear witness to thy remembrance through which the tongues of all created things were loosed in praise of their Lord, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, and to thy praise of He who is thy Maker. All things have arisen [*qáma 'alá*] in praise of Him and to this beareth witness all of existence [*kull al-wujúd*] in both the visible [*ash-shuhúd*] and invisible [*al-ghayb*] worlds and beyond them God Himself knoweth and testifieth to the truth of My words. I bear witness that thou hast assisted the religion of God and made manifest His Cause and struggled [*jáhadta*] in His path inasmuch as Thou wert obedient unto Him. Through thine aid the testimony of God and His proof, the power of God and His omnipotence, the majesty of God and His grandeur, and His sovereignty over all created things were made manifest. Blessed be they [p. 308] who struggled with thee and battled against [*hárabú ma'*] the enemies of God by thy command and circled round thee and entered the shelter of thine authority [*waláyatuka*] and drank from the living waters of thy love and suffered martyrdom before thy face and were laid to rest [*ruqidú*]¹⁰ within the precincts of Thy court. They, verily, are of those who rest peacefully [*ar-ráqidín*]. I testify that they are the helpers [*ansár*] of God upon His earth and His trustees in His lands and the people of God [*hizb alláh*] amongst His creatures and the hosts of God amongst His creation and the pure ones of God betwixt the heavens and the earth.

I bear witness to the great tests and overwhelming adversities which befell thee in the path of thy Lord and the tribulations which compassed thee on every side. Nothing prevented thee from the path of thy Creator and thou didst exert thyself [*jáhadta bi-nafsika*] until thou wert slain as a martyr in His way. Thou didst offer up thy spirit, soul, and body out of love for thy Master, the Ancient of Days. I testify that all things between heaven and earth and the eyes of those who have drawn nigh unto God behind the Tabernacle of manifest glory wept over thy suffering. The mystic maidens [*al-húriyyát*] bared their heads in the celestial chambers [*al-ghurfát*] and beat upon them with wondrous and holy fingers. They prostrated their faces upon the dust and sat upon the ashes and cried out at that time in the luminous, crimson¹¹ chambers. I testify that through Thy misfortune [*fi musibatúka*] all created things have been clothed with the robe of black and the faces of the sincere ones have paled. The pillars of those who profess the unity of God have been shaken and the eye of might and grandeur hath wept in the exalted and holy dominion [*jabarút*]. I bear witness at this time, O my master, in my present state that thou hast not fallen short in thy duty towards thy Lord nor hast thou carried out of love for thy Master. Thou hast proclaimed His Cause in both the East and the West until thou didst sacrifice thyself as a martyr in His path. [p. 309]

May God curse [*la 'an alláh*] those people who have oppressed thee and rebelled against thee and attacked thy soul and caviled at thy face and denied thy testimony and failed in their duty towards thee and turned away disdainfully from submission to thee [*al-khadú 'bayn yadayka*]. Verily, they were among those who join partners with God. Therefore, I beseech God by thee and by them who are in thy presence to grant me forgiveness and pardon my sins and sanctify me from the defilement of the earth and make me of those who are pure. Grant that I may attain His Presence during these days in which all are heedless of Him and are shut out as by a veil (from Him). Enable me to stand firm with Him and obedient to His cause and to have certitude in His Own Self and steadfastness in His verses and enter into His shade, and be established within the court of His mercy, martyred [*ash-shaháda*] in His path and repentant unto His Self, the Exalted, the Most Great. Though thee we beseech God to debar us not, in these days, from the splendors of the lights of His Face nor deprive us of the wonders of His grace nor shatter our hopes in His mercy which hath encompassed all the worlds. We ask God to make us firm in His love and steadfast in His Cause in such wise that our feet shall always remain upon His

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Path [*sirát*], which hath been made manifest through the power of Truth among the heavens and the earth.

Mercy, praise and glory [*al-bahá'*] be upon you, O pure ones [*asfiyá'*] of God amongst the servants, and his trusted ones [*umana'*] in the lands, and upon your bodies [*ajsád*] and your selves [*ajsám*] and your spirits, and your firstness [*awwalikum*] and your lastness, and your inner and outer beings, and upon them who have abided in your midst [*hallú jawáarakum*] and circumambulated you and attained unto the door of your mercy and stood before the manifestation of the lights of your forgiveness and entered the threshold of your nearness and drew nigh unto God though you and sought intercession [*istafsha'ú*] from God through your souls and visited your sanctuary and sought to be blessed by your grave [*turba*] and sought guidance by your guidance. They, verily, are of those who are turning unto your holy, sanctified, illumined, and radiant faces.

Therefore, O my God and my Master! I beseech Thee by him and by them who have been laid to rest [*ruqidú*] [p. 310] in his midst [*fí hawlíhi*] to number us among those who have soared in the atmosphere of Thy mercy and quaffed the wine of Thy favor and bounty and attained unto the pinnacle of graciousness through Thy generosity and Thy tender mercies and tasted the sweetness of Thy remembrance and scaled the loftiest heights and the highest stations through Thy grace and manifold favors and are detached from all things and travel swiftly unto the court of Thy gracious favors. The breezes of the glory of Thy tender mercies and the fragrances of Thine eternal holiness have seized them. Verily, Thou art the Omnipotent, the All-Powerful, the All-Wise.

O our God and our Beloved! Forgive us and our parents and they who are close to us among those who believe in Thee and in Thy verses and in Him Who hath been manifested through Thy Sovereignty. Make us then, O my God, powerful in this world through Thy might and grant that we may attain unto Thy presence in the next world. Debar us not from that which Thou dost possess nor shatter our hopes in all of that which becometh Thee. Verily, Thou art the Bounteous, the Most Excellent, the Benevolent and, verily, Thou art our Lord, the All-Merciful and our God, Whose help is implored by all men and upon Whom we rely [*úlayka atuklán*]. None other God is there but Thee, the Ever-Forgiving, the Generous, the All-Merciful.”

Thus have we set forth this Tablet for thee, O leaf of Paradise, and made mention of thee in order that thou mayest follow that which thou hast been enjoined to follow and be among those who adore (God) in the holy and luminous Tablets.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Athár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá*, vol. 4 (Tehran, 133 B.E.), p. 301-10

Notes

- 1) Ibn Qúlúyah, Ja'far ibn Muhammad, *Kámil al-ziyárat* (Bayrút: Dár al-Surúr, 1997): 358-62.
- 2) Majlisí, Muhammad Baqír. *Bihár al-Anwár*. Muhammad Baqír al-Mahmúdí, ed. Tehran: Wizárat al-Irshád al-Islamí, 1986-. p. 320.
- 3) Majlisí, 317-27.
- 4) Denis MacEoin, *The Sources for Early Bábí Doctrine and History: A Survey* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992): 99.
- 5) MacEoin. *Rituals in Bábism and Bahá'ism*. Pembroke Persian Papers, vol 2. London: British Academic Press, 1994: 26-7.
- 6) Mírzá Huseyn of Hamadán, *The Tárikh-i-Jadíd or New History of Mírzá 'Alí Muhammad the Báb*, trans. by Edward G. Browne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893): 94.
- 7) 'Abdu'l-Hamíid Ishráq-Khávarí, *Da'irat al-Ma'arif-i-Bahá'í* [Bahá'í Encyclopedia]. Vol. 15. Digitally published, East Lansing, MI: H-Bahai, 2001. Vol. 15: 111.
- 8) See, for example, *Gleanings IX*. In several untranslated Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh's identification with the Imám Husayn is much more explicit. In a Tablet to Shaykh 'Abdu'l-Husayn-i-Tihraní, Bahá'u'lláh also remarks, "O Husayn! You visit (the grave of) Husayn while killing Husayn!" [*tazúru al-Husayn wa taqtulu al-Husayn!*]. *Ma'idih-ye Asamani*, vol. 4, p. 136.
- 9) This is one of the few places that Bahá'u'lláh refers to a quaternary structure of the universe, although the device was quite common in the Writings of the Báb. For an excellent discussion of quaternary structures in the Writings of the Báb, see Todd Lawson, "The Dangers of Reading: Inlibration, Communion, and Transference in the Qur'án Commentary of the Báb," *Scripture and Revelation*, ed. Moojan Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997).
- 10) Although the published version of the Tablet contains *ruqidú* (to carry, support something), *ruqidú* seems to be the correct reading given the context and its repetition as an active participle at the end of the clause.
- 11) The text reads "Alá *ghurfát khamrin munírin*," but *khamr* (wine) is probably a scribal error and *humr* (red) was intended.

The Mystical Dimensions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

by Kavian Sadeghzade Milani

Introduction

Religious thought incorporates philosophy, theology and mysticism; indeed, the mystical experience is integral to religious experience. Shoghi Effendi commented in a letter that “the core of religious Faith is that mystic feeling which unites man with God.” He further notes in the same letter that “[t]he Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character” (*Spiritual Foundations* #40). Expanding this understanding of mysticism, religious scholar Annemarie Schimmel writes that mysticism “in its widest sense . . . may be defined as the consciousness of the One reality—be it called Wisdom, Light, Love or Nothing” (*Mystical Dimensions of Islam* 4). This consciousness cannot be reached by intellectual endeavors, as it transcends human intellect and rationalization.¹ The human heart, however, can engage in spiritual discovery, and tread the mystic path. Mysticism, therefore, may be defined as the quest and journey of the human soul towards its Creator.² In the Bahá'í context, this means that the human soul embarks on the mystical path through the recognition of Bahá'u'lláh. Consequently, the psychology of the soul changes³ under both the gnostic and volunteristic aspects of Bahá'í spirituality.⁴ The copper of the soul is transmuted into gold in the process of Divine alchemy and the ailments of the human soul are healed in remembrance of God.⁵ The Bahá'í Revelation invites all human souls to partake of this Divine Elixir.⁶

A significant portion of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh concerns mysticism. Both the theory (doctrine) and method (practice) of the mystical experience are expounded. Many texts are primarily concerned with the mystical path. The Hidden Words, The Seven Valleys, and The Four Valleys are some of the best-known representative Writings from this group.⁷ Even texts such as the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and the Kitáb-i-*qán*, which are not primarily intended to be mystical treatises, present and treat a variety of mystical topics. There have been a number of recent attempts by Bahá'í scholars to examine the vast corpus of Bahá'í Writings concerning spiritual and mystical topics.⁸ As a whole, however, the author agrees with the assessment made by Jack McLean that the mystical elements of the Bahá'í Faith remain under-explored.⁹

The Bahá'í Revelation presents to the wayfarer a variety of vehicles for the spiritual journey. The mystical Writings of Bahá'u'lláh detail the spiritual path in sundry ways.¹⁰ The Bahá'í Faith validates a number of spiritual and mystical practices as essential for one's spiritual development, whereas some of the so-called mystical practices are discounted and even forbidden, such as mortification, mendicancy and poverty. The authentically spiritual practices are however confirmed and endorsed. The Obligatory Prayers (*salát*) are indispensable to spiritual progress, as are the recitation of other prayers and meditations revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. The reading of the verses of God every day and night provides the human soul with an “occasion of encounter with the person of the divine Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh.”¹¹ Fasting (*sawm*) and the daily invocation of “*Alláh-u-Abhá*” are also integral to the Bahá'í mystical experience. Obedience to the laws and ordinances of Bahá'u'lláh key to the Divine Elixir designed to transform the copper of the soul into gold.¹² Work itself is considered to be a critical element in Bahá'í mysticism.¹³ All of the above elements are generally acknowledged and well-appreciated elements of Bahá'í spirituality. This article, however, will examine an element of the Bahá'í spiritual experience which is often neglected with regards to its mystical dimensions: the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

The thesis that the Bahá'í Administrative Order is an instrument designed by Bahá'u'lláh for the mystic wayfarer is the subject of this study. The Administrative Order has already been the subject of numerous academic examinations.¹⁴ Most such studies have focused on comparative political theory. To date, the mystical dimensions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order remain largely unexplored. Some authors have acknowledged such spiritual aspects, though. Jack McLean, for example, in his formulation of Bahá'í spirituality writes:

For a Bahá'í, to further the aims and purposes of the Bahá'í revelation means to participate in the erection of a new society, whose blueprint the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith have drawn up and whose keynote is justice.

This new society is Bahá'u'lláh's new world order which is completely without parallel in the utopian societies and systems of government that have evolved until the present day. This world system of Bahá'u'lláh, which exists today in embryonic form and whose Head is the Universal House of Justice, is the visible expression of all the intangible spiritual precepts and superlative teachings that Bahá'u'lláh has revealed to humanity.¹⁵

This article advances the thesis that the Administrative Order is an indispensable component of Bahá'í mystical transformation. The author will first examine the theosophical framework and develop the nomenclature required for the study of any mystical system. This theosophical foundation will then be applied to the creation of the Bahá'í Administrative Order as a mystical entity.

Theosophy (*Hikmat-i-Illáhi*) and Mysticism (*'Irfán*)

Any serious examination of the mystical experience must take account of theosophical considerations.¹⁶ Mysticism was earlier defined as the journey of the human soul towards God. Theosophy may be defined as "that sacred philosophy which springs from such inward illumination; it is the mysticism of the mind as distinguished from the mysticism of the heart."¹⁷ Thus, theosophy can be equated with *Hikmat-i-Illáhi* (Divine Wisdom, lit. *Theo-sophia*), as outlined in the Bahá'í Writings. It is within this framework that Bahá'í mystical theory should be examined.¹⁸

In the *Kitáb-i-`qán* Bahá'u'lláh introduces three distinct forms of theophany.¹⁹ The three are Universal Revelation (*Tajallí-i-`ám*), the Holy Outpouring (*Fayd-i-Muqaddas*) and the Most Holy Outpouring (*Fayd-i-Aqdas*).²⁰ The Universal Revelation is that theophany by which God is manifested "upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing . . . and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes."²¹ As such Bahá'u'lláh declares, "All created things eloquently testify to the revelation of that inner Light within them."²² This universal theophany is available to all wayfarers, whether from within or outside the Bahá'í tradition and the mystic should behold the inner mysteries enshrined in all things as he traverses the path. Such speculation is integral to the Bahá'í spiritual experience.²³ The Most Holy Outpouring on the other hand represents the Specific Revelation of God (*Tajallí-i-Kháss*). This theophany "is confined to the innermost Essence, unto which no man can attain."²⁴ This Specific Revelation occurs in the realm of Absolute Oneness (*Ahadiyyah*) where the names and attributes of God are indistinguishable from God's Essence, and where God is both the Lover and the Beloved.²⁵

The Holy Outpouring (*Fayd-i-Muqaddas*) that Bahá'u'lláh equates with the Secondary Revelation of God (*Tajallí-i-Thání*), however, is the theophany of immediate interest, as it refers specifically to Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. This Holy Outpouring (*Fayd-i-Muqaddas*) belongs to "the realm of the primal and original manifestation of God."²⁶ In Sufi terminology this Revelation is the locus through which the names and attributes of God are manifested.²⁷ This is in conformity with Bahá'í theology:

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 applicable to God, Himself, Who is both the Visible and the Invisible.²⁸

The Secondary Revelation or Holy Outpouring has been identified with the "Supreme Pen," the "First Emanation of God," and the "Creative B and E" in Sufi literature.²⁹ The above have all been identified with Bahá'u'lláh in the Bahá'í Writings.³⁰ It is this theophany that Bahá'u'lláh directly represents. It is also through this Holy Outpouring that the human soul encounters the Divine Elixir and embarks on the mystical path. Thus the volunteristic and gnostic elements of the Bahá'í mystical experience are derived from Bahá'u'lláh. The encounter of the human soul with the Holy Outpouring (*Fayd-i-Muqaddas*) in the Bahá'í Revelation is the spiritual dimension that is unique to the Bahá'í mystical experience. All the integral elements of the Bahá'í spiritual path mentioned earlier have been directly derived from this Secondary Revelation. It is this same theophany that generates the Bahá'í Administrative Order through the "mystic intercourse" described below.

The Pen-Tablet Interaction and the Generation of the Bahá'í Administrative Order

The Pen (*qalam*)/Tablet (*Lawh*) interaction is a commonly utilized motif in the Bahá'í Writings. Both terms occur frequently in Bahá'í scripture. Sometimes their use denotes literally a pen or a tablet, but often their

meaning is symbolic, referring to Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. The Pen thus represents an active entity and is generative, whereas the Tablet is passive in relation to the Pen and a recipient.³¹ The Pen generates the Tablet itself. In the Tablet of Wisdom Bahá'u'lláh explains the creation of the world of existence using this same motif:

That which hath been in existence had existed before, but not in the form thou seest today. The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.³²

This is by no means the only application of this motif. For example, later in that same Tablet Bahá'u'lláh elaborates on the Word of God as the originator of matter, through the creation of “Such as communicate the generating influence and such as receive its impact” (*fá'ilayn va munfa'ilayn*). These are generally taken to be a reference to the four elements of air, water, fire and earth, whose active/recipient interactions beget all matter.³³

The Guardian applies the same motif to the generation of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. The passage below from *God Passes By* describes the interaction between active and recipient forces, where Bahá'u'lláh is the active force and 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the recipient entity. The text establishes the following relationship,

The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, on the other hand, may be regarded as the offspring resulting from the mystic intercourse between Him Who had generated the forces of a God-given Faith and the One Who had had been made its sole Interpreter and was recognized as its Perfect Exemplar. The creative energies unleashed by the Originator of the Law of God in this age gave birth, through their impact upon the mind of Him Who had been chosen as its unerring Expounder, to that Instrument, the vast implications of which the present generation, even after the lapse of twenty-three years, is still incapable of fully apprehending.³⁴

The *Fayd-i-Muqaddas* (Holy Outpouring) or the Secondary Revelation of God is here stated to interact with 'Abdu'l-Bahá through a “mystic intercourse.” This “mystic intercourse” begets the Will and Testament, which is considered to be the charter for the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Therefore according to the text the Bahá'í Administrative Order has an unequivocal mystical linkage to Bahá'u'lláh. Shoghi Effendi had already elaborated on this in the *Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* a few years earlier:

The creative energies released by the Law of Bahá'u'lláh, permeating and evolving within the mind of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, have, by their very impact and close interaction, given birth to an Instrument which may be viewed as the Charter of the New World Order which is at once the glory and the promise of this most great Dispensation. The Will may thus be acclaimed as the inevitable offspring resulting from that mystic intercourse between Him Who communicated the generating influence of His divine Purpose and the One Who was its vehicle and chosen recipient. Being the Child of the Covenant—the Heir of both the Originator and the Interpreter of the Law of God—the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá can no more be divorced from Him Who supplied the original and motivating impulse than from the One Who ultimately conceived it.³⁵

This passage reiterates many of the points that the passage from *God Passes By* addressed. It establishes the active/recipient relationship again and outlines the “mystic intercourse” that generates the *Will and Testament*, which is the charter for the Administrative Order. The Covenant between Bahá'u'lláh and every Bahá'í soul is also incorporated into this “mystic intercourse” and preceded the birth of the Administrative Order. The critical function of the Covenant is suggested by the reference to the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the “Child of the Covenant.”³⁶ The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh and the Administrative Order are thus inseparable.

In *God Passes By* Shoghi Effendi presents the exact point again, albeit using a different metaphor. There he describes the embodiment of the Spirit of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in the institutions of the Faith after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

The moment had now arrived for that undying, that world-vitalizing Spirit that was born in Shíráz, that had been rekindled in Tíhrán, that had been fanned into flame in Baghdad and Adrianople, that had been carried to the West, and was now illuminating the fringes of five continents, to incarnate itself in institutions designed to canalize its outspreading energies and stimulate its growth. (324)

The analysis presented is of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It is generally understood that with the passing of

'Abdu'l-Bahá the Bahá'í Faith emerged from a period of "charismatic" leadership and entered an "administrative" phase. Shoghi Effendi's examination is somewhat different and conforms well to his thought analyzed earlier: It was "that world-vitalizing Spirit" that incarnated itself in "institutions," thereby establishing the continuity of the mystical linkage with Bahá'u'lláh.

The following passage is also of interest in this regard. It makes the point that an artificial separation between the "spiritual" and the "administrative" aspects of the Cause is "tantamount to a mutilation of the Cause." He writes:

To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself." (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 5)

Mysticism, Law, Authority and the Bahá'í Administrative Order³⁷

As illustrated above, the Bahá'í Administrative Order was inaugurated by and derives its authority from the Manifestation, and like other expressions of Bahá'í spirituality it is accommodated into the Bahá'í prophetic schema without difficulty.³⁸ Two issues must be addressed at this point. The first concerns authority and divine guidance in the Bahá'í Administrative Order. The other concerns the divine Law and the legislative components of this Order. The issues of divine guidance, authority, and divine Laws are critical questions that every mystical system must answer. This article will briefly examine how these issues were understood in Sufism and Sufi Orders. Then the same questions will be raised regarding the Bahá'í Administrative Order as a mystical system.³⁹ Authority and Divine guidance are important in any mystical quest as Trimmingham points out in connection to Sufism:

Masters of the Way realized that the mystical tendency is highly dangerous as an individual experience, since the soul under the influence of a "state" is wide open to delusion and self-deception. There are mystic Ways to other gods than God.⁴⁰

In Sufism mystical guidance was provided for the Sufi wayfarer through two interrelated sources: the Sufi master and the *Qutb* (spiritual pole). The masters are essential for spiritual development as the following passage indicates:

Connection to a master is considered a condition sine qua non for spiritual success. Without a master, without a guide, all illusions and all distractions are to be feared. This is what is meant by the well-known Sufi adage "who does not have a *shaykh* has Satan for his *shaykh*."⁴¹

The masters are all inwardly connected with the *Qutb* (spiritual pole) of their age. The *Qutb* is the central mystical locus of the Universe, from whom the masters derive their inspiration and authority. The wayfarer-master-*Qutb* hierarchy is essential to the Sufi world-view. These dynamics were accepted despite the fact that they find little textual justification in Islamic Scripture.⁴² The second problem addresses the tension between the mystics and the jurists. It can be maintained that Sufism in general was observant of the Islamic legal ordinances, and that Sufis were to observe religious Law.⁴³ It is generally acknowledged, however, that the focus on the mystical de-emphasized the legal code and that more radical Sufism fostered and augmented anti-nomian tendencies.⁴⁴ The gap between the legalistic and mystical traditions in Islam was rarely bridged, and mainstream Islam has always looked upon Sufism with a degree of suspicion.

The Bahá'í Administrative Order represents a unique synthesis compared with Sufism. The mystical forces of the Bahá'í Revelation were channeled through the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh. Upon the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the "mystic intercourse" described above had taken place, and the Bahá'í Administrative Order was begotten. In other words, the mystical encounter of the human soul with the Holy Outpouring (*Fayd-i-Muqaddas*) becomes possible through the encounter with the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Bahá'u'lláh had anticipated both the Universal House of Justice and the Bahá'í Administrative Order in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.⁴⁵ At present, the Universal House of Justice, designated by Bahá'u'lláh as the "Ark of God" (*Safinat'u'lláh*) in the Tablet of Carmel, is the spiritual pole and the center of Bahá'í spirituality. According to Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice is the one divinely appointed Center and the one expressly-designated pivot around which Bahá'í administration revolves.⁴⁶ The relationship between the human soul and the

Universal House of Justice is secured through the Covenant. It has already been demonstrated that the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is instrumental in the generation of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. The establishment of a covenant between the mystic and the object of mystical quest or the Pole (*Qutb*) is an integral part of the mystical experience. In the case of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, the Covenant between Bahá'u'lláh and the human soul also implies a relationship between that soul and the Universal House of Justice. This spiritual Covenant also serves to maintain the organic unity of the Bahá'í world.

All must seek guidance from the Universal House of Justice and turn to them.⁴⁷ The Will and Testament maintains that the Universal House of Justice is “the source of all good and freed from all error” and that “whatever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself.”⁴⁸ “God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth”⁴⁹ as it serves to “insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority”⁵⁰ from the source of Revelation. This body also provides infallible guidance for Bahá'ís on “legislative and administrative ordinances” and “may enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book.”⁵¹ As such, the Universal House of Justice represents a unique synthesis of the legislative and spiritual offices, naturally eliminating the tension permeating Islamic spirituality described above. For the Bahá'í wayfarer the Universal House of Justice is not a mere administrative organ elected in a three-tier process by universal suffrage; rather, it is a sanctified repository of divine guidance and the spiritual axis of the Bahá'í world. Accordingly, the establishment of a spiritual connection between the heart of the mystic and the Universal House of Justice becomes an essential component of the Bahá'í mystical experience.

The theoretical rather than the practical aspects of Bahá'í mysticism are the primary concern of this article. However, the fact that the Universal House of Justice represents the axis *par excellence* of Bahá'í spirituality should not be considered a mere theoretical or doctrinal element of the Bahá'í mystical experience. It has significant practical implications for the manner in which one traverses the mystic path. The following is a highly instructive example of the dynamics between a Bahá'í (and eventual martyr) and the Universal House of Justice. It is selected from the introduction to a report written for and addressed to the Universal House of Justice by Mrs. Jínús Mahmúdí, who at the time (1981) was an Auxiliary Board Member. The occasion for this report was the arrest of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran in August 1981. In it Mrs. Mahmúdí records an interesting account of the individual members of the N.S.A. and provides unique insights into the spiritual state of their meetings. It was written under circumstances of extreme danger. Both the relationship of the National Spiritual Assembly with the Universal House of Justice as well as her individual connection to and understanding of the Supreme Institution of the Bahá'í Administrative Order are clearly conveyed in this report:

May my life be sacrificed for you. We give thanks—We are content. You have said that whatever comes to pass is the will of God. Therefore we render thanks—We are content—We are servants—Just give us the strength to endure . . . Strengthen each one of us a thousand-fold so that we can withstand the onrush of the tribes of the earth, then we will like unto the mighty ocean send waves unto the shores of the East and the West.

Your crazed lovers are now in the prison of love. That new creation that you yourself had created. Your guidance was not withheld from them even for a moment. Your love and your igniting words would ceaselessly arrive like copious rain. At first it caused their tears to flow, then it would set them on fire. Then it bestowed upon them freshness, subtlety, power and strength. This is how you created that new creation. When Husayn⁵² would call and say that there was a new message from the House of Justice they did not know how to get to the gathering. They began with prayers and supplications and then would consume your every word with all their existence. They derived new life from it and prepared for sacrifice.⁵³

The implications for the mystic wayfarer are very real. These souls entered the field of martyrdom inspired and strengthened by the Universal House of Justice. Their connection to the axis of Bahá'í spirituality allowed for their mystic union with the Beloved.⁵⁴

The Feast

The Bahá'í Administrative Order encompasses all Bahá'ís at the level of the nineteen-day Feast. This insti-

tution is established in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

Verily, it is enjoined upon you to offer a feast, once in every month, though only water be served; for God hath purposed to bind hearts together, albeit through both earthly and heavenly means.⁵⁵

The Feast is the bedrock of Bahá’í administration. The Feast also serves to remove barriers and unite the community at grass roots, and as such is rendered non-elitist. It is a sacred practice with significant spiritual and devotional character.⁵⁶ It has authentic counterparts in other mystical schools, such as in Sufism where regular spiritual meetings entitled *majlis* (pl. *majális*) are held “for the purpose of reading instructive texts, invocation, and singing.”⁵⁷ The well-known Sufi practice of *samá’* (spiritual concert) is an example of such spiritual meetings.⁵⁸ These sessions were the source of inspiration and ecstasy for the Sufis, and they began with and ended with Qur’anic recitation. The Bahá’í nineteen day Feast likewise is intended for inspiration and uplifting. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates on this theme as follows:

The believers of God must assemble and associate with each other in the utmost love, joy, and fragrance. They must conduct themselves (in these Feasts) with the greatest dignity and consideration, chant divine verses, peruse instructive articles, read the Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, encourage and inspire each other with love for the whole human race, invoke God with perfect joy and fragrance, sing the verses, glorifications, and praises of the Self-Subsistent Lord, and deliver eloquent speeches. The owner of the house must personally serve the beloved ones. He must seek after the comfort of all, and with the utmost humility he must show forth kindness to every one. If the Feast is arranged in this manner and in the way mentioned, that supper is the “Lord’s Supper,” for the result is the same result and the effect is the same effect.⁵⁹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá envisions music as an element of the Feast. Bahá’í scholars have acknowledged the importance of music in the Bahá’í spiritual experience.⁶⁰ This suggests a prominent role for music in the Bahá’í Feast. In short the Feast, as an integral component of the Bahá’í Administrative Order, presents an occasion for spiritual development for the soul.

The Rulers (*Umará’*) and the Learned (*‘Ulamá*)

Bahá’u’lláh has called for two branches of the Bahá’í Administrative Order in the Kitáb-i-‘Ahdí (Book of My Covenant): the Rulers (*Umará*) and the Learned (*‘Ulamá*).⁶¹ The Universal House of Justice has stated that the “distinction is that whereas the ‘rulers’ function as corporate bodies, the ‘learned’ operate primarily as individuals.” The administrative functions of both branches are clearly defined and delineated in the Bahá’í Writings as well as in the writings of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice. Both branches are integral to the theory and practice of Bahá’í spirituality. The members of the Local Spiritual Assembly for example “should consider themselves as entering the Court of the Presence of God, the Exalted, the most High, and as beholding Him Who is the Unseen” as ordained by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.⁶² They are to serve both the individual Bahá’í and the community at large as “channels of divine guidance.”⁶³ This branch of the Bahá’í administration is unique in terms of mystical guidance compared to other schools of mystical thought, with respect to even though one finds parallels between the “rulers” and the function of the spiritual master in general.

It is the “learned” arm of the Bahá’í administration, however, that parallels the function of the Sufi master most closely, and as such it is also integral to the Bahá’í mystical experience. This arm consists of the Hands of the Cause, the Continental Board of Counselors and the Auxiliary Board. The functions of the Hands of the Cause as delineated in the Will and Testament are:

The obligations of the Hands of the Cause of God are to diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things. They must manifest the fear of God by their conduct, their manners, their deeds and their words.⁶⁴

The functions of the “Hands” as expounded above are clearly similar to that of the Sufi master as examined earlier.⁶⁵ These same functions of the Hands of the Cause are carried into the future by the Continental Board of Counselors, and their Auxiliary Board. Therefore the term “learned” has been applied to the Hands of the Cause, Counselors, and Auxiliary Board members.

The Hands of the Cause of God, the Counselors and the members of the Auxiliary Board fall within the definition of the “learned” given by the beloved Guardian. Thus they are all intimately interrelated and it is not incorrect to refer to the three ranks collectively as one institution.

However, each is also a separate institution in itself.⁶⁶

The two arms of the Bahá’í Administrative Order are critical components of Bahá’í spirituality, both in mystical method and mystical theory. The “learned” derive their authority and inspiration from the Universal House of Justice in the same manner that the Sufi masters derive their authority from the *Qutb*. The following comments by the Universal House of Justice regarding the two arms of administration, however, must be kept in mind, where they indicate the supreme synthesis incorporated in the administrative structures of the Bahá’í Faith.

The newness and uniqueness of this concept make it difficult to grasp; only as the Bahá’í Community grows and the believers are increasingly able to contemplate its administrative structure uninfluenced by concepts from past ages, will the vital interdependence of the “rulers” and the “learned” in the Faith be properly understood, and the inestimable value of their interaction be fully recognized.⁶⁷

The “newness” of this synthesis makes it difficult to fully comprehend. The Bahá’í mystic therefore stands in need of a new frame of reference, as there is nothing in our known ancient and traditional spiritual heritage that can fully compare with the Bahá’í Administrative Order.⁶⁸ This new paradigm requires that every Bahá’í individual heed this passage from the *Lawh-i-Hikmat*: “Abase not the station of the learned in Bahá and belittle not the rank of such rulers as administer amidst you.”⁶⁹

Hál (state) and *Qál* (speech)

Of particular importance for the mystic wayfarer is the distinction between the two Sufi notions of *hál* (spiritual state) and *qál* (speech). *Hál* refers to inner and authentic spiritual state of the wayfarer, whereas *qál* is what one utters by mouth. The former is a genuine spiritual and internal phenomenon, whereas the latter is an external one. Sufi literature favors the inner spiritual state, which is “real” over the spoken or outer, which may or may not reflect the inner reality. An example occurs in the narrative of Moses and the Shepherd in Rumi’s *Mathnaví* where God teaches Moses the distinction.

We look not at the exterior and the speech (*qál*),

We behold the inner and the state (*hál*).⁷⁰

This distinction is maintained in the Bahá’í Writings,⁷¹ for the inner state is emphasized in all matters pertaining to the Bahá’í mystical experience rather than the outer aspects. For example, if a person should go through the motions of the obligatory prayer carelessly and without any spiritual connection, that prayer may not bring about the desired mystical experience.⁷² The Bahá’í administrative Order is also an agent for transformation of the human soul, and much like other spiritual practices can only function as such if engaged in with spirituality and with a pure intention. It is the duty of every Bahá’í wayfarer to engage the Bahá’í administration as an authentic *hál* experience rather than a *qál* one. Thus, the individual cannot practice adhering to the letter of the law with regards to the Bahá’í Administrative Order and not the spirit. Only then can the Bahá’í administration be a component of the Bahá’í spiritual experience. The following passage on behalf of Shoghi Effendi touches on the same point:

Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá’u’lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organization, and becomes a dead thing. (*Spiritual Foundations: Prayer, Meditation, and the Devotional Attitude* #40)

Conclusion

Writing in the 1930s, Shoghi Effendi stated that there are features and relationships in the Bahá’í Administrative Order that will be defined and analyzed by future generations. This article is a study of one such feature—the mystical dimensions of the Bahá’í Administrative Order. The thesis is advanced that Bahá’u’lláh has through the Covenant bequeathed to posterity “an excellent and priceless heritage.”⁷³ Through this heritage the wayfarer can encounter the Holy Outpouring (*Fayd-i-Muqaddas*). The Bahá’í Administrative Order has a number of unique and key features when considered as a mystical entity, one of which is the inclu-

sion of all at the level of the Feast. The full spectrum of this topic cannot be explored in this article. The reader is invited to consider this thesis in light of the scriptural evidence beyond those presented here. The implication for the human soul whether as one serving on administrative bodies or otherwise is clear: the encounter with the Administrative Order is critical to the mystical path.

Notes

- 1) This is not a concept peculiar to the Bahá’í tradition. For example, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* 515 defines mysticism as “a doctrine or discipline maintaining that one can gain knowledge of reality not accessible to sense perception or to rational conceptual thought.” See the *Seven Valleys* p. 33 for an elaboration on this theme by Bahá’u’lláh.
- 2) Bahá’í thought maintains that the chief endowment of the human being is the rational soul (*nafs-i-nátiqah*) also identified with the human spirit (*rúh-i-insáni*). Ontologically, the human soul is at the end of the Arc of Descent, and at the beginning of the Arc of Ascent, which is the initiation of the spiritual journey (*Some Answered Questions* 285-86).
- 3) Traditional Sufi teachings describe an elaborate psychology (*ma’rifat an-nafs*). In this system, which is based on Quránic nomenclature, the soul (*nafs*) progresses from the *nafs-i-amárah* (the commanding soul) to the *nafs-i-mutma’inah* (the confirmed soul) and the *nafs-i-mardiáh* (that has attained Divine good-pleasure). The Sufi science of the soul is treated in adequate detail in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* 294-307. Bahá’u’lláh has acknowledged and confirmed Sufi psychology (cf. *Majmú’iy-i-Alwáh-i-Hadrat-i-Bahá’u’lláh* 97). Bahá’u’lláh has elsewhere markedly simplified the Bahá’í science of the soul:

Much hath been written in the books of old concerning the various stages in the development of the soul, such as concupiscence, irascibility, inspiration, benevolence, contentment, Divine good-Pleasure and the like; The Pen of the Most High, however is disinclined to dwell upon them. Every soul that walketh humbly with its God, in this Day, and cleaveth unto Him, shall find itself invested with the honor and glory of all goodly names and stations (Gleanings 159).
- 4) Schimmel divides the mystical approaches into the “volunteristic” and the “gnostic.” The volunteristic mystic aims to possess the attributes of God, whereas the gnostic mystic attempts to obtain a deeper knowledge of God (*Mystical Dimensions of Islam* 6). Both elements are explicitly present in the Bahá’í Writing.
- 5) *Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh*, from the Persian, passage number 32.
- 6) Along the way, as the soul begins to change, the individual experiences new understandings of the self and its relationship to other individuals as well as to God. It is this broad complex of transformed spiritual attitudes and understandings that I will call mystical experience.
- 7) A multitude of other key tablets also present and elaborate upon the mystical dimensions of the Bahá’í Revelation. The *Qasídiy-i-Varqá’íyyih* and *Mathnaví* are two such tablets. It is regrettable that the scholarly community in general has not accorded these Tablets the close attention that they merit, from the standpoint of mystical content and teachings as well as the literary form. These texts have been examined however with respect to other aspects and there are provisional translations of the *Qasídah* available as detailed in *Secret and Symbol* (258-59) by Christopher Buck.
- 8) In general the author agrees with the assessment made by Jack McLean who states that “it is regrettable that very little Bahá’í scholarship to date has explored the topic of mysticism in a positive light . . .” (*Dimensions in Spirituality* 83). *Dimensions in Spirituality* by Jack McLean is a noteworthy attempt to compensate this deficiency. It represents the first serious attempt towards a comprehensive formulation of Bahá’í spirituality. Dr. Dáryúsh Ma’ání has also contributed a significant volume of literature on this topic in Persian. His *Kanz-i-Asrár* (Thesaurus of Mysteries), for example, only the first volume of which has been published, represents a lexicon of the terminology utilized in the *Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh*.
- 9) *Dimensions in Spirituality* (83).
- 10) To these must be added the authorized interpretations made by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.
- 11) *Dimensions in Spirituality* (58).
- 12) *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* paragraph 4. See also *The Seven Valleys* (39-40).
- 13) *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* paragraph 33, where Bahá’u’lláh states: “We have exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship of the one true God.” This represents a radical break from the Sufi tradition where a mystic was known for his poverty, and renunciation of the world. Hence the designations *faqír* in Arabic and *darvish* in Persian, both of which mean “poor,” came to be generally accepted terms for the Sufi. These mystics were frequently inclined to beg, a practice also forbidden by Bahá’u’lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.
- 14) An introductory outline of the development and structure of the Bahá’í Administrative Order is presented by Smith in *The Bábí and Bahá’í Religions: From Messianic Shi’ism to a World Religion* 115-35. *The Search for a Just Society* (424-33) by John Huddleston is an interesting presentation and incorporates a rare balance between the spiritual and administrative elements. Another excellent study is *An Organic Order* by Roger Coe in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi*. The most comprehensive overall treatment remains that of Shoghi Effendi himself as detailed in his writings such as *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 152-57.
- 15) *Dimensions in Spirituality* 126.
- 16) The word “theosophy” itself poses a problem, as it has been used to denote a variety of ideas and schools of thought.
- 17) See *The Sufi Orders in Islam* by Trimingham 138.

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- 18) This article presents a synthesis derived from Bahá'í Sacred Writings and the writings of Shoghi Effendi. Such inductive reasoning has inherent flaws and is always dangerous. The author wishes the readership to give close attention to the following guidance by the Universal House of Justice in this regard.

As you point out in your letter, divine Revelation is infallible and proceeds from an all-encompassing knowledge of the Truth, but when individual Bahá'ís attempt to apply Sacred Texts to any specific problem or situation they do so using their own minds which are of limited understanding. . . . The Bahá'í principle of harmony between religion and science requires, as you say, that a Bahá'í scholar must use his intelligence to arrive at a solution of a specific problem if there is an apparent conflict between a Sacred Text and other evidence; and also he must accept the fact that some problems may defy his comprehension. . . . (Scholarship 26)

- 19) By theophany the authors intend Self-Revelation of the Ipseity. Here the terms manifestation, revelation and theophany are utilized as synonyms. The Ipseity is identified with the Sufi *Huwa* (He), which refers to the unknowable Essence of God.
- 20) *Book of Certitude* 139-43. These definitions are presented in an attempt to arrive at an understanding of "attainment unto the divine Presence" (*Liqa'u'lláh*).
- 21) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 149.
- 22) *Book of Certitude* 140.
- 23) The seeker should achieve this state in the Valley of Search, the first of the *Seven Valleys*.
- 24) *Book of Certitude* 141. This article does not intend to treat the complex theosophical background of the Universal Revelation and the Specific Revelation. See *Hikmat-i-Iláhi* 278-79 by Qamshí'í and *Qámús-i-'qán* 3:1194-1204 by A. Ishráq-Khávárí for further details.
- 25) Bahá'í Writings acknowledge Five Divine Presences or realms. These are in descending order *Háhút*, *Láhút* (Heavenly Court), *Jabarút* (Dominion), *Malakút* (Kingdom) and *Násút* (Corporeal World). In the Tablet of All Food (*Lawh-i-Kull-i-Ta'ám*), Bahá'u'lláh identifies the Heaven of Absolute Oneness as *Háhút* (Unknowable Essence). Even the Manifestations have no access to this realm. This paper will not deal with this very interesting topic. For a study of the Five Divine Presences in the Bahá'í Writings see *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 1: 58-59, by Adib Taherzadeh. In the Most Holy Outpouring God reveals His Self to Himself, and He is at once the Lover and the Beloved (*Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* 2:12-13).
- 26) *Book of Certitude* 142.
- 27) The Secondary Revelation (*Tajalliy-i-Thání*) corresponds to theophany in the realms of *Láhút* and *Jabarút*, where the latter represents the first stage of differentiation or substantiation (*taqyid*). See the Tablet to Varqá (*Lawh-i-Varqá*) in Momen's "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics" 192.
- 28) *Book of Certitude* 142.
- 29) For example *Hikmat-i-Iláhi* 330.
- 30) This nomenclature has been examined in Milani, Kavian S. and Nafeh Fananapazir, "A Study of the Pen Motif in Bahá'í Writings." (*JABS* 9:1)
- 31) *Al-Qalam* (Pen) is defined by the glossary in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* as "the instrument of God's creative act." Sachiko Murata suggests similar dynamics in her study of gender relation in the writings of Ibn-'Arabí in the *Tao of Islam*. She writes:
- The Pen writes out these words on the Tablet, thus manifesting the spiritual essences of all things . . . The Pen has two faces. With one face it looks at God, and with the other it looks at the Tablet and everything below it. In the same way the Tablet has two faces. With one face it looks at the Pen, and with the other it looks at the worlds that lie below it. In relation to the Pen, the Tablet is receptive and thereby manifests differentiation. But in relation to cosmos, the Tablet is active and manifests governing control. (The Tao of Islam 13)
- 32) *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 140.
- 33) A comprehensive treatment of this subject by Keven Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective on the Origin of Matter," appeared in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2.3.90. See also *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations* (464-66) for a general introduction to the topic.
- 34) *God Passes By* 325.
- 35) *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 144.
- 36) The implications of the Covenant for the mystical journey of the human soul towards God will be examined in a later section. The reference to the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "the Child of the Covenant" has clear implications for the Bahá'í wayfarer.
- 37) The reader will note that this article establishes a number of comparison and contrasts between the Bahá'í Administrative Order and mystical thought, particularly Islamic mysticism (Sufism). This serves as a lead into the central issues at hand. The author hopes that the readers note that the Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion, and not a Sufi sect. The comparison is valid in as much as the Bahá'í Administrative Order is noted to have authentic mystical content as established by this article.
- 38) The case was different with Sufism (Islamic mysticism), as it could not be incorporated into the Islamic prophetic structure. The two were however, allowed to co-exist alongside each other as Trimmingham points out. See *The Sufi Orders in Islam* 133-46 for a detailed study on this theme.
- 39) As Sufism is not the focus of this article experts will no doubt find this treatment of the Sufi content superficial. The point of the comparison is however to demonstrate how these issues have been synthesized in the Bahá'í Administrative Order. The Sufi

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Orders (*Tá’ifas*) themselves are later developments in Sufism. Trimmingham points out:

The foundation of the orders is the system and relationship of master and disciple, in Arabic *murshid* (director) and *murid* (aspirant). It was natural to accept the authority and guidance of those who had traversed the stages (*maqámát*) of the Sufi Path. (Sufi Orders in Islam 3)

There have been a number of studies on these Sufi Orders. The most comprehensive to date is that of Trimmingham entitled *Sufi Orders in Islam*. More recent treatments are found in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*.

40) *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations* 147.

41) See Nasr in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* 271-72.

42) It should not be surprising that the Sufi hierarchy was accepted without textual justification. The master-mystic dynamics are developments that were later systematized to explain the Sufi mystical experience

43) See for example *A Sufi Rule for Novices* 31.

44) See *The Mystics of Islam* by Nicholson 126-27.

45) See for example the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* paragraphs 42 and 30. The twin pillars of this Order are Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice. Cf. *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* (147). According to the *Will and Testament* the Guardian of the Faith is the designated and authoritative “interpreter of the Word of God” among other functions. The Universal House of Justice is examined in detail shortly.

Paragraph 42 of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is also significant for the fact that it anticipates the very situation, which occurred in the Bahá’í world in 1957, precipitated by the passing of the Guardian (Shoghi Effendi) and the absence of a Universal House of Justice. This passage will be explored later in this article.

46) See letter written on behalf of the Guardian quoted in *The Continental Board of Counselors* 44-45.

47) *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 26.

48) *Will and Testament* 14 and 20.

49) *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 68.

50) *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 148.

51) *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 149.

52) Husayn is a reference to Dr. Husayn Nají who at the time was the chairman of the National Spiritual Assembly.

53) A copy of this historical letter came to my attention in 1986.

54) O Son of Justice! Whither can a lover go but to the land of his beloved? And what seeker findeth rest away from his heart’s desire? To the true lover reunion is life, and separation is death. His breast is void of patience and his heart hath no peace. A myriad lives he would forsake to hasten to the abode of his beloved. (Hidden Words, from the Persian, number 4).

55) *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* paragraph 57.

56) See the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, note number 82.

57) *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* 248.

58) Attendance at such gatherings is highly recommended for both the Sufi veteran and the new initiate. cf. *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* 275. The well-known practice of *samá’* (spiritual concert) characterized by music and dance to induce spiritual ecstasy is a form of such gatherings. The rules governing this spiritual practice are many and differ according to the Sufi order. (Cf. *A Sufi Guide for Novices*, by Milton, 61-66)

59) *Principles of Bahá’í Administration* 17.

60) See Rafatí in *Khúshihá-i az Kharman-i-Adab va Hunar* 2:27-28, where the following passage from the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (paragraph 51) is suggested regarding the role of music in the Bahá’í spiritual experience:

We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening to thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God. We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion.

61) Cf. *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 221, where it is written:

It is incumbent upon everyone to aid those daysprings of authority and sources of command who are adorned with the ornament of equity and justice. Blessed are the rulers and the learned among the people of Bahá’.. They are My trustees among My servants and the manifestations of My commandments amidst My people. Upon them rest My glory, My blessings and My grace which have pervaded the world of being. In this connection the utterances revealed in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* such that from the horizon of their words the light of divine grace shineth luminous and resplendent.

Shoghi Effendi has provided the following clarification on these twin arms of Bahá’í Administration,

In this holy cycle the “learned” are, on the one hand, the Hands of the Cause of God, and, on the other, the teachers and

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diffusers of His teachings, who do not rank as Hands, but who have attained an eminent position in the teaching work. As to the “rulers” they refer to the members of the Local, National and International Houses of Justice. The duties of each of these souls will be determined in the future. (Continental Board of Counselors 42.)

62) *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* paragraph 30.

63) Ridvan 153 message from the Universal House of Justice paragraph 24.

64) *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 13.

65) The comparison weakens when the entire scope of the activities of the Hands of the Cause are considered. The institution of the “learned” has the dual function of protection and promotion of the Bahá’í Faith. The “Hands” were also instrumental in conducting the affairs of the Bahá’í Faith during the years 1957-63, after the passing of Shoghi Effendi and prior to the election of the Universal House of Justice. The critical function of the “learned” was anticipated in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (paragraph 42). A comparison of paragraphs 40 and 173 further suggests this critical function of the “learned.” The scope of the activities of the “learned” therefore transcend those of the Sufi masters.

66) *Continental Board of Counselors* 42.

67) *Continental Board of Counselors* 45.

68) It is worth noting that according to the Universal House of Justice Bahá’u’lláh has “permanently excluded the evils admittedly inherent in the institutions of the ‘learned’ in past dispensations.” *The Continental Board of Counselors* 45.

69) *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 138-39.

70) For the full story see Rumi’s *Mathnaví* book 2: 1722-1817

71) See for example *Amr va Khatq* 3:445-48 by A. Mázindarání.

72) According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “in every word and movement of the obligatory prayer there are allusions, mysteries and a wisdom that man is unable to comprehend, and letters and scrolls cannot contain” (*Spiritual Foundations* #27).

73) *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 219.

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Mysticism and the Bahá'í Community

by Moojan Momen

Religion has played many roles in human history. One of its roles has been that of assisting and promoting the spiritual development of the individual—helping to put the individual in touch with the spiritual side of their being, placing the individual into a higher, better relationship with Transcendent reality. In most religions, a minority of the members of religion have made this aspect of the religion their main concern and have organized themselves for the better pursuit of this aspect. This has resulted in the emergence of Christian and Buddhist monasteries and Sufi orders in Islam.

In the Bahá'í Faith, mysticism has been brought forward to a central role in the religion. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi has defined “that mystical feeling which unites man with God” as “the core of religious faith” (Hornby 1988, 506, no. 1704). It is thus the concern of all Bahá'ís rather than that of just a minority. In this paper, we will leave aside the examination of personal spirituality and mysticism (the use of prayer, fasting and meditation in order to achieve spiritual progress) and concentrate upon the communal aspect, the organisation of the Bahá'ís as a mystic community. We will begin with a brief look at the Islamic mystical community, the Sufi orders, and at Bahá'u'lláh's historical interactions with these and with Sufi mystics, especially those wandering dervishes who were a familiar sight in nineteenth-century Iran. Then we will examine the general features of the organisation of mystical orders and communities in the different religions of the world and Bahá'u'lláh's criticism of these. Lastly, we will look at the way that Bahá'u'lláh organised the Bahá'í community in such a way as to be a new type of mystical community.

Bahá'u'lláh and Mystics

There is much evidence that Bahá'u'lláh was sympathetic to and had close relations with many Muslim mystics during His lifetime. The clearest evidence for this comes from the Baghdad period. When Bahá'u'lláh left Baghdad because of disunity among the Bábís, He took up the lifestyle of a wandering dervish among the Sulaymaniyyah mountains. He soon became regarded as a Sufi shaykh and was invited by the head of the Khalidiyyah (Naqshbandíyyah Order) in the Kurdish town of Sulaymaniyyah to stay in their *takiyyah* (retreat). While there, Bahá'u'lláh expounded on the great mystical text, the *Futúhát Makkíyyah* of Ibn al-‘Arabí. He also composed a poem, the *Qasídah-yi Warqá'íyyah* (Ode of the Dove), in the style of the *Tá'íyyah*, a famous poem of the Sufi master, Ibn Fárid. Although the Bábís of Baghdad managed to persuade Bahá'u'lláh to return there, He continued His ties with the Kurdish Sufis, who visited him from time to time in Baghdad. Since the time of His years in Baghdad He had been in touch with the Qádiríyyah Order as well as the Naqshbandíyyah. He wrote the Four Valleys for a Kurdish Sufi leader whom He had met in Sulaymáníyyih, Shaykh ‘Abdu’r-Rahmán Tálabání of Kirkúk, the head of the prominent Kurdish Tálabání family and leader (shaykh) of the Qádirí Sufi order in Kurdistan. Bahá'u'lláh also wrote the Seven Valleys for Shaykh Muhiyu’d-Dín, a Sufi of the Qádirí order, who was to succeed his father as a Sufi shaykh in Gilzarda. In these texts, Bahá'u'lláh showed Himself to be perfectly at home with Sufi terminology and concepts.

During the rest of Bahá'u'lláh's sojourns, He remained in touch with Sufi initiates and shaykhs. Hájí Mírzá Ridá Qu lí Safá, a well-known Sufi shaykh of the Ni‘matu’lláhí order, visited him in Istanbul; Hájí Muhammad ‘Alí Pírzádi, a celebrated Sufi, boarded Bahá'u'lláh's ship at Alexandria to pay his respects; and Hájí Muhammad ‘Alí Sayyah visited Bahá'u'lláh in ‘Akká. Many Ottoman officials were inclined to Sufism and several of these came to regard Bahá'u'lláh very highly on account of the spirituality they observed in him. Among these was Sulayman Páshá, a Sufi of the Qádiríyyah Order who was governor of Edirne while Bahá'u'lláh was there. Bahá'u'lláh also instructed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to respond to a request from Safvet Páshá for a commentary on an Islamic Tradition much favoured by Sufis (“I was a Hidden Treasure . . .”).

Among those who became Bahá'ís during the time of Bahá'u'lláh, there were many who were either Sufis or were inclined towards Sufism. Among these was the famous calligrapher Mírzá Muhammad Husayn Mishkín-Qalam, a Sufi of the Ni‘matulláhí order; Sulaymán Khán, later known as Jamál Effendi; and Ahmad

Yazdí, to whom the Arabic Tablet of Ahmad was addressed; and several of several of the companions of Bahá'u'lláh in His journeys, including Darvish Sidq 'Alí, Mírzá Muhammad- 'Alí Isfahání, and Hájí Muhammad Khán Balúch. Many other prominent disciples of Bahá'u'lláh either showed interest in Sufism or wore the garb of dervishes for a time. These include Mullá Muhammad Zarandí Nabil-i-A'zam and Mullá Muhammad Qá'iní Nabíl-i-Akbar.

There were also a number of conversions among Iranian Sufi dervishes, who, even after conversion, continued as wandering dervishes. Hájí Qalandar of Hamadán, upon becoming a Bahá'í took to the road and lived the life of a wandering dervish, meeting with and converting other dervishes. He visited 'Akká on several occasions, once in the company of another Bahá'í dervish Sádiq- 'Alí Qazvíní (Mazandarání n.d., 6:711-12). Hájí 'Abdu'l-Karím of Qazvín, a twenty-year-old man from a wealthy family, met Hájí Qalandar and was converted both to the Bahá'í Faith and the dervish way of life. Leaving behind all his property, he took the Sufi name of 'Árif- 'Alí and began to travel. After a time, a certain Ismá'íl joined him as student, taking the Sufi name Hájí Tayfúr. These two travelled through the Ottoman domains eventually reaching 'Akká, where Bahá'u'lláh gave Hájí 'Abdu'l-Karím the name of Hájí Mu'nis (Mazandarání n.d., 6:554-5). In Baghdad, the two travellers met and converted Hájí Tavangar, another dervish from Qazvín, and four of his companions (Mazandarání n.d., 6:555-6). In this way, the Bahá'í Faith gradually spread among the dervishes. On one occasion, a group of six Bahá'í dervishes appeared in 'Akká to visit Bahá'u'lláh.

It would appear that Bahá'u'lláh looked to Sufism and mysticism as a way of attracting Sunnis to the Bahá'í Faith, since Sunnis were usually hostile to anything that emerged from Iran and which they therefore considered tainted with Shi'ism. This process started in Baghdad where Bahá'u'lláh produced several mystical works in a style familiar to Sufis. But it was from 'Akká that Bahá'u'lláh appears to have organised and directed a campaign to spread the Bahá'í Faith among Arab, Turkish and Indian Sunnis through Bahá'í mystics, who would travel through these lands in the garb of dervishes, speaking to the people and hoping to guide a few to the Bahá'í Faith. They would, of course, use Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valley and Four Valleys as well as His mystical poetry for this. Among those who appear to have been specifically instructed by Bahá'u'lláh to carry out this campaign were Hájí Qalandar, who after visiting Bahá'u'lláh travelled through Syria, Iraq, and Anatolia (Mazandarání n.d., 6:711-12); Jamál Effendi, who was instructed by Bahá'u'lláh to travel in the garb of a Sufi dervish throughout the Ottoman domains and teach the Bahá'í Faith (1871-5; Samandar, *Tarikh*, 213 and Momen 1999-2000, 50) and who was later instructed to continue in the same way throughout India and south-east and central Asia (Momen 1999-2000); Hájí Eliyáhu who, after visiting Bahá'u'lláh in 'Akká, travelled throughout the Sunni world in dervish dress (Mazandarání n.d., 6:674); and Sayyid Háshim of Káshán, who on Bahá'u'lláh's instructions spent seven years wandering through Iraq, Syria and the Arabian peninsula dressed as a dervish (Vahid-Tehrani n.d., 1-2). None of these individuals appears to have had any great success, however, except for Jamál Effendi's efforts in India and Burma. Later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appears to have abandoned this plan in favour of using Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpáygání to approach the more orthodox Sunni Muslims at the Azhár University in Cairo.

The Social Organisation of Mystical Orders

Insofar as we can discern similarities in the social organisation of the mysticism in the various religions of the world, these would consist of:

1. A hierarchical structure with a leader who is regarded as being farthest along the spiritual path and who is thought capable of guiding others along that path. One of the main features of mysticism in the religions of the world is the fact that they usually result in some form of hierarchical organisation. In Theravada and most forms of Mahayana Buddhism, the spiritual path can only be successfully trod in a monastery under the guidance and authority of an abbot or senior monk. In many forms of Hinduism, true mysticism only occurs under the tutelage of a guru. Absolute obedience of His commands is required. In Christianity, the traditional path for mystics was to join one of the more mystical monastic orders, such as the Franciscans and the Carmelites. These orders often stressed discipline and obedience to the hierarchy of the order. Islamic mysticism, Sufism, is organised into orders, each of which has a shaykh (*pír*, *murshid*) or leader. The fact that progress along the mystical path can only be attained under the authority and guidance of a shaykh is emphasised by such sayings as "he who has no shaykh has the Devil as his shaykh."

One of the aspects of the master-initiate relationship that is thus set up is that of confession, laying oneself emotionally and psychologically bare before the master. This practice forms an important part of Christian mystical and monastic orders, but is also to be found in Sufi orders. Another aspect is the complete submission and obedience shown by the initiate towards the master. It was not unusual, for example, for the initiate to prostrate themselves before the master. Rules about how initiates are to behave, especially towards the master are part of Christian, Sufi and Buddhist orders. A typical text explaining the relationship of master to initiate is the following description of Sufism:

This relationship draws the novice from the turmoil of the world into the refuge provided by the master's spiritual presence and protection. This result demands, however, that two conditions be fulfilled: (1) confession and (2) compliance with the master's guidance. (Ajmal 1987: 295-6)

2. The insistence that it is only by personal, oral transmission of the teaching and experience of the community that one can really make progress along the spiritual path—it is not something that can just be learned from books. This principle is held by mystics and mystical orders from Buddhism and Hinduism through to Islam and Christianity. Thus for example, Honen, the Japanese Buddhist Master and founder of the Jodo school of Buddhism, said:

A man who reads about the doctrines of the Jodo without receiving oral instruction will miss the thing really necessary to the attainment of Ojo (enlightenment). (Shunjo 394)

All mystical orders are to some extent gnostic—they hold to a secret or knowledge or wisdom which is only transmitted through their order. Indeed, even within the order, there is sometimes an elite inner circle that has full access to this esoteric knowledge while the outer circle merely benefits and obtains a grace and blessing through being associated with the inner circle. There is thus usually a distinct elitism associated with these mystical orders. This state of affairs is described thus by Frithjof Schuon:

[A]lthough esotericism is reserved, by definition and because of its very nature, for an intellectual elite necessarily restricted in numbers, one cannot help observing that initiatory organizations have at all times included in their ranks a relatively large number of members . . . this leads to a distinction, within the brotherhoods between inner and outer circles, the members of the latter being scarcely aware of the real nature of the organization to which they belong . . . (Schuon 1984: 33-4)

These mystical orders usually relate this secret or esoteric knowledge to the founder of their religion, sometimes saying that it is a secret teaching that the founder transmitted to those who were ready to hear it or else that the founder transmitted in a dream or vision.

3. An inclination towards monasticism or asceticism. Insofar as these mystical orders perceive the world and its distractions to be a hindrance to their quest, these groups try to isolate themselves from the world. In the monastic setting there are often elaborate rules of behaviour for initiates to follow, commonly involving periods of isolation, a reduction or absence of speech, sexual abstinence and a general reduction in ordinary human interactions. Even in Islam, where monasticism is prohibited, the Sufi orders developed retreats (*khanegahs*, *tekkes*, or *zawiyas*), which shared many similarities with monasteries.

4. Practices that lead to altered states of consciousness. The commonest form of this is the repeated rhythmic chanting of a formula (*mantra* [Skt.], *dhikr* [Ar.], or *hesychasm* [Gr.]), usually accompanied by rhythmic breathing leading to hyperventilation and resulting in ecstatic and trance experiences. In fact these ecstatic and trance states result in altered states of consciousness which are often interpreted by those experiencing them as become one with the universe. Thus they reinforce the monistic view of reality to which these mystical orders subscribe.

5. Ethics, Law and Unity. There are a number of other features which are not typical of mystical orders but which did occur historically in Islam and which we will note here because they were of particular concern to Bahá'u'lláh. In Islamic history we can see a development in mysticism. In the earliest phase, mystics were just pious individuals, such as Hasan al-Basrí and Rabí'a (both eighth century C.E.) with a desire for direct communion with and experience of the Divine. Although these individuals may have had a circle of students to whom they gave religious instruction, they did not attempt to set up a religious community or order. Later, in the Twelfth through Thirteenth Centuries, Islamic mysticism became more formal with the setting up of the

spiritual lineages of the great Sufi orders, such as the Qádiriyah and the Rifá'iyah. Although ideally, each successive leader of the order was chosen by the previous leader on the basis of their high spiritual station and their ability to guide others, in practice, the leadership of most Sufi orders became hereditary. By the Fifteenth Century, these Sufi orders had begun to establish formal practices such as repetitive chanting, rhythmic breathing, song and dance. Increasingly the focus was away from individual spiritual development and towards group practices (which often led to altered levels of consciousness and the ecstatic experiences associated with such states), the veneration of saints and shrines, and the working of miracles and cures—activities that no doubt increased the popularity of these orders, but were of little relevance to the true mystic quest. In other words, spiritual depth had been sacrificed for show, effect and sentiment.

In several religions, and especially in Islam, there has also been a tendency for some of those pursuing the mystical path to degenerate morally. Thinking that they have achieved a higher plane through spiritual exercises and discipline, they have considered themselves above the religious law and sometimes sunk into morally reprehensible behaviour.

The mystical thread in the development of religions has always been in tension with other threads, such as the trend towards ritualism and legalism. In the religions of the West, those tending towards legalism have usually attacked those who follow the mystic path. Thus another problem of the mystic path has been the propensity to cause divisions.

When Bahá'u'lláh came to analyse and give His formulation of the spiritual problems of humanity, He gave some degree of attention to what was by then the ancient question of how to organise a community that sets out to promote spiritual development. In His analysis, He pointed out the weaknesses of the existing systematisations of the mystic path in the world's religions.

Bahá'u'lláh's critique of existing mystical pathways

In His writings, Bahá'u'lláh critiques all five of the characteristic features of mystical order that are enumerated above. As He surveys the various religious hierarchies and organizational frameworks that existed in His day, He found none of them satisfactory for His purpose of creating a mystical religious community.

1. Leadership and a hierarchical structure. Bahá'u'lláh's criticism of all forms of religious leadership can be found in many places in His works. His assessment of them is:

Leaders of religion, in every age, have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp. Some for the lust of leadership, others through want of knowledge and understanding, have been the cause of the deprivation of the people. By their sanction and authority, every Prophet of God hath drunk from the chalice of sacrifice, and winged His flight unto the heights of glory. . . . Content with a transitory dominion, they have deprived themselves of an everlasting sovereignty. (Bahá'u'lláh 1989:15-16)

Although Bahá'u'lláh allows that in past ages, when the majority of people were illiterate and there were no social support systems in society, religious leaders and religious professionals may have been necessary, He states that that stage in human history is now past. With the increasing ability of all human beings to obtain an education and read the scriptures for themselves, the balance has now shifted so that the negative aspects of their role out-weigh the positive.

Bahá'u'lláh also comments on some specific practices that are part of the master-initiate relationship. Apart from abolishing the religious leadership of the mystical master and the obedience due to him, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits the confessing by one individual of his/her sins before any individual or even in a group setting:

Moreover such confession before people results in one's humiliation and abasement, and God—exalted be His glory—wisheth not the humiliation of His servants. (Bahá'u'lláh 1978, 24)

2. Oral Transmission and Gnostic Knowledge. With regard to oral transmission of scripture and knowledge, which is considered of primary importance in most mystical traditions, Bahá'u'lláh deals with this as an aspect of His criticism of religious leadership as a whole. The insistence on oral transmission is often a pretext for elevating and strengthening the position of the leader of a mystical order. But the tradition of oral transmission and master-initiate relationships is also condemned by Bahá'u'lláh because it leads to *taqlíd*, the blind imita-

tion and following of the master, and thus to spiritual stagnation. It negates that spirit of search and investigation which is essential on the mystic path: "O My Brother, journey upon these planes in the spirit of search, not in blind imitation" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* and *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 24). He also attributed the corruption of Islam to its attribution of binding authority to the orally transmitted reports of the sayings of Muhammad (Shoghi Effendi in Hornby 1988, 439, no. 1435).

With regard to the gnostic knowledge implicit in most mystical orders, Bahá'u'lláh states that in this day all the spiritual knowledge and guidance that is necessary for the mystic quest is freely and openly available to all. All claims to a secret spiritual knowledge that is above what ordinary people can understand are to be treated with great suspicion.

And among the people is he who layeth claim to inner knowledge, and still deeper knowledge concealed within this knowledge. Say: Thou speakest false! By God! What thou dost possess is naught but husks which We have left to thee as bones are left to dogs. (1992, 36)

Even more strongly condemned are those who claim that certain specific abstruse knowledge is necessary for spiritual understanding. Bahá'u'lláh condemned, for example Karím Khán Kirmání, the Shaykhí leader who taught mystical philosophy to his circle of disciples. He states that he had perused Kirmání's book *Irshádu'l-Awwám* (Guidance to the Ignorant) and "From this title We perceived the odour of conceit and vain-glory, inasmuch as he hath imagined himself a learned man and regarded the rest of the people ignorant" (1989, 185). More specifically, Bahá'u'lláh condemns Kirmání for claiming that some twenty obscure and abstruse branches of learning were necessary in order to understand Muhammad's Mi'ráj, the night-ascent to heaven, one of the key events in the life of Muhammad, that has always been understood by mystics in Islam to be a symbol of the mystic's ascent towards God.

We noticed that he had enumerated some twenty or more sciences, the knowledge of which he considered to be essential for the comprehension of the mystery of the "Mi'ráj." We gathered from his statements that unless a man be deeply versed in them all, he can never attain to a proper understanding of this transcendent and exalted theme. Among the specified sciences were the science of metaphysical abstractions, of alchemy, and natural magic. Such vain and discarded learnings, this man hath regarded as the pre-requisites of the understanding of the sacred and abiding mysteries of divine Knowledge . . .

Gracious God! Such is the measure of his understanding . . . how clear and evident it is to every discerning heart that this so-called learning is and hath ever been, rejected by Him Who is the one true God. How can the knowledge of these sciences, which are so contemptible in the eyes of the truly learned, be regarded as essential to the apprehension of the mysteries of the "Mi'ráj," whilst the Lord of the "Mi'ráj" Himself was never burdened with a single letter of these limited and obscure learnings, and never defiled His radiant heart with any of these fanciful illusions? . . . By the righteousness of God! Whoso desireth to fathom the mystery of this "Mi'ráj," and craveth a drop from this ocean, if the mirror of his heart be already obscured by the dust of these learnings, he must needs cleanse and purify it ere the light of this mystery can be reflected therein. (1989, 186-7)

Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes in His works that true spiritual knowledge is not dependent on book learning or instruction in abstruse and esoteric matters. It is purely dependent on one's spiritual qualities and capacities:

Heed not the idle contention of those who maintain that the Book and verses thereof can never be a testimony unto the common people, inasmuch as they neither grasp their meaning nor appreciate their value. And yet, the unfailing testimony of God to both the East and the West is none other than the Qur'án. Were it beyond the comprehension of men, how could it have been declared as a universal testimony unto all people? . . .

Such contention is utterly fallacious and inadmissible. It is actuated solely by arrogance and pride. Its motive is to lead the people astray from the Ridván of divine good-pleasure and to tighten the reins of their authority over the people. And yet, in the sight of God, these common people are infinitely superior and exalted above their religious leaders who have turned away from the one true God. The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit. (1989, 210-11)

3. Monasticism or asceticism. Bahá'u'lláh states that monasticism and withdrawal from the world is no longer an acceptable means for individuals to try to achieve spiritual progress. He instructs monks and others who seclude themselves to go out into the world and occupy themselves with what will benefit humanity:

Say: O concourse of monks! Seclude not yourselves in your churches and cloisters. Come ye out of them by My leave, and busy, then, yourselves with what will profit you and others. Thus commandeth you He Who is the Lord of the Day of Reckoning. Seclude yourselves in the stronghold of My love. This, truly, is the seclusion that becometh you, could ye but know it. He that secludeth himself in his house is indeed as one dead. It behooveth man to show forth that which will benefit mankind. He that bringeth forth no fruit is fit for the fire. (1988, 49)

Bahá'u'lláh also admonishes monks and spiritual ascetics that the concept of celibacy as an assistance to spiritual progress is erroneous. In Christianity, for example, Bahá'u'lláh states that it was born out of a misguided idea that all sexual intercourse is evil and out of a ill-conceived desire to emulate Christ's celibacy. Bahá'u'lláh states that it is lechery that is forbidden, not legitimate marital relations, and that the reason for Christ's celibacy was not intended to indicate that this was a desirable state but rather was born out of necessity. Addressing monks in general, He states:

Enter ye into wedlock, that after you another may arise in your stead. We, verily, have forbidden you lechery, and not that which is conducive to fidelity. . . . He that married not (Jesus Christ) could find no place wherein to abide, nor where to lay His head, by reason of what the hands of the treacherous had wrought. His holiness consisted not in the things ye have believed and imagined, but rather in the things which belong unto Us. (1988, 49-50)

Bahá'u'lláh condemns asceticism and the severe practices of self-denial and self-punishment that often accompany this. He implies that these actions are often only done so as to attract the adulation of the masses:

How many a man hath secluded himself in the climes of India, denied himself the things that God hath decreed as lawful, imposed upon himself austerities and mortifications, and hath not been remembered by God, the Revealer of Verses. Make not your deeds as snares wherewith to entrap the object of your aspiration. (1992, 36)

4. Practices that lead to altered states of consciousness. Among the laws given by Bahá'u'lláh is one that commands the chanting of the phrase "Alláhu Abhá" 95 times daily. There is some question as to whether this can be considered the same as Sufi *dhikr* or a mantra. The fact that one must count the number of times that one is saying the formula is somewhat against that loss of consciousness of one's surroundings that usually accompanies trance and ecstasy states associated with reciting *dhikrs* and mantras.

What we can say is that although Bahá'u'lláh made the spiritual development of the individual a central concern of His religion, He did not raise any of the practices leading to altered states of consciousness to the level of a law. Thus He evidently did not think these practices were essential for spiritual development. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh warns against excessive recitation to the point that causes weariness and dejection:

Pride not yourselves on much reading of the verses or on a multitude of pious acts by night and day; for were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. Read ye the sacred verses in such measure that ye be not overcome by languor and despondency. Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them, so that they may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the Dawning-place of His manifest signs; this will draw you nearer to God, did ye but comprehend. (1992, 149)

Another mystical activity which some traditions recommend is the practice of visualization. In Mahayana Buddhism, for example, one of the spiritual practices that is recommended is that of visualising the Western Paradise (Sukhavati) of Amitabha. This visualisation is achieved under the instruction of a master. 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of a similar process of visualising but rather than visualising a heavenly place, the process that He refers to is the intellectual visualising, with the inner eye, of a spiritual truth. Moreover, 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not imply that a master is required for this process to occur:

Day and night you must strive that you may attain to the significances of the heavenly Kingdom, perceive

the signs of Divinity, acquire certainty of knowledge and realize that this world has a Creator, a Vivifier, a Provider, an Architect—knowing this through proofs and evidences and not through susceptibilities, nay, rather, through decisive arguments and real vision—that is to say, visualizing it as clearly as the outer eye beholds the sun. In this way may you behold the presence of God and attain to the knowledge of the holy, divine Manifestations. (1982, 227)

5. Ethics, Law and Unity. Bahá'u'lláh was strongly critical in several places in His writings of certain developments in Sufism. In the Seven Valleys, He specifically refutes those Sufis who have asserted that once a mystic has attained a certain level or stage on the mystic path, then religious laws, which are intended for the uninitiated masses, are no longer incumbent upon them:

In all these journeys the traveller must stray not the breadth of a hair from the “Law,” for this is indeed the secret of the “Path” and the fruit of the Tree of “Truth”; and in all these stages he must cling to the robe of obedience to the commandments, and hold fast to the cord of shunning all forbidden things, that he may be nourished from the cup of the Law and informed of the mysteries of Truth. (1991, 39-40)

In general, in Bahá'u'lláh's time, the behaviour and morals of some Sufis had sunk to a low point. Some were intoxicated and unruly; others were unprincipled charlatans who performed sleights of hand and trickery to fool the uneducated masses into thinking that they had super-natural powers. After a passage in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that Bahá'u'lláh ordained a special night for the mystics and dervishes, He goes on to correct any possible misunderstanding as to who is meant:

He went on to say that “dervish” does not denote those persons who wander about, spending their nights and days in fighting and folly; rather, He said, the term designates those who are completely severed from all but God, who cleave to His laws, are firm in His Faith, loyal to His Covenant, and constant in worship. It is not a name for those who, as the Persians say, tramp about like vagrants, are confused, unsettled in mind, a burden to others, and of all mankind the most coarse and rude. (1971, 38)

In addition, Bahá'u'lláh condemns some mystics for allowing themselves to be fed and supported by the generality of the people, while they seclude themselves and do nothing that contributes to the general good.

Among them are mystics who bear allegiance to the Faith of Islam, some of whom indulge in that which leadeth to idleness and seclusion. I swear by God! It lowereth man's station and maketh him swell with pride. Man must bring forth fruit. One who yieldeth no fruit is, in the words of the Spirit [Christ], like unto a fruitless tree, and a fruitless tree is fit but for the fire. (1978, 60)

Bahá'u'lláh was also critical of any movement that created a split or disunity in a religion. Mystics often created such disunity by being at odds with the majority of their fellow-believers, although it must be admitted that it has usually been the latter and their leaders that have initiated the conflict and have persecuted the mystics. In the Tablet of Unity, Bahá'u'lláh condemns in particular the creation of separate sects based on different rituals and public acts of worship. He refers in particular to different ways of saying the ritual obligatory prayer and to the Sufi practice of dancing. He laments the fact that Islam has become weakened because it has become divided into numerous religious communities, each with their own public rituals and practices. Bahá'u'lláh considers that the Sufi orders have played a major role in this process of dividing and weakening Islam. In the following provisional translation of a passage from the Tablet of Unity, Bahá'u'lláh specifically refers to a number of Sufi orders as examples of this process:

The Holy Law (Shari'ah) of the Messenger of God may be likened to an ocean from which innumerable gulfs branch out. And this is the cause of the weakness of the Shari'ah of God among the peoples. Until now no-one, not kings nor subjects nor the indigent have understood the reason for this, nor have they appreciated how to regain that power that has vanished and the learning that has fallen away. Thus one gulf is Shi'a, one gulf is Sunni, one Shaykhí, another Sháh Ni'matulláhí, one Naqshbandí, another Malámatí, one Jalálí, another Rifá'í, and yet another Khárábátí. Thus are multiplied the innumerable pathways to hell. Thus do the stones weep and the Pen of the All-High laments. Seest thou what has befallen a Shari'ah whose light illumined the world and whose fire, that is to say the fire of its love, was the guide of its peoples. Well is it with those who ponder upon these matters and investigate then and are fair in their judgement. Thus did this difference in public rituals become the cause of the shaking of the foundations of the Cause of God (Bahá'u'lláh unpublished)

Bahá'u'lláh's Formula for a Mystic Community

One of the most important things that Bahá'u'lláh did was to make it clear that the quest for personal spiritual development (the mystical quest) is the central concern of religion. This is something that has not always been clear in other religions. In the majority orthodox interpretation of Judaism and both Sunni and Shí'í Islam, for example, the central concern of the religion is the following of a Holy Law, the correct performance of rituals and the correct pattern of life. Bahá'u'lláh annuls most of the provisions of the Holy Law, saying in effect that such rigid frameworks were necessary in the childhood of humanity but now that humanity has reached maturity, decisions on the pattern of one's life should be left to the ethical judgement and sense of dignity and moderation of the individual. Instead, He refocuses the energies of the followers of His Religion on the spiritual development of the individual. From now on, the mystic quest is to be everyone's concern. Using the term that in Sufism signifies the mystical union of the lover and the Beloved (*wisál*), Bahá'u'lláh calls this day, "the Day whereon the Finger of majesty and power hath opened the seal of the Wine of Reunion (*wisál*), and called all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth." (1983, 28-29)

Thus while the mystical quest is a religious interest of a minority in other religions (the members of Sufi orders, the ascetics in Hinduism, the monks in Christianity and Judaism, etc.), in the Bahá'í Faith, it becomes a central concern of the whole community. While in other religions, separate communities need to be set up in order to cater for the minority who wish to pursue the mystical quest (Sufi orders, Christian and Buddhist monastic communities), in the Bahá'í Faith, the whole community is engaged in the mystical quest and thus the Bahá'í community itself is the mystic community. The Bahá'í administrative order thus becomes the organization of a mystic community.

1. Leadership and a hierarchical structure. In the religious community that He is creating, Bahá'u'lláh does not want individuals to claim authority. He does not want any Bahá'í to see himself or herself as being of a higher rank than other Bahá'ís. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes this when He states that, despite His position of being the leader of the community and the Centre of the Covenant, He wishes His rank to be merely that of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the "servant" [lit. "slave"] of Bahá'u'lláh; Shoghi Effendi 1991, 139). Shoghi Effendi similarly refused all attempts by Bahá'ís to elevate his position and he signed his English letters to Bahá'ís "your true brother." Bahá'u'lláh treats of this theme in the Tablet of Unity, of which the following is a provisional translation of the relevant part:

Another type is the unity of rank or station. This results in the rising up of the Cause and its elevation among the peoples. But if ranking and preference of one over another comes into its midst, the world falls into ruin and desolation may be witnessed. Those souls who have drunk from the sea of the utterance of the All-Merciful and are turning towards the All-High Horizon should see themselves as being of one rank and one station. Should this injunction be firmly established and be realised through the power and might of God, the world would be seen as the Abhá paradise. Verily human beings are exalted, as can be found in every Divine scripture; but to consider oneself as more learned, more favoured, more accomplished, more righteous or more exalted is a mighty error and sin. Well is it with those souls who are adorned with the ornament of this unity and are accepted before God. Look at the 'ulamá of Iran. If they had not considered themselves the most exalted and most accomplished of all beings, they would not have caused those wretched followers of theirs to curse and blaspheme against the Desire of the Worlds. All humanity is dismayed, nay the entire world is bewildered, at these false and neglectful souls. The fire of pride and vainglory has burnt them all, but they are not aware of it and do not understand. They have not drunk a drop of the ocean of knowledge and understanding. Woe unto them and unto what their tongues have uttered and unto what their hands have wrought on the day of retribution and on this day when the people have arisen for the Lord of the Worlds. (Bahá'u'lláh, unpublished)

Having established this principle, Bahá'u'lláh was then left with the question that, if the Bahá'ís were to be a mystic community and if there was to be no religious leaders in the community, what then was going to replace the role of the spiritual guide or master to that mystic community? What was going to replace the Sufi *shaykh* or *murshid*, the guru, the abbot or senior monk of the monastery?

There are several ways in which the role of the spiritual guide or master is replaced in the Bahá'í community. First, Bahá'u'lláh instructs every Bahá'í to read and meditate upon a passage of the Bahá'í scriptures

every day: "Peruse ye every day the verses revealed by God. Blessed is the man who reciteth them and reflecteth upon them" (Bahá'u'lláh in *Compilation* 1991, 1:188, no. 363). Through this process, spiritual secrets will be revealed to the mystic: "Meditate profoundly, that the secret of things unseen may be revealed unto you, that you may inhale the sweetness of a spiritual and imperishable fragrance" (Bahá'u'lláh 1989, 8). This process will in itself lead to progress along the mystic path:

They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful in the most melodious of tones will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty of earth and heaven can never be compared. From them they will inhale the divine fragrance of My worlds—worlds which today none can discern save those who have been endowed with vision through this sublime, this beauteous Revelation. Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion. Blessed be those who hearken. (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, 116)

There are, in the Bahá'í scriptures, numerous prayers, supplication and meditations from Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá which will assist in this process of spiritual enlightenment and progress.

Turn to God, supplicate humbly at His threshold, seeking assistance and confirmation, that God may rend asunder the veils that obscure your vision. Then will your eyes be filled with illumination, face to face you will behold the reality of God and your heart become completely purified from the dross of ignorance, reflecting the glories and bounties of the Kingdom. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 293)

Beyond this, the Bahá'í teachings also have provision for the obtaining of spiritual guidance through tapping the spiritual wisdom of the community. The process of consultation is applied to all aspects of Bahá'í community life. It is applied in the administrative affairs of the community, but Bahá'ís are also encouraged to gather together, read the Bahá'í scriptures and consult about the meaning and spiritual significance of these. Bahá'u'lláh states that this process leads to "awareness" and "awakening" (in *Compilation* 1991, 1:93, no. 170). Bahá'u'lláh calls consultation "the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way and the bestower of true understanding" (Bahá'u'lláh 1978, 168). There is a great deal in the Bahá'í writings about the way in which consultation should occur (see below), but if it is carried out in this way, then Bahá'ís believe that it is superior to the master-initiate relationship as a source of spiritual guidance because it taps the collective wisdom of the group and, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "the views of several individuals are assuredly preferable to one man, even as the power of a number of men is of course greater than the power of one man. Thus consultation is acceptable in the presence of the Almighty, and hath been enjoined upon the believers." (*Compilation* 1991, 1:97-98, no. 182)

In the Bahá'í community, however, as developed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, individuals do not have authority. There are individuals who have special designations, such as Hands of the Cause, Counsellors, and the Afán, but these designations are only honorary or confer opportunities for service to the Bahá'í community. Such roles as these individuals may have in the Bahá'í community are advisory and exhortatory. They have no authority. Authority belongs only to elected institutions.

2. Oral Transmission and Gnostic Knowledge. With regard to authoritative transmission of the scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith, the official position is almost the exact opposite of what is to be found in most mystical orders. In the Bahá'í Faith, all are encouraged to read the scriptures for themselves and to gain their own understanding of them. The scriptures and authoritative texts consist only of material that was written down either by one of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith or was seen and approved by them. Material that has been orally transmitted even through just one transmitter has no binding authority.

Shoghi Effendi has laid down the principle that the Bahá'ís should not attribute much importance to talks, reported to have been given by the Master, if these have not in one form or other obtained his sanction.

Bahá'u'lláh has made it clear enough that only those things that have been revealed in the form of Tablets have a binding power over the friends. Hearsays may be a matter of interest but can in no way claim authority. This basic teaching of Bahá'u'lláh was to preserve the Faith from being corrupted like Islam which attributes binding authority to all the reported sayings of Muhammad.

This being a basic principle of the Faith we should not confuse Tablets that were actually revealed and mere talks attributed to the founders of the Cause. The first have absolute binding authority while the lat-

ter can in no way claim our obedience. The highest thing this can achieve is to influence the activities of the one who has heard the saying in person. (Hornby 1988, 438-439, no. 1435)

We have seen above that these traditions of oral transmission through master-initiate relationships are regarded by Bahá’u’lláh as not merely perpetuating the phenomenon of religious leadership, which He condemns, but also leading to spiritual stagnation in that each generation merely continues the insights and guidance that it has inherited and does not push forward the boundaries of human spiritual achievement. Bahá’u’lláh calls upon His followers to “[t]ear asunder, in My Name, the veils that have grievously blinded your vision, and, through the power born of your belief in the unity of God, scatter the idols of vain imitation” (1983, 143, no. 75). Each Bahá’í is instructed to know of his/her own knowledge, to investigate reality and judge matters independently for himself/herself:

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour. (Bahá’u’lláh 1990, Arabic 2)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá stresses this need for human beings to free themselves of blind imitation of religious leaders and spiritual masters and to investigate reality for themselves:

God has given man the eye of investigation by which he may see and recognize truth. He has endowed man with ears that he may hear the message of reality and conferred upon him the gift of reason by which he may discover things for himself. This is his endowment and equipment for the investigation of reality. Man is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another’s ears nor comprehend with another’s brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation; otherwise, you will be utterly submerged in the sea of ignorance and deprived of all the bounties of God. Turn to God, supplicate humbly at His threshold, seeking assistance and confirmation, that God may rend asunder the veils that obscure your vision. Then will your eyes be filled with illumination, face to face you will behold the reality of God and your heart become completely purified from the dross of ignorance, reflecting the glories and bounties of the Kingdom. (1982, 293)

3. Monasticism or asceticism. We have seen above that Bahá’u’lláh forbade monastic seclusion and called upon the monks to emerge from their monasteries and to take an active role in society. Having criticised and dismissed many aspects of the existing mystical communities, Bahá’u’lláh was faced with the task of creating an alternative structure that would replace the role of the monastery, that would give the guidance and support upon the mystical path that was provided in the traditional monastic setting. Of course, Bahá’u’lláh had to operate within the historical reality of His time. The Bahá’í community was a persecuted minority with much of its energy and efforts being spent in merely surviving. Therefore Bahá’u’lláh was compelled to delay much of the implementation of His ideas. He laid down the principles but left it to His successors, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, to bring these ideas to reality. Thus in considering the creation of the Bahá’í community as a mystical order, we must look across the whole of the history of the Bahá’í Faith in order to discern its features.

There are various features of Bahá’í community life that allow it to function as a supportive environment for spiritual development and the mystical life. The first is the fact that most community activity is carried out in an environment of prayer and devotion. Second that the individual members of the community are encouraged to interact with each other in such a way as to promote love and unity. Third, Bahá’u’lláh prohibits backbiting in the community, since He states that it “queneth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.” (Bahá’u’lláh 1983, 265)

In brief, what Shoghi Effendi and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá have tried to create is a religious community that is sufficiently supportive to allow the individuals in it to develop themselves spiritually within a “safe” environment as a replacement for the monastic environment.

4. Mystical Practices. There are a number of practices used by mystics to which Bahá’u’lláh did give His qualified assent. Certain mystical systems believe that the very vibrations of the chanting of holy verses themselves have an effect. Thus, for example, in Yoga mantras should be said in a voice that is “alive and resonant” so that it may “utilize the power of sound vibrations to influence modalities of consciousness.” (Hewitt 1991,

442). Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh instructs that His words be chanted in “in the most melodious of tones” (1992, 116). He further exhorts the Bahá'ís:

Gather ye together with the utmost joy and fellowship and recite the verses revealed by the merciful Lord. By so doing the doors to true knowledge will be opened to your inner beings, and ye will then feel your souls endowed with steadfastness and your hearts filled with radiant joy. (Compilation 1991, 1:188, no. 364)

There is a reference, moreover, in the Bahá'í scriptures to Bahá'u'lláh having ordained a certain night for those who wish to carry out repetitive chanting (*dhikr*) activities.

While in the barracks, Bahá'u'lláh set apart a special night and He dedicated it to Darvish Sidq-‘Alí. He wrote that every year on that night the dervishes should bedeck a meeting place, which should be in a flower garden, and gather there to make mention of God [*dhikr*]. (‘Abdu'l-Bahá 1971, 38)

In the main, however, Bahá'u'lláh turns the attention of the Bahá'ís towards practices of individual devotion such as prayer and meditation upon the Bahá'í scriptures, and away from specific techniques which lead to states of trance or ecstasy.

Process and Progress

As well as establishing the Bahá'í community as an alternative to the traditional mystical communities, Bahá'u'lláh has ensured that the workings of the Bahá'í community facilitate and enhance the process of mystical progress and spiritual advancement. Thus, for example, many authors of texts on mysticism in the past have emphasised the importance of willing obedience to the master or spiritual guide. This obedience is necessary both to ensure compliance with the master's instructions but also to enable the initiate to develop spiritual qualities such as humility and detachment. In the Bahá'í community, the same result is achieved through the concept of the Covenant. This concept means that each generation of Bahá'ís agrees to obey the instructions of the Centre of the Covenant—‘Abdu'l-Bahá, followed by Shoghi Effendi, followed by the Universal House of Justice. In day-to-day terms, Bahá'ís currently obey the local and national institution of the Bahá'í community in the place where they live. Although full discussion and consultation is encouraged in the process leading up to a decision, once these institutions have made a decision, it is expected that all Bahá'ís will obey this, whether or not they agree with the decision. This allows the same spiritual processes that occur through obedience—suppression of the ego, the development of humility, and detachment from one's own fond notions and preconceived ideas.

We have seen above that consultation can be a source of spiritual guidance for Bahá'ís. It is also however, in its very process a way of enhancing spiritual development. The qualities that need to be cultivated in order for good consultation to occur, whether this be consultation over the meaning of the text or over an administrative matter, are also qualities that are needed for the spiritual progress of the individual.

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. (‘Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 87, no. 43)

‘Abdu'l-Bahá also writes of the need for “courtesy, dignity, care and moderation” (in *Compilation* 1991, 1:95, no. 176) as a pre-condition for consultation. In short, the development of many of the virtues that progress human beings along the mystical path are facilitated by engagement in the process of consultation. And both Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá have encouraged the use of this consultative process in all aspects of both personal and community life:

Settle all things, both great and small, by consultation. Without prior consultation, take no important step in your own personal affairs. Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another's projects and plans. Grieve over one another. Let none in the whole country go in need. Befriend one another until ye become as a single body, one and all . . . (‘Abdu'l-Bahá in *Compilation* 1991, 1:98-9, no. 185)

In this way, the whole of one's life as a Bahá'í becomes a continuous chance to consult and thus to improve these qualities and progress along the mystic path.

We have seen above that Bahá'u'lláh prohibits the isolation of the monastic community and instructs the monks to emerge from their monasteries. Instead He creates the Bahá'í community, in which He encourages as much diversity as possible—Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi always called Bahá'ís to seek out new and diverse groups to bring into the community. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for example, encouraged the American Bahá'ís to bring the black races into the Bahá'í community, even though He knew that this would be a great test for the white Bahá'ís. Shoghi Effendi encouraged and reported as a great success the enrolment of new races and tribes into the Bahá'í community. The Universal House of Justice has also encouraged Bahá'ís to seek to enrol members of all classes and strata of society. Thus, while in a monastic community the monks interacted with others who were of much the same cultural and social outlook as themselves, in the Bahá'í community one is exposed to every type of person and to types of cultural and social outlooks that clash with one's own. This creates a situation in which tests arise due to conflicting outlooks of individual Bahá'ís. Thus, commonly, the greatest tests and difficulties for Bahá'ís arise from their interactions with other Bahá'ís. (This being indeed a reflection of Bahá'u'lláh's own experience: "My imprisonment doeth Me no harm, neither the tribulations I suffer, nor the things that have befallen Me at the hands of My oppressors. That which harmeth Me is the conduct of those who, though they bear My name, yet commit that which maketh My heart and My pen to lament." Bahá'u'lláh 1988, 23)

As a consequence of this great variety of people interacting within the Bahá'í community, there will always tend to be great differences of opinion. The important factor in allowing this potentially unstable mixture to continue without exploding and splitting into sects is the concept of the Covenant. The source of the unity of the Bahá'í Faith is not a uniformity of doctrine and thought or the strict regimentation of a Holy Law, it is loyalty to the Covenant. As long as Bahá'ís maintain this loyalty, they are free to have widely differing ideas about the Bahá'í Faith. But this very freedom will inevitably be a source of irritation and tests to their fellow-believers, who think differently from them. Western ways of doing things will clash with Eastern ways; conservatives will be offended by radicals; liberals will be frustrated by fundamentalists. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that it is through meeting and overcoming tests that human beings grow spiritually (1971, 49-51). Thus in the dynamics of the social interactions of the Bahá'í community and under the umbrella of the unity brought about by the Covenant, one's spiritual qualities of love, patience, forbearance and empathy are put to the test and refined. The social dynamics of the Bahá'í community and the resultant development of spiritual qualities has been discussed further by Daniel C. Jordan:

When one joins a Bahá'í Community, he joins a family of extremely diverse human beings with whom he will have to work and establish meaningful relationships. The first thing he finds out is that his old repertoire of responses is no longer adequate. So many different human beings represent a great many unknowns, and trying to relate to those unknowns creates energy (anxiety) which sets that reciprocal process of knowing and loving through faith and courage in motion. Defining a legitimate goal which will constructively utilize the energy from that anxiety will call forth a new repertoire of responses. Each new response is a bit of one's latent capacity made manifest—a release of human potential. Another way of saying it is that the Bahá'í Community offers more opportunities for knowing and loving under growth-fostering circumstances than can be found anywhere else.

... Thus the Bahá'í community, because of its diversity, provides many of those tests which are essential for our development. At the same time, guidance from Bahá'í institutions and the commitment of members of the community to accept each other for what they can become provides the courage to turn those tests into vehicles for spiritual development—for the release of human potential (n.d., 13-14).

One function of the spiritual master or guide in traditional mystical communities has been to act as a corrective to delusions and self-deceptions that all are prone to. The processes of consultation and community interactions provide the corrective mechanism in the Bahá'í community. It is very easy to think that one has achieved such qualities as patience and love if one is in an isolated cocoon in a monastic setting. It is much more difficult to be self-deluded when one is interacting in a diverse community and trying to consult with individuals of a widely differing social, cultural and educational background to oneself.

Lastly, in the processes of the Bahá'í community that lead to spiritual development and progress, great emphasis is given to the concept of service. Thus for example, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá is enumerating what will lead to the mystic's goal of nearness to the Divine, He includes service to humanity and service in the cause

of universal peace among these pre-requisites.

Bahá'u'lláh proclaims in the Hidden Words that God inspires His servants and is revealed through them. He says, "Thy heart is My home; sanctify it for My descent. Thy spirit is My place of revelation; cleanse it for My manifestation." Therefore, we learn that nearness to God is possible through devotion to Him, through entrance into the Kingdom and service to humanity; it is attained by unity with mankind and through loving-kindness to all; it is dependent upon investigation of truth, acquisition of praiseworthy virtues, service in the cause of universal peace and personal sanctification. In a word, nearness to God necessitates sacrifice of self, severance and the giving up of all to Him. Nearness is likeness. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 148)

This teaching of the Bahá'í Faith is intended as a corrective to the tendency, described above, for some to think that because they think they have reached a certain spiritual station, they can indulge in a life of idleness and seclusion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares that, on the contrary, the closer one becomes to the Divine, the higher one's mystical ascent, and the more one engages in service to other human beings, the more interactions one has with individuals who are unlike oneself, and therefore more tests come one's way. Thus it is also through service that one's spiritual qualities are extended and refined.

This aspect of service is, at present, mainly an individual endeavour. Its role in Bahá'í community life is as yet undeveloped. It will only come to fruition with the development of the institution of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, the dependencies of which are intended to "afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant." (Shoghi Effendi 1968, 184) As the institution of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* develops, the Bahá'í community will increasingly adopt a service ethos and thus this avenue for the spiritual development of the individual will be enhanced.

In summary, the Bahá'í administration is not just the organization of a mystical community, but has been set up precisely so that its very functioning is itself the promotion of the spiritual development of the individual. The processes of the Bahá'í community act in a similar manner to give the individual the maximum chance of spiritual progress and a way of assessing this progress and avoiding self-deception.

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The Lawh-i-Mánikjí Sáhib:
Introduction and provisional translation
Ramin Neshati

“Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.”

—Bahá’u’lláh

The Lawh-i-Mánikjí Sáhib is a prominent tablet revealed by Bahá’u’lláh in the early ‘Akká period.¹ Of the context and circumstances surrounding its revelation not much is known, but oblique internal allusions to significant historical events makes it possible to trace the date of its recording to circa 1869-1872. This Tablet enjoys a singular distinction in the corpus of Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, as it is the first occasion where He gives expression to the now-famous proclamation “Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.” It is also noteworthy for its style and composition—one of only relatively few tablets Bahá’u’lláh revealed in pure Persian.² A rudimentary English translation first appeared in *Star of the West*, an edited version of which is reproduced below.³ This paper concerns itself with an epigrammatic survey of the salient themes found in this renowned Tablet, and with their import and correlation to Bahá’u’lláh’s writings of the same and later periods. Apart from succinct comments, no attempt has been made to analyze, scrutinize, or annotate the Tablet. An effort, however feeble, has been made to enhance the pedestrian quality of the *Star of the West* translation in the distant hope of inching closer to the poetic eminence of the original.

Introduction

The recipient of the Tablet, Mánikjí Sáhib,⁴ was a Parsi agent dispatched to Persia by the Zoroastrian community of Bombay (now Mumbai) to aid and assist their co-religionists in the land of their origin.⁵ The Zoroastrian community of India took form in the wake of several waves of migrations by disadvantaged and persecuted Persian Zoroastrians, first shortly after the invasion of Arab Muslims in the Safavid period and more recently in the Qajar period, principally from the towns of Yazd, Kirman and their surrounding villages. These émigrés settled by and large in the Indian provinces of Gujarat and Maharashtra.

It is well documented that ethnic and religious minorities in Qajar Iran faced a bleak and precarious existence. During the long and oppressive reign of Násirud-dín Sháh (1848-96), political chaos, economic deprivation and moral bankruptcy progressively permeated the fabric of Persian society and wreaked havoc upon its normative order. The Shí’a clergy (*‘ulamá*) routinely dealt with non-Muslims in a disdainful and callous manner, often under the pretext of “enjoining the good and forbidding the evil” (*al-amr bi’l-ma’ruf va al-nahy ‘an al-munkar*).⁶ By branding religious minorities as “ritually impure,” depriving them of blood money equivalent to a Muslim, making conversion to Islam obligatory for any man or a woman that wished to marry a Muslim and other insufferable practices, the clergy establishment managed to maintain an iron grip on enforced social mores and bolstered its hold on political power. Inciting mob action to harass assumed heretics (i.e., Sufis, Bábís, and the like) was a common tactic employed by the mullás, the more unscrupulous of whom sometimes stood to gain financially—through pillage, plunder and other insalubrious schemes—by institutionalizing what many in the West would denounce as naked discrimination and extortion. While the Bábís, and later Bahá’ís, were singled out for particularly brutal and bloody persecution, the Zoroastrians were never immune from lesser forms of maltreatment.⁷ Upon settlement in India, these emigrants—known as Parsis (i.e., Persians)—felt liberated to restore their sense of community, to unstintingly practice their religion and, most importantly, to prosper in trade and commerce under the British Raj. Having established and organized themselves, they set out to alleviate the miserable conditions of their brethren in Iran. Through a series of agents, Mánikjí being the first, they managed to absolve Zoroastrians from the payment of special taxes (*jizya*) levied on religious minorities and, ultimately, to secure a royal decree for the establishment of a self-governing association called the Anjuman-i-Nasirí. The primary mission of this association was to lobby the state to intervene

in cases of gross mistreatment of Zoroastrians and to promote and preserve the Persian language in its pure form.⁸

Mánikjí met Bahá’u’lláh in Baghdad in 1854 while en route to Iran and later corresponded with Him on more than one occasion. He was impressed by Bahá’u’lláh’s dignity and comportment and in due time became well disposed to the Bábí community through an enduring rapport with Him. This Tablet was revealed in response to one of Mánikjí’s letters in which he posed specific questions to Bahá’u’lláh on Divine Names, language preference (i.e., Persian over Arabic), education, and the like. Although Mánikjí did not read or write Persian he nonetheless had a keen interest in safeguarding it in its pure, non-Arabicised form. He hired Mírzá Abul-Fadl Gulpáygání, the celebrated Bahá’í scholar and recognized pure Persian expert, to teach in a school he helped found for educating Zoroastrian children.⁹ In subsequent letters, Mánikjí continued to seek out Bahá’u’lláh’s views on the validity of various religions, nationalism, the origin of humanity, and other such topics.¹⁰

Until the early 1860s the Bábí, and later Bahá’í, communities in the Middle East drew their ranks chiefly from the local Muslim populations—lower-ranking mullás being some of its most ardent converts. Subsequently, the Bahá’í community succeeded in attracting adherents from two distinct religious minorities in Iran: the Jews and the Zoroastrians. The only other religious minority of consequence, the Christians (Armenians, Assyrians and other sects), remained relatively intact and immune to the phenomenon of Bábí and Bahá’í conversions.¹¹ The brutality of the Muslim clergy in putting the Iranian Bahá’ís through horrific tortures and bloody massacres on the one hand, and the meekness with which these assumed heretics accepted their lot on the other, increasingly led members of these religious minorities, who as noted were not immune to lesser forms of abuse, to empathize with the plight of the Bahá’ís and to look more closely into their beliefs and practices, thereby leading many of them to enlist within the ranks of the nascent Bahá’í community. Even after having converted, however, they continued to maintain strong bonds with their former religious communities, customs and contacts.¹² For Zoroastrians the tracing of Bahá’u’lláh’s ancestry to the last monarch of the pre-Islamic Sasanian dynasty—Yazdigird III—and His claim to be Sháh Bahram Varjavand, the latter-day Savior promised in their Scriptures, provided further impetus for their rapid conversion.¹³ Ironically, the Zoroastrian priests (*dasturs*) and the Muslim clergy found themselves united in pressuring these converts to abandon their newfound religion.

Mánikjí, it appears, was not merely a promoter of the Persian language or a protector of Zoroastrian rights. His activism and influence spanned the socio-cultural, religious and political spheres. Being reform-minded, he routinely communicated with Persian intellectuals, political activists and dissenters such as Mírzá Fath ‘Alí Akhundzada, Áqá Buzurg Kirmání, Mírzá Malkum Khán, and the like.¹⁴ Also, doubts have persisted about the nature of his Anglo-Indian connections and his possible role as a British mole.¹⁵ He frequently commissioned others to write on topics that held his interests, but would either tamper with the finished product or would claim authorship for material he did not write.¹⁶ As mentioned, he employed prominent Bahá’ís and specifically commissioned Mírzá Husayn Hamadání to write a history on the Bábí religion that came to be known as *New History (Taríkh-i-Jadíd)*, a work not devoid of controversy. Despite the growing tensions between the Zoroastrian dasturs and prominent Zoroastrian converts, however, Mánikjí retained a favorable outlook toward the Bábís and Bahá’ís and continued to maintain a warm friendship with Bahá’u’lláh.

Synopsis

A brief outline of the salient themes found in the Lawh-i-Mánikjí Sáhib appears below:

- i. Praise of God
The Tablet begins with references to Water of Life and First Rays (i.e., Divine Revelation) as the source of creation. Bahá’u’lláh confirms speech as God’s primary bequest to mankind and His use of wisdom and intellect as ever-pleasing to the Almighty.
- ii. Greetings and salutations
As common literary devices in personal correspondences such as this Tablet, Bahá’u’lláh’s expressions of fondness for Mánikjí and His buoyant optimism for their continued friendship follow the recollection of their meeting in the land of Arabia (i.e., Baghdad).

- iii. Response to question about Divine Names
While affirming God as the Divine Physician, Bahá'u'lláh, in a possible reference to the rulers and the clergy, laments the recklessness of the “selfish” in misleading the masses, and underscores the importance of being attentive to the changing exigencies of time and place (i.e., dynamic pragmatism). In the Tablet to Queen Victoria, He uses a similar metaphor to associate the state of humanity to a sick body that is misdiagnosed and untreated owing to the selfish desires of ignorant physicians. He further declares: “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.”¹⁷
- iv. Exhortations to turn to God
In moving imagery Bahá'u'lláh reckons those that recognize His station as having attained immortality and those that reject Him as never capable of attaining life.
- v. Response to question about preferred language
Mánikjí's question pertained to His preference for Persian over Arabic. Bahá'u'lláh's response clarifies that both are meritorious and that the purpose of language is the conveyance of a message, for which either language is adequate. In later tablets—for instance Splendours (*Ishráqát*) and Effulgences (*Tajalliyát*)—Bahá'u'lláh designates Arabic as the “eloquent” tongue and calls Persian “luminous.”¹⁸ Acknowledging Mánikjí's bias, however, Bahá'u'lláh bestows supplementary praise on Persian as the mother tongue of the Manifestation of God for this age.
- vi. Detachment from earthly possessions
In reference to the misdeeds of some (presumably His followers), Bahá'u'lláh gives vent to His disappointment that such acts have kept others from realizing His Message. He further deems detachment as a prerequisite for the elevation of humanity to the heights of nobility and makes human tranquility contingent upon personal benevolence.
- vii. Abandonment of alienation and enmity
Echoed in numerous other tablets, the uninhibited association and fellowship among all nations is a central theme here and anchors Bahá'u'lláh's call to unity.
- viii. Advice against avarice
In a lucid analogy that brings into focus the literary excellence of this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh cautions that covetousness and greed can veil the light of the soul just as the thin eyelid obstructs vision.
- ix. Admonition to combine speech with action
Impact of speech is conditioned upon the speaker being in step with the needs and expectations of the hearer. Bahá'u'lláh encourages the exercise of moderation in speech and links soft speech to the nurturing efficacy of milk, whereas coarse speech is equated to a sharp dagger. In the *Lawh-i-Maqsúd* and elsewhere Bahá'u'lláh expounds on this topic.¹⁹
- x. Continued exhortations to turn to God
Drawing upon evocative imagery such as “Sun of Wisdom,” “Ocean of Knowledge,” and “Falcon on the arm of the Almighty” Bahá'u'lláh further explicates His station.
- xi. Glad tidings of the unity of mankind
Perhaps the pivotal message in this Tablet—and in Bahá'u'lláh's entire revelation—is the call to the unity of mankind. In countless tablets He elevates it above all human aspirations. His persistent appeals to adopt a common tongue and script buttress this plea to unity. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Bahá'u'lláh states: “The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.” In the same Book, Bahá'u'lláh instructs world leaders to adopt a single language and script and affirms that doing so will bring about “the greatest instrument for promoting harmony and civilization.” The unity of mankind, in Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, is one of two signs that herald the coming of age of the human race.²⁰
- xii. Admonitions to adopt a virtuous life

Affirming the past as the mirror of the future, Bahá’u’lláh calls for the recognition of His station. He further promotes the pursuit of useful sciences and encourages truthfulness, detachment, faith, moderation (especially in speech), wisdom and tactfulness. Bahá’u’lláh concludes the Tablet by inspiring confidence in the ultimate destiny of mankind to attain to the fruits of His mission.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a glimpse, however pithy, into one of Bahá’u’lláh’s most outstanding tablets of the early ‘Akká period. A more exhaustive study of the Lawh-i-Mánikjī Sáhíb awaits the ambition of the future seeker and student. It is not unreasonable to posit, however, that many of Bahá’u’lláh’s tablets of the later ‘Akká period, such as those cited in the Synopsis section above, draw heavily upon the themes first introduced in this Tablet. While the non-trivial enterprise of arriving at a definitive and cohesive taxonomy of the vast corpus revealed by the Supreme Pen still eludes many a student of Bahá, it is yet possible to attempt to frame and contextualize this Tablet for a better understanding of its core message. Challenges abound, however. Many of Bahá’u’lláh’s writings are not yet available in English or are otherwise inaccessible to a wide audience in the West, and much of what is published must be approached with caution and meticulous scholarship. Bahá’u’lláh’s writings are often steeped in cryptic allusions and technical terms that cannot be easily deciphered. Against this backdrop, the scholarship of Mírzá Abul-Mírzá Gulpáygání is edifying. His provision of a framework for the classification and enumeration of the “styles” encompassing Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation is de rigueur and foundational for such a survey. Bahá’u’lláh wrote in one of nine styles such as: proclamations, prayers and meditations, commentaries and interpretations of past religious scriptures, laws and ordinances, mystical writings, addresses to rulers and kings, philosophical writings, ethical teachings and, finally, social teachings.²¹ As evidenced by the main themes found in this Tablet, it can be placed into the last of these categories even as it comprehends elements of some of the other styles, such as ethical teachings.

While the foremost theme of the Lawh-i-Mánikjī Sáhíb accentuates the call for the unity of mankind, Bahá’u’lláh also stresses the need to act in accordance with the exigencies of time and to be alert to the problems of the day. He, moreover, advises all nations and races to dispel alienation, enmity and estrangement. Other social and ethical teachings present in this Tablet include the necessity to use language with wisdom, to adopt virtuous traits, to eschew greed, to take up useful sciences and so on. In numerous later writings, Bahá’u’lláh continues to expand and elaborate on many of the same topics. For example, in *Glad Tidings* (Bishárát), *Words of Paradise* (Kalimát-i-Firdawsiyih) *Splendours* (Ishráqát) and other tablets of the post-Aqdas era, Bahá’u’lláh explains how a universal language and script are necessary ingredients for achieving the unity of the human race. In the Lawh-i-Maqsúd, Bahá’u’lláh goes further to mandate the establishment of a universal auxiliary language and script as “incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding.”²² In a tablet revealed in the latter part of the ‘Akká period—associated with His departure from that city, circa 1877—called the Tablet of Unity (Lawh-i-Ittihad), Bahá’u’lláh expounds on some of the very same themes found in this Tablet. While defining the various meanings of unity, He consistently recalls the principles of moderation in speech, the necessity of placing deeds before words, the hazards of vainglory and dominance and finally, the exhortation to associate with all peoples in a spirit of unity and fellowship.

Ostensibly a reply to a letter of a friend, the Lawh-i-Mánikjī Sáhíb enjoys a marked distinction in Bahá’u’lláh’s voluminous revelation for its weighty content and for its lofty and lucid diction. Mánikjī deserves our abiding gratitude for eliciting this majestic Tablet from the Supreme Pen and for his unrelenting services towards furthering the principles of education and human rights in Qajar Iran—principles that, it should not escape our attention, he avidly shared with Bahá’u’lláh.

Translation

As mentioned, a rudimentary translation by Mírzá Ahmad Sohrab was first published in *Star of the West*. What appears below is an extensively edited and modified variant of that translation. Where necessary I have filled the gaps in non-translated sections (such as the exordium and other phrases), corrected mistranslations, and supplied variant renderings, which, it is my belief, more closely convey the sense of the original. The *texts in italics* are either from *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* or *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and have been reproduced in lieu of the equivalent *Star of the West* text. An Arabic prayer

is appended at the end of the Tablet, which is not translated here or in *Star of the West*. To the extent possible, I have endeavored to approximate the literal denotation of the original. However, evidence of the unattainable goal of a “befitting rendering of Bahá’u’lláh’s matchless utterance” can be found throughout this translation. I pray that the reader will excuse all such shortcomings and deficiencies.

Lawh-i-Mánikjí Sáhib*

In the Name of the Incomparable Lord!

Praise be unto Him, the Eternal Seer, who through a dewdrop of the ocean of His Generosity raised up the firmament of existence, begemmed it with the stars of knowledge and summoned mankind to the court of perception and understanding! This dewdrop, which is the Primal Word of the Almighty, is at times called the Water of Life for it quickens the lifeless souls in the desert of ignorance and at other times it is known as the First Rays. When this radiance shone forth from the Sun of Wisdom, the Primary Movement was made manifest through the bounty of the Incomparable, the Wise One. He is the Knower, the Merciful! He is sanctified above every statement and attribute! The seen and the unseen fail to attain a measure of His understanding. The world of being and everything therein bears witness to this Utterance. Thus it is established that the First Bestowal of the Almighty is speech and its acceptance by Him is conditioned upon wisdom. It is the First Instructor in the School of Existence and the Primal Emanation of God. All that is visible is but through the radiance of its Light and all that is revealed is through the appearance of its Knowledge. All names originate from His Name and the start and end of all affairs are in His Hand.

Your letter reached this Captive of the world in this prison. It brought happiness, increased friendship and renewed the remembrance of former times. Praise be unto the Possessor of the Universe for permitting our meeting in the land of Arabia. We met, we conversed and we listened. It is hoped that forgetfulness shall not follow that encounter, that the passage of time shall not erase its remembrance from the heart and that from what was sown shall sprout the flora of friendship, verdant, luxuriant and imperishable.

You have asked about Divine Names. *The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require. Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.*

We can well perceive how the whole human race is encompassed with great, with incalculable afflictions. We see it languishing on its bed of sickness, sore-tried and disillusioned. They that are intoxicated by self-conceit have interposed themselves between it and the Divine and infallible Physician. Witness how they have entangled all men, themselves included, in the mesh of their devices. They can neither discover the cause of the disease, nor have they any knowledge of the remedy. They have conceived the straight to be crooked, and have imagined their friend an enemy.

*Incline your ears to the sweet melody of this Prisoner. Arise, and lift up your voices, that haply they that are fast asleep may be awakened. Say: O ye who are as dead! The Hand of Divine bounty profereth unto you the Water of Life. Hasten and drink your fill. Whoso hath been re-born in this Day, shall never die; whoso remaineth dead, shall never live.*²³

You have written regarding languages: Arabic and Persian are both good, for that which one desires of a language is to attain insight into the discourse of the narrator and this can be obtained from either tongue. However, as in this day the Sun of Wisdom shines forth from the horizon of Persia this language is all the more praiseworthy.

O friend! When the Primal Word appeared in these latter days, a number of the heavenly souls heard the Melody of the Beloved and hastened toward it, while others, finding the deeds of some at odds with their words, stayed far and were deprived from the radiance of the Sun of Knowledge.

* This is a provisional translation for presentation and discussion at 'Irfán Colloquia. It is not to be reproduced or further distributed in any form or medium.

Say, O ye sons of earth! Thy Lord, the Pure One, proclaims: *In this glorious Day whatever will purge you from corruption and will lead you towards peace and composure, is indeed the Straight Path.*²⁴ Purity from the stains of desire means detachment from all things that occasion loss and abate human nobility, which in turn comes about when one favors his own words and deeds, notwithstanding their merit. Serenity is attained when one becomes the well-wisher of all who are on earth. He who is informed will readily testify that if all the peoples of the earth were to attain to these Heavenly Utterances they would by no means be prevented from the Ocean of Divine Generosity. The heaven of righteousness has no Star, and shall not have any, brighter than this. The first Utterance of the Wise One is this: O ye sons of earth! Turn away from the darkness of alienation and seek the radiance of the Sun of Unity. This is that which shall benefit the people of the world more than aught else.

O friend! The Tree of Utterance has no better a Blossom and the Ocean of Wisdom has no brighter a Pearl than this. O ye sons of wisdom! Flimsy as it may be, the eyelid yet prevents the eye from seeing the world and all that is therein. Consider then what would result when the curtain of greed veils the vision of the heart. Say, O people! The darkness of avarice and envy obscures the light of the soul even as clouds eclipse the radiance of the sun. He who listens with the ear of intelligence to this Utterance shall unfurl the wings of freedom and soar with great ease toward the heaven of understanding.

When the world was environed with darkness, the Sea of Generosity was set in motion and Divine Illumination made visible the deeds. This is that same illumination foretold in the heavenly books. Should the Almighty desire it, He will sanctify the hearts with pure speech and shine the Light of the Sun of Unity upon the souls and thereby regenerate the world. O people! Words must be demonstrated through deeds, for the latter is the true witness of the former. Words alone shall not quench the thirsty nor unlock the doors of sight to the blind. The Heavenly Wise One proclaims: A harsh word is like unto a sword, while gentle speech like unto milk. In this manner will the children of the world attain to knowledge and improve their lot. *The Tongue of Wisdom proclaimeth: He that hath Me not is bereft of all things. Turn ye away from all that is on earth and seek none else but Me. I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge. I cheer the faint and revive the dead. I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way. I am the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight.*²⁵

The Peerless Friend says: The path of freedom has been opened! Hasten ye! The Fount of Knowledge is gushing! Drink ye! Say O friends! *The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.*²⁶ Truly I say: Whatsoever abates ignorance and augments knowledge has been and shall be pleasing to the Creator. Say, O people! Walk under the shadow of Justice and Righteousness and take shelter under the pavilion of Unity. Say, O thou possessor of sight! The past is the mirror of the future; see and be apprised thereof that perchance you may recognize the Friend and not be the cause of His displeasure. In this day, the best fruit from the Tree of Knowledge is that which benefits mankind and improves his condition.

Say! The tongue bears witness to My Truth; do not defile it with falsehood. The soul is the treasury of My Mystery; do not surrender it to avarice. It is hoped that in this Dawn, through which the universe has been illumined with the rays of the Sun of Understanding and Knowledge, we may attain to the good pleasure of the Beloved and drink from the Ocean of Divine Recognition.

O friend! As ears are few to hear, for some time now the Pen has been silent in its own chamber, to such an extent that silence has overtaken utterance and has been deemed more favorable. Say, O people! Words are revealed according to capacity, so that newcomers may stay and beginners may make progress. Milk must be given according to prescribed measure, such that the babes of the world may enter into the Realm of Grandeur and be established upon the Court of Unity.

O friend! We have seen the pure ground and have sown the seed of knowledge thereupon. Now it is left to the rays of the sun—will they singe the seedling or cause it to grow? Say: In this day, through the greatness of the Peerless, the Wise One, the Sun of Knowledge has appeared from behind the veil of the soul. All the birds of the meadow are inebriated through the wine of Understanding and are content with the remembrance of the Beloved. Well is it with him who comprehends.

Notes-i

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Amin Neshati whose perceptive suggestions and valuable editing greatly improved the quality of this paper.

- 1) The original Tablet can be found in *Majmúy-i-Alváh-i-Mubarak* (Cairo, 1920) p. 259-67. It is also published in *Daryay-i-Danish* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985) pp. 2-10. A short description appears in A. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 3, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1996) p. 270.
- 2) Bahá'u'lláh used pure Persian (*Parsiy-i-sari*) rather sparingly, except when corresponding with Zoroastrians or for other special occasions. The Persian spoken in His time and to today borrows heavily from Arabic, the language of Islam. He used Arabic as the primary language of revelation and many of His prayers and tablets in Persian are heavily Arabicised. An Arabic prayer appears at the end of this pure Persian Tablet, perhaps to reinforce Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation that both Persian and Arabic are worthy of praise.
- 3) See *Star of the West*, vol. 1:1 1910 pp. 5-7. For a partial translation, see section CVI in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans., Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) p. 213.
- 4) His full name is Mánikjī Limjī Hataria. In Hindi, the suffix 'jí' is appended to names and titles of venerated persons as a sign of respect and endearment, the closest English rendering being 'dear.' Also, it is customary in India to use "Sáhib" as a formal designation or title of a respected personage, somewhat equivalent to 'Excellency' in English or to "Jináb" in Persian.
- 5) S. Stiles [Maneck], "Early Zoroastrian Conversions to the Bahá'í Faith in Yazd, Iran," in J. Cole and M. Momen, eds., *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History: From Iran East and West*, vol. 2 (Los Angeles: Kalimat, 1984) p. 70.
- 6) For a fuller treatment of clergy-instigated persecutions see S. Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) pp. 251-57.
- 7) For a brief account, see Taherzadeh, *Revelation*, vol. 3, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1996) pp. 260-5.
- 8) M. Fischer, "Social Change and the Mirrors of Tradition: The Bahá'ís of Yazd," in H. Moayyad, ed., *The Bahá'í Faith and Islam* (Ottawa: The Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1990), pp. 25-55. On the proliferation of political associations (*anjumans*) during the reign of Násirud-dín Sháh and their influence on the court, see A. Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe* (Washington, DC: Mage, 1997).
- 9) See Stiles, *op. cit.* On Mánikjī's illiteracy in Persian, see A. Gulpáygání, *Letters and Essays*, trans., J. Cole (Los Angeles: Kalimat, 1985) pp. 78-79.
- 10) J. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) pp. 147-150.
- 11) M. Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981) pp. 244-250.
- 12) See Stiles, *op. cit.*
- 13) H. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980) pp. 9-12. See also Fischer, *op. cit.*
- 14) M. Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982) pp. 169-171.
- 15) Personal interviews with members of the Sifidvash family, a prominent Bahá'í family of Zoroastrian lineage now living in California, December 2000.
- 16) D. MacEoin, *The Sources for Early Bábí Doctrine and History* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) pp. 153-160. See also Gulpáygání, *supra*.
- 17) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) p. 255.
- 18) Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) p. 49. See also pp. 22, 68, 127.
- 19) On "impressive and penetrating speech," see *ibid.*, p. 172.
- 20) Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992). See p. 11, K189, n193-4.
- 21) See A. Mazandarani, *Asráru'l-Áthár* (Tehran: Mu'assasiy-i-Matbu'at-i-Amri, 129 BE) vol. 4, p. 128.
- 22) See *Tablets*, pp. 164-71.
- 23) See *Gleanings*, p. 213.
- 24) See *Tablets*, *op. cit.*
- 25) *Ibid.*
- 26) *Ibid.*

The Seven Valleys and the Scientific Method

by Robert Sarracino

I. Introduction

The Seven Valleys is extolled by Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By* as Bahá'u'lláh's "greatest mystical composition."¹ In this Treatise "He describes the seven stages which the soul of the seeker must needs traverse ere it can attain the object of its existence."² It is written in the language of Sufi mysticism, and contains references and allegories familiar to those who would be conversant with the literature, traditions and history of Sufism. Indeed, the very choice of "Seven Valleys" finds precedent in the greatest work of 'Attár.

If we consider that the supreme goal of mysticism is to attain "the Presence of God," the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, according to Bahá'í belief, has unleashed such a flood of grace and divine knowledge into the world of humanity that this supreme pursuit, the pursuit of attaining the Presence of God, has now become the legitimate pursuit of every member of the human race. A careful reading of Scripture would reveal that, in fact, this has always been true. But religious truth has in the past been clouded by the often self-serving interpretation of the clergy, and despite the truths contained in Scripture, supreme spiritual attainment was considered possible for only a few. Although renunciation of the world was not sufficient, it was necessary: only those who turned their backs on the secular world, the world of work and family and wealth and politics, who became reliant for material sustenance on the generosity of those who by choice or force of circumstances pursued "lesser" spiritual goals—only such professionals in the path of God could attain mysticism's highest goal.

With the Bahá'í Revelation comes a revolution in our perception of the path to spiritual attainment. Bahá'u'lláh, recommending those branches of knowledge which do not "start with words and end with words," elevates work which is done in the spirit of service to the rank of worship. Monks and priests are enjoined to "give up the life of seclusion," to "direct their steps towards the open world," to marry and to "bring forth one who will make mention of God."³

We have exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship of the one true God!"⁴

Having attained the stage of fulfillment and reached his maturity, man standeth in need of wealth, and such wealth as he acquireth through crafts or professions is commendable and praiseworthy...⁵

Thus mysticism—that is, the supreme goal of mysticism—is for all. In this sense the Seven Valleys is truly revolutionary. This short but potent work distills the arcane knowledge of mysticism, clarifying and purifying the true and the divine while exposing and abandoning the residue of human fancy and invention. Written to a member of a fraternity which had existed for centuries, this work thus marks the fall of that fraternity as a community of the spiritual elite.

The Seven Valleys, whose pages outline "the seven stages the soul must needs traverse" in its search for truth, thus becomes a universal guide for all who pursue their professions and support themselves and their dependents, and who, while living lives of material, intellectual and social service, strive to bring their lives and pursuits in line with the will of God. It is a guide for anyone engaged in a process of discovery, whether personal discovery or discovery as part of a professional pursuit. Specifically, it is—or can be—an inspiration and sourcebook for the scientist engaged in scientific research. The essence of the scientific method is contained within its pages.

There are, in my view, three basic steps in the scientific method:

1. Acceptance of a source of reality and adoption of a "world view." The modern sciences accept nature as this source of reality. To a Bahá'í, the Manifestation of God is the source of reality. One of the best presentations of the world view of the modern physicist is contained in *The Character of Physical Law*, a transcript of a series of lectures by Nobel laureate Richard Feynman.⁶ Perhaps the most concise statement of the Bahá'í world view, a world view which must necessarily accompany acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh, is contained in "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" from *The*

World Order of Bahá’u’lláh by Shoghi Effendi.⁷

2. Questioning of reality. For the scientist this *questioning* takes the form of selected observation, controlled experimentation and mathematical analysis. Except when paradigms fail this questioning is done within a particular paradigm. For a Bahá’í, questioning takes the form of study of the revealed writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the Báb and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the three Central Figures of the Faith; of the Guardian, the appointed and authorized interpreter of the writings of Bahá’u’lláh; and the Universal House of Justice, upon which has been conferred the authority to “elucidate” the truths contained in Bahá’í scripture.
3. Resolution or synthesis. This can take the form of confirmation of a paradigm, articulation of that paradigm, or, when paradigms fail, resolution of a crisis through creation of a new paradigm. In times of great crisis it can take the form of creation of a new world view. Synthesis of data into laws or theories is not trivial, is not obvious, is not linear and is not easy.⁸ It is a difficult and demanding task, and requires the full range of human abilities, including imagination and creativity as well as reasoning ability. The final product—a new formulation, a new understanding, a new theory, a new paradigm—if successful, will influence the way an entire community of scientists will think. But no particular resolution or synthesis is unique. There is no way of knowing the full range of possible systems which explain any given set of observations and experiments. The scientific community invariably settles on one particular system, which becomes the dominant paradigm.

II. The Seven Valleys

The 0th Valley

The scientific method begins with an act of faith: faith that the universe is rational; faith on the part of the scientist that he can, indeed, make sense out of the universe; faith that the truths of the universe can be investigated by the technological means at hand, can be grasped by the mind of man and brought into order within the systems—mathematical and other—which human logic has created. In talking about the role of faith in the scientific enterprise, Alfred North Whitehead writes,

I mean the inexpugnable belief that every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying general principles. Without this belief the incredible labours of scientists would be without hope. It is this instinctive conviction, vividly poised before the imagination, which is the motive power of research: that there is a secret, a secret which can be unveiled. How has this conviction been so vividly implanted in the European mind?

[T]here seems but one source for its origin. It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher. Every detail was supervised and ordered: the search into nature could only result in the vindication of the faith in rationality. . . . I am not talking of the explicit beliefs of a few individuals . . . [but] the impress on the European mind arising from the unquestioned faith of centuries.⁹

Bahá’u’lláh justifies this faith in a number of passages which are highly significant for their implications for the scientific enterprise. In the Hidden Words He writes,

Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of My command I made thee to appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things.¹⁰

and in the Lawh-i-Hikmat,

Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein. It will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it . . .¹¹

Thus, in the Bahá’í view, the universe can be understood because *it was created to be understood*. Science is worth pursuing because in uncovering the truths of nature we uncover our own reality, which means we come to know God, which is the purpose of our creation.

The Seven Valleys and the Scientific Method

This mystical role of nature, which physicists of this century have often referred to as the “beauty” of nature, was expressed by the French mathematician Henri Poincaré:

If nature were not beautiful, it would not be worth knowing, and if nature were not worth knowing, life would not be worth living.¹²

At the very core of modern science is the belief that “nature is the sole arbiter of truth.” If nature conflicts with human reason or with tradition or authority, then tradition and authority are wrong, and what is called “human reason” is flawed. If nature conflicts with mathematics, then we must create a new mathematics. This belief, accepted on faith, lies at the core of modern science. Along with this belief comes a world view, the world view expressed above, that nature is in some sense rational and amenable to human investigation. And again, this is accepted on faith. And finally, modern science proceeds by working within paradigms. Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*¹³ has pointed out that the acceptance of a particular paradigm, or the search for and creation of a new paradigm if the old is seen to be flawed, is essential to the scientific method. It is under the umbrella of paradigms, motivated by problem solving and paradigm articulation, that the great body of scientific work is carried out, work which at times can lead to progress so rapid that it astonishes even the scientist himself. But the acceptance of a paradigm, paradigm articulation, and paradigm revolution are part of the scientific enterprise. All are carried out under a dominant world view or what one might call a “grand paradigm.”

In the beginning, then, one must articulate one’s world view and prepare oneself for investigation and discovery. And this is how the Seven Valleys begins. It articulates a world view essential for the true seeker and inspires the seeker—the scientist—with confidence in his own inner potential; with confidence that he does, in fact, have within himself the means to embark on the search and reach the goal.

The Seven Valleys begins,

Praise be to God Who hath made being to come forth from nothingness . . .¹⁴

There is a Supreme reality, and the universe is a *creation*—as distinct from an entity which simply “exists” or has “just happened.” Thus, the foundation for the scientific enterprise is laid. That the universe is *created* implies it is an infinite mystery, which in turn implies that science will be an eternal enterprise.

. . . graven upon the tablet of man the mysteries of pre-existence . . .¹⁵

By simple logic, no existence can encompass its own pre-existence. Upon man, however, the “mysteries of pre-existence” have been engraved. Hence, man transcends the material creation. If it is science through which we come to understand the creation, then science will not only be an eternal enterprise but, this passage implies, science will be a *fruitful* enterprise.

And finally we read, in this powerful opening paragraph which sets the tone for the entire work, that every man may thereby win his way to the summit of realities, until none shall contemplate anything whatsoever but that he shall see God therein.¹⁶

The scientific imperative, like the religious imperative, has been built into the very spirit of man. This passage, so evocative of the second Arabic Hidden Word, that man should “see with his own eyes” and “know of his own knowledge,” gives us the divine mandate to pursue science and religion and gives to the individual the sovereign authority to investigate, discover and apprehend reality.

In the second paragraph Bahá’u’lláh establishes the authority of the Manifestation of God:

And I praise and glorify the first sea which hath branched from the ocean of the Divine Essence, the first morn which hath glowed from the Horizon of Oneness . . .¹⁷

The Seven Valleys was written to a Muslim before Bahá’u’lláh’s declaration of His own Mission, and hence this paragraph is explicitly in praise of Muhammad. It is clear, however, in light of the body of Bahá’í teachings, that these words apply not exclusively to Muhammad, but to the Manifestation of God. It was mentioned above that the first step in the scientific method is acceptance of a source of reality. For Bahá’ís this source is the Manifestation of God. Bahá’ís accept this on faith, in the same way that the physical scientist accepts on faith that nature is a source of reality rational in its underpinnings.

Finally, the scientist needs confidence in himself and in his own abilities, and encouragement in his search for truth. When paradigms fail—and they fail often—Thomas Kuhn has talked about the “silent revolutions” of science—scientists need inspiration and confidence. Scientific work centred around a paradigm in crisis is extremely difficult, requiring as it does not only the ability but the courage to look at data and scientific problems in a very different way, and the courage to propose a new way of thinking to a community which contains conservative elements which will inevitably oppose the new paradigm. Even if new paradigms are not found, however, there is the challenging task of paradigm articulation, in which the crisis is resolved through modification of the existing paradigm.

Towards the end of the opening section the would-be seeker is assured,

I therefore reveal unto thee sacred and resplendent tokens from the planes of glory, to attract thee into the court of holiness and nearness and beauty . . .¹⁸

And he is encouraged,

wert thou to taste of these fruits . . . yearning would seize the reins of patience and reserve from out thy hand . . . and draw thee from the earthy homeland to the . . . Center of realities.¹⁹

This, of course, is the great aspiration of the inspired scientist: to reach the “center of realities” of the field of his enquiry.

The Valley of Search

The second step in the scientific method is to question reality. For the physicist this questioning takes several accepted forms: selected observations, controlled experiments, and mathematical analysis. In the case of what Thomas Kuhn calls “normal science” this questioning takes place in the context of a paradigm. The paradigm determines which questions are worth asking and, generally, what answers should be obtained. The vital role of the paradigm in science can hardly be overstated. Nature, taken as a whole, is too complex and the multiplicity of possible experiments and the great mass of possible data obtainable from these experiments is too overwhelming to allow any sense or anything like progress to be made. The paradigm, by creating a “picture” of what nature is and what it should be, tells the scientist what questions are worth asking, what data is extraneous and what is essential; it helps create order out of what otherwise would be bewildering confusion.

When the scientist questions reality he almost always expects a particular answer. This creates a dilemma: if the correct answer is obtained, is it because he somehow contrived to obtain the expected answer, or is it because the paradigm actually models nature within the context of the experiment? When he doesn't get that answer, there are several possibilities:

- 1) He did not perform the experiment or the analysis correctly (his apparatus or experimental technique was deficient; his mathematical analysis was wrong), and he has to perform it again, perhaps with new experimental or mathematical apparatus.
- 2) He asked the wrong question, and nature is trying to give an answer to a question he didn't think he had asked.
- 3) The paradigm needs articulation.
- 4) The paradigm is wrong.

The scientist needs “objectivity.” In fact, what he needs are just those qualities and attributes described by Bahá'u'lláh in the Valley of Search.

It is incumbent on these servants that they cleanse the heart . . . from every marking, and that they turn away from imitation . . .²⁰

This “cleansing of the heart,” what the scientist loosely calls “objectivity,” must, however, be within a context—within a paradigm. Hence a key condition of this stage of search is given in the passage,

In their search, they have stoutly girded up the loins of service . . .²¹

That is, the seeker must have a concept of “service,” and must be engaged in this service.

The steed of this Valley is patience . . .²²

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He must be engaged in service while “*at every moment*” seeking “*to journey from the plane of heedlessness into the realm of being.*”²³

When paradigms fail—and they fail first in the minds of only one or a few scientists and later the entire community—the researcher faces the extremely difficult task of replacing them. Science works only within models. No model has ever been abandoned until it has been replaced with a new one which the scientific community has come to see as being superior.

How does one discover a new paradigm?

[W]hatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must he set at naught, that he may enter the realm of the spirit . . .²⁴

Labor is needed, if we are to seek Him; ardor is needed, if we are to drink of the honey of reunion with Him . . .²⁵

These passages can serve as an inspirational guide for the scientist in search of a new paradigm. They apply equally in the educative process. In order to succeed and become a practicing scientist the student must learn the reigning paradigm. He must learn to think in a new way; he must learn to reorder his entire thinking process. It takes labor and ardor, and a willingness to abandon the past.

The Valley of Love

Once the scientist thinks he has found the answer, once the student thinks he has understood the existing model, he enters a new state. Both researchers and students alike describe the emotions which accompany the dawn of a new understanding: excitement, exultation, ecstasy; they “*dissolve*” in the new discovery, a state Bahá’u’lláh describes as “*unaware of himself, and of aught besides himself.*”²⁶ Having found an answer, they see all problems as having their solution in this one answer. This state is all-consuming.

The absent-mindedness and single-mindedness of students and scientists is legendary. The physicist Leo Szilard was noted for being so perpetually lost in his own thoughts that he would often wander across streets without bothering to notice the traffic. This proved highly amusing to his colleagues and highly irritating to motorists when he first went to Chicago to join Enrico Fermi as part of his team.

A story is told of Meyer, one of the three discoverers of the principle of the Conservation of Energy—what is now called the First Law of Thermodynamics—that a physicist acquaintance of his once objected to his ideas by saying that if he, Meyer, were right, then water would be heated just by being shaken. Meyer stared at his friend and bolted from the house. Two days later a strange man, unshaven, disheveled, agitated, appeared at the man’s house and shouted, “And it is!” It was Meyer, who had spent the last two days shaking a bottle of water.

This Valley, however, is a dangerous place to be for too long.

He hath bound a myriad victims in his fetters . . . Know that every redness in the world is from his anger.²⁷

There is no one more intolerable than a scientist defending his paradigm. Time and again in the history of science, scientists, in the name of truth and objectivity, have shown an intolerance, vindictiveness, irrationality which in individuals supposedly dedicated to truth, defies description. Boltzmann committed suicide because of the treatment he received at the hands of his contemporaries. “If Meyer had not been mad,” according to one biographer, he never would have been able to persist against the scientific fraternity of his day. Today Neo-Darwinism is coming under attack from several directions: biochemistry, mathematics and a persistent, not insignificant, trickle of anomalous evidence. The stubborn refusal of some of its most ardent defenders to examine dispassionately contradictory evidence, and their irrational labeling of those who do not toe their party line, are illustrative of what happens to scientists who remain in the Valley of Love.

Some will remain in this Valley forever. Others will pass beyond it:

And if, confirmed by the Creator, he escapes from the claws of the Eagle of love, he will straightway step into the Valley of Knowledge.²⁸

The Valley of Knowledge

To the scientist the process of escaping “*the claws of the Eagle of love*” is the maturation of his under-

standing. On one level—on the level of the student, for instance—knowledge and understanding reach the point at which the “lover” enters the fraternity, that is, the community of scientists. The student becomes a professional. One cannot become a professional scientist of caliber without having gone through the ardor of the Valley of Love, without experiencing the pain of this Valley and without experiencing the doubt that must accompany this pain. When the scientist enters the Valley of Knowledge the ardor of the Valley of Love is not lost, but it becomes tempered with knowledge. “*Doubt*” gives way to “*certitude*.”

For the scientific revolutionary the passion of discovery, the almost fanatic desire to convert the scientific community to one’s new paradigm, accompanied by doubt that perhaps the new discovery is not, after all, really correct, gives way to a more mature understanding, and certitude that the new discovery is, after all, correct. The physicist Paul Dirac, who discovered an equation which married quantum mechanics with Einstein’s Special Relativity, wrote that he initially used his new, relativistic equation to find first order corrections to the nonrelativistic Schrodinger wave equation. He did not proceed to solve for second order corrections because, he said later, he was afraid his equation might prove wrong. He accordingly published a paper giving his first order corrections. Another researcher, picking up on his work, then solved the equation to second order. The second order solution matched experimental data, and Dirac now knew he had made a great discovery—but the credit for this verification, which could have gone to him, went to someone else.

The Valley of Unity

The Valley of Knowledge is the “last plane of limitation.” After this stage the seeker enters the Valley of Unity where

he pierceth the veils of plurality . . . and ascendeth into the heaven of singleness . . . [W]ith the eye of God he beholdeth the mysteries of divine creation.²⁹

Beyond the state of “knowledge” the scientist reaches a state, described by this Valley and the ones above it, in which he comes to see the great unity in the laws of his discipline. Although wedded to a particular paradigm—he must be, in order to be a practicing scientist—he has also in a sense transcended this paradigm. The physicist, for instance, is willing to see physics in new ways, willing to entertain new paradigms, willing to be intrigued by new problems which strike at the very boundaries of his belief—willing, in a sense, to see those problems which *do* strike at the boundaries of his belief. By contrast, a physicist who has not reached this stage will see how all problems can be explained within the confines of his models. Since the great majority of problems which will be confronted in his working life fall into this latter category, he can have a very successful career without progressing beyond the Valley of Knowledge.

In seeing the unity behind the laws of physics, as can be seen only on the level of this Valley, the physicist also, to his way of thinking, sees the great unity of nature. He has come to see the Mind of God. His reality *is* reality.

Thomas Kuhn has pointed out that one of the great and unique features of science is the existence of a community which, sooner or later, comes to accept the same family of paradigms. The notion of progress itself, he has pointed out, is meaningful only in the context of a community of believers. Science as a collective enterprise isn’t just about discovering and knowing, it is about coming to see all nature with a single eye and a unified vision. It is this aspect of religious truth, as well, which also makes religion progressive. The great strength of the Bahá’í community, a strength which will become more and more apparent as the community grows and progresses, is its ability to acquire a unified vision and to see the world with a single eye.

In science this unified vision does not prevent new discoveries from being made and new paradigms—what scientists would unhesitatingly call greater insight into the workings and secrets of nature—from emerging. And although it provides a healthy conservative brake on change, it certainly does not stifle debate. In the same way, the unified vision of the Bahá’í Faith, guaranteed by the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh, will not prevent new discoveries, progress and new paradigms—what Bahá’ís would unhesitatingly call new truths—from emerging within the body of truth contained in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. And while giving stability to the entire system, this unified vision does not suppress the “clash of differing opinions” which is so healthy and so necessary for a progressing community.

Science progresses through a community conducting ever more sophisticated experiments and analysis

within a paradigm. The Bahá'í community will progress in a number of ways, but one of the chief agents of its progress is consultation. It is through consultation that problems will be solved, new problems appear, and community transformation—what an historian of science might call paradigm articulation or, more rarely, paradigm shift—will take place.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has said that one of the wisdoms of consultation is that sometimes one wise person will have a solution which a thousand others might not see. It is consultation which will allow the one correct view to rise to the fore and become accepted by the thousand. Is this not evocative of the scientific process, in which the discovery of a lone scientist, a discovery which at first glance may appear completely wrong, eventually achieves acceptance by the community as a whole?

The Bahá'í writings create a vision of progress. Shoghi Effendi wrote that the people of the future would be far more spiritual, far more advanced than people of today and that the Bahá'í institutions, now in their infancy, would mature. Bahá'ís see their individual, collective and institutional lives as progressing to the point at which they will eventually realize the divine Purpose and express divine Truth to an unprecedented degree. Is this not similar to the self image of the scientific community? Science also, scientiste believe, will continue to progress. Its paradigms will increasingly reflect the reality of nature; its evolving systems will become an ever-advancing expression of Truth.

The Valleys of Contentment, Wonderment and True Poverty

Bahá'u'lláh describes valleys beyond the Valley of Unity: the Valley of Contentment, the Valley of Wonderment and the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness. “*The tongue faileth in describing these three Valleys, and speech falleth short.*”³⁰ These Valleys contain much that would be useful to a practising scientist working at the forefront of knowledge, striving to advance from what is known and understood towards the infinite heights of reality; that would be useful, as well, to one striving to integrate material and spiritual knowledge; striving to integrate natural philosophy and what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has called “*divine philosophy.*”³¹

What has been explored in this paper seems to unveil a remarkable similarity between, on the one hand, the method used by the scientific community, and on the other hand, the method used by the Bahá'í community in its operation and development. There is a remarkable similarity between the method employed by the individual scientist or the student and the method employed by the individual Bahá'í in his striving to progress in personal, family, community and institutional life and service. Keys to this method are contained in the Seven Valleys. It can serve as a guide, a sourcebook, for the scientist and the religious believer alike.

III. Conclusion

One of the questions which has intrigued Western historians is why Europe and its descendent cultures achieved such overwhelming economic, scientific and military dominance in the past four centuries. It is the European system, these historians point out, which today has come to dominate the world's economic, educational, intellectual and scientific life. Answers have been offered by McNeil in *Rise of the West*,³² Trevor-Roper in *The Rise of Christian Europe*,³³ Landes in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*,³⁴ and Phillips in *The Cousins' Wars*.³⁵ Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* points out:

But only the civilizations which have descended from Hellenic Greece have possessed more than the most rudimentary science. The bulk of scientific knowledge is a product of Europe in the last four centuries. No other place and time has supported the very special communities from which scientific productivity comes.³⁶

Inherent in this concern is the further question, born out of anxiety, “how can this achievement of Europe, and the promise it holds for future progress, become lasting?” What is not to ensure, as the West loses its economic and intellectual dominance, as Western-born systems continue to become global and merge with systems and philosophies foreign to European culture and to Christianity, that the gains made by Western civilization will endure? What is to prevent a slide back into a more primitive approach to apprehending the universe?

To Bahá'ís, operating from a different paradigm—to borrow this phrase from the contemporary historian—the question is different. To Bahá'ís the economic and scientific advancement which took place in Europe from the Renaissance up to the Age of Imperialism was an inevitable consequence of the Revelation of Muhammad.

Just why it was Europe and not the Muslim world itself, or India, or China, which took up the torch of Muslim civilization and carried it to its preordained heights, is another question, but it is not the crucial question which it is to someone not sharing the Bahá’í world view.

As to why it was *not* the Muslim world itself which continued to carry the torch, the Bahá’í historian Mírzá Abu’l Fadl offers an answer, or at least the seed of an answer: at a crucial stage in the development of Muslim civilization the learned of that society turned away from science and turned instead towards a theology which became increasingly indulgent and fruitless. Trevor-Roper in *The Rise of the Christian West* points out that it was Europe’s failure in its response to the rise of Islam, rather than the fall of Rome, which plunged Europe into the Dark Ages, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*³⁷ points out that it was exposure to the Muslim world, through the Crusades, which started Europe back on the path towards civilization. This path, blocked by the Church, was not an easy path to follow. The first stirring of Europe, what Trevor-Roper calls the mini-Renaissance, was successfully squashed by the Church. The second attempt, however—what we call the Renaissance—and the succeeding scientific revolution—succeeded despite the Church.

To Bahá’ís, the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh will ensure that the gains made by Europe through the inspiration of the Revelation of Muhammad will not be lost. In fact, the development of civilization since the middle of the Nineteenth Century, as explained in the masterful works of Shoghi Effendi, is due to a degree unrecognized at present to the inspiration of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, which will continue to exert its beneficial influence until its consummation in humanity’s first truly global civilization. This supremely optimistic view, stimulating and energizing in its effects, is shared by the entire Bahá’í community. And as that community gains strength this view will gain greater acceptance in the world at large.

Thomas Kuhn points out, with some obvious anxiety,

Just how special that community [the scientific community] must be if science is to survive and grow may be indicated by the very tenuousness of humanity’s hold on the scientific enterprise.³⁸

To Bahá’ís the hold is not tenuous at all. It is the inevitable outgrowth of the progressive unfoldment of divine Truth and the divine Will in successive divine Revelations. The question of why it was Europe, what elements led Europe to succeed, and how we can ensure that those essential elements of success are preserved in civilization, is therefore a secondary question. The key question is how to most rapidly transform the world into the global system envisaged by Bahá’u’lláh. The diversity of the human experience, when coupled with the moral and social principles contained in divine Revelation, rather than having the potential to destroy the systems erected by modern science and through modern thought, will on the contrary enhance the economic, scientific, intellectual, social and political development of the global community.

Scientists use a method. They use a method which in the past has been highly successful. More than anything, the scientific community wishes to continue that success. It seeks a method which will, in the long run and despite any changes society may yet undergo, keep science alive; a method which will prevent stagnation and guarantee science’s continued progress. The Seven Valleys contains the core of just such a method.

Notes

- 1) Shoghi Effendi. 1965. *God Passes By* p. 140. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust.
- 2) *Ibid.* p. 140
- 3) Bahá’u’lláh. 1978. *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* p. 24. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust.
- 4) Bahá’u’lláh. 1992. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* p. 20. Bahá’í World Centre, Haifa.
- 5) Bahá’u’lláh. 1978. *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* p. 35. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust.
- 6) Richard Feynman. 1965. *The Character of Physical Law*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.
- 7) Shoghi Effendi. *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*. “The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh” pp. 97-157. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust.
- 8) A few years ago George Duvall, of the Department of Physics at Washington State University, spoke about the vital importance, and difficulty, of engaging in scholarship in the physical sciences:
Physics has become a very difficult subject. The expansion of the field in both depth and breadth during the last forty year is almost incomprehensible. The coherence which has characterized physics in the past is slipping away, and too lit-

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the effort is being made to prevent it. There are three legitimate activities for the academic: research, teaching, and scholarship. The last of these is not properly recognized by university administrators, yet it plays a key role in science. It is the scholar who keeps up with progress on a broad front, who digests new results, synthesizes and simplifies them, integrates them with existing knowledge, and makes them available to his fellows and comprehensible to his students. To accomplish this is an intellectual feat of the greatest magnitude, and it is a natural companion to teaching. Unfortunately, scholarship of this kind does not mature quickly, it does not lead to large numbers of publications, and its merit is not easily evaluated. By failing to recognize the value of scholarship and to learn how to evaluate it, universities are doing a great disservice to students, the faculty, the professions, and the nation.

George Duvall. 1989. "Three Blind Men and an Elephant," in *Shock Compression of Condensed Matter*.

- 9) Alfred North Whitehead. 1967. *Science and the Modern World*. New York: Free Press.
- 10) Bahá'u'lláh. 1939. *The Hidden Words*, Persian #29. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- 11) Bahá'u'lláh. 1978. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* p. 141. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- 12) Henri Poincaré. Quoted in Peitgen, Jurgens and Saupe. 1992. *Chaos and Fractals* p. 15. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- 13) Thomas Kuhn. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- 14) Bahá'u'lláh. 1945. *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* p. 1. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- 15) *Ibid.* p. 1
- 16) *Ibid.* p. 1-2
- 17) *Ibid.* p. 2
- 18) *Ibid.* p. 3
- 19) *Ibid.* p. 4
- 20) *Ibid.* p. 5
- 21) *Ibid.*
- 22) *Ibid.*
- 23) *Ibid.*
- 24) *Ibid.* p. 7
- 25) *Ibid.*
- 26) *Ibid.* p. 8
- 27) *Ibid.* p. 10
- 28) *Ibid.* p. 11
- 29) *Ibid.* p. 17
- 30) *Ibid.* p. 30
- 31) 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1982. *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.
- 32) William McNeill. 1963. *The Rise of the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 33) Hugh Trevor-Roper. 1965. *The Rise of Christian Europe*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- 34) David Landes. 1998. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*. London: Abacus.
- 35) Kevin Phillips. 1999. *The Cousins' Wars*. New York: Basic Books.
- 36) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 168
- 37) 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1957. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- 38) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 167

Theological Responses to Modernity in the Nineteenth-century Middle East:

The examples of Bahá'u'lláh and Muhammad Abduh

by Oliver Scharbrodt

Introduction: Bahá'u'lláh, Muhammad Abduh, and the challenge of modernity

The emergence of Western modernity in the nineteenth-century Middle East led to the appearance of a variety of movements that responded to modernity. The military, political and economic dominance of Western powers in the Middle East that resulted in the colonisation or semi-colonisation of many countries of that region illustrated the backwardness of Muslim countries which were not prepared for the exposure to Western modernity. Therefore, political movements sought the modernisation of the state apparatus by introducing Western administrative patterns and legal reforms, constitutionalists demanded the abolition of absolute monarchy and supported democratisation, and state officials intended to prepare Middle Easterners intellectually to modernity by establishing a Western-like educational system. Usually the discussion of the emergence of modernity in the Middle East is concerned with these socio-political issues.

However, Western imperialism had a deep psychological impact on Middle Easterners as well. The dominance and rule of non-Muslims over Muslims questioned the strength of Islam and forced Muslims to admit that the followers of Christianity, a religion Islam was supposed to supersede, have achieved a greater civilisation.¹ The belief that Islam was the final and perfect revelation of God was contradicted by the vulnerability and dependence of Muslim states on Western intervention. Hence, the emergence of Western modernity has an important theological dimension, since the backwardness of Muslims in relation to the so-called infidels from Europe questions the superiority of the Islamic religion. Only a small minority abandoned Islam at all, thinking the religion itself responsible for the decline of the Middle East and seeking a solution in Western secularism. The majority searched for a religious response to modernity and hoped for a restoration of the glorious past of Islam.² Any response which does not intend to abandon the religious tradition at all, has to find an explanation for the present decline of Muslim societies and to explain how the religious tradition can be made relevant for modernity in order to maintain its universal validity. If such a religious response intends to modernise Muslim societies, it has to find a theological justification for reform on the basis of the Islamic tradition. Such an approach is not unusual to Muslim theological discourse which always had political implications and was pursued in support of a specific political agenda.

This paper will present and compare two religious responses to Western modernity in the nineteenth-century Middle East: the theological ideas of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Muhammad Abduh is undoubtedly one of the most influential thinkers of modern Islam. Being the disciple of Jamál al-Dín al-Afghání and the teacher of Rashíd Ridá, Abduh stands in the line of eminent personalities in the Islamic world of the last two centuries. Afghání's fame is based on his Pan-Islamic political activism, while Ridá's significance lies in his ideological impact on modern Muslim political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. Both secular liberal-minded Muslim intellectuals and fundamentalist ideologues refer to Abduh as their predecessor in reforming Islam. Abduh received a traditional education at Azhar where he came in contact with Afghání and became one of his closest disciples. Because of his support for the nationalist movement that emerged in Egypt in the 1870's, Abduh was exiled to Beirut after the defeat of Urabi's nationalist revolt in 1882. Later he went to Paris and allied with Afghání, publishing with his teacher the anti-British journal *al-Urwat al-Wuthqá*. In 1888, the permission was given to him to settle again in Egypt, where he started working as a judge and became chief mufti of Egypt in 1899. Until his death in 1905, he was much involved in publishing activities and tried to implement administrative and educational reforms at Azhar.

Both Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh deal in their writings with those socio-political issues that other reform movements in the Middle East discussed. However, this paper will focus on their theological ideas, following the thesis that any reform attempt with a religious outlook has to provide a theological justification for its aims. Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh are not interested in theology *per se*, but intend to provide a metaphysical framework

for their respective reform programmes. Abduh's most important theological work is the *Risalat al-tawhíd*, a systematic treatise on Islamic theology that was published after his return to Egypt on the basis of the lectures he gave during his exile in Beirut. Bahá'u'lláh has not written a systematic treatise on the subject, but His theological ideas are spread throughout His writings. The *Kitáb-i-`qán*, which He wrote in Baghdad in the late 1850s or early 1860s before His open proclamation, expresses His growing prophetic consciousness and can be considered to be the theological manifesto of the Bahá'í Faith. This paper will compare Bahá'u'lláh's and Muhammad Abduh's ideas on theology, prophetology, and salvation history. The comparison does not only aim at showing differences and parallels, but also at finding reasons for them in relation to the objectives of their reform programmes. It demonstrates how both thinkers try to bridge tradition with modernity and to find a theological response to the tension between both forces by appropriating, stressing, dismissing and modifying elements of the traditions they come from and enriching them with modern ideas. The comparison distinguishes between four modern motifs in their theologies.

Modern motifs in Bahá'u'lláh's and Muhammad Abduh's theologies

Rationalism

It is not surprising that both thinkers refer to Mu'tazila rationalism and nominalism in order to modernise and to a certain extent rationalise theology. However, Bahá'u'lláh and Muhammad Abduh only make selective use of Mu'tazila ideas and use them to a different degree. Abduh's point of departure is a philosophical proof of God's existence. According to him, it is possible to prove God's existence rationally without any reference to revelation. One can find analogies of this philosophical approach in medieval Christian and Muslim theological discourses which have appropriated the Aristotelian theory of existence to prove the validity of either the Christian or Islamic revelation universally, based on reason.³ For Abduh, logic provides universal canonical rules for secure and objective knowledge.⁴ Abduh applies this notion of logic to his philosophical approach to theology in order to provide it with a foundation which he considers to be rational and hence universally valid.

Abduh distinguishes three epistemological categories which have ontological counterparts. Everything that can be known can be categorised as being either possible (*mumkin*), impossible (*mustahíl*) or necessary (*wájib*).⁵ Three principles of existence follow these categories of knowledge. Abduh discriminates between "that which is contingent,⁶ that which is necessarily self-existent⁷ and that which is inherently impossible of existence."^{8,9} These three categories of existence enable Abduh with a tool to deduce from them the existence of God, while discussing them *en détail*. The mode of the impossible or non-existent is only an imaginative category which can neither in reality nor logically be existent.¹⁰ The contingent possesses potentially and equally both the mode of being and the mode of non-being. It requires an external force that causes the actualisation of the principle of being. The existence of the contingent depends on a prior cause, as it can never cause its existence by itself. The contingent ceases from existing when a cause lacks or stops the continuous process of causation. The contingency of things of the created world can be perceived, as they come into being and disappear later. All contingent things of the world constitute the contingent which requires a primal cause. This cause cannot be part of the contingent since, being a cause, it must exist prior to the contingent. The necessarily existent and the non-existent are the two ontological modes that precede the contingent. However, since the non-existent does not exist, only the necessarily existent can be the primal cause.¹¹

After having shown that the necessarily existent Being causes the contingent, Abduh introduces the essential qualities of the primal cause. One of its characteristics is its pre-existent eternity, since it precedes all contingent things.¹² All attributes must be assigned to it in their most complete form to maintain its perfection. As it bestows attributes to contingent things and hence determines their nature, it must possess these attributes perfectly.¹³ The qualities of life, knowledge, will, freedom of choice must be then, according to Abduh, essential attributes of the necessarily existent Being as well.¹⁴ One can find a similar discourse on the attributes of the Supreme Being among Neoplatonists, except for the stress on unity (*wahda*) which has been added to this set by Al-Ash'arí and Al-Ghazálí in Muslim theological discourse.¹⁵ Likewise for Abduh, the oneness of the necessarily existent Being "in His essence, His attributes, His existence and His acts"¹⁶ has to be assumed. The attribute of unity implies its non-composite nature and its uniqueness, as no being is equal to it.¹⁷ With this philosophical approach to God's existence, Abduh presumes to have proven the rationality of the fundamental

belief in one God and to have shown the harmony of reason and revelation in the basic question of God's being. For Abduh, reason alone is sufficient to lead to the belief in God. Abduh revives the philosophical approach to God of medieval Muslim theologians and philosophers for his apologetic aim of demonstrating the reconcilability of Islam with reason.¹⁸

In contrast to Abduh, Bahá'u'lláh does not seek a rational foundation for the faith in God. Although He shares with Abduh the distinction between the contingency of creation and God as its non-contingent creator, He does not provide a logical explanation of God's existence, but embeds God and His creation in a Sufi-like cosmological scheme. Apparently, Bahá'u'lláh does not see the necessity to prove God's existence, and the addressees of His writings probably never doubted it anyway.

The different attitudes of Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh towards reason can be observed in their discussion of the divine attributes as well. Both share a nominalistic and skeptical view of language, but again the extent and the purpose they use it for differs. Both agree that the divine essence is neither attainable by human comprehension nor expressible by language—only through His attributes can God be recognised. Whereas for Abduh most attributes can be rationally deduced from the necessarily existent Being, Bahá'u'lláh underlines that all attributes assigned to God have no reality and do not reflect the divine essence. This difference can be explained by their different objectives. Although Abduh follows the scholastic tradition in expounding a philosophic approach to God's existence and emphasises the necessity and importance of a rational basis of theology, he does not entirely agree with a complete appropriation of speculative philosophy in theological discourse. For him, the attempt to integrate wholly Greek philosophy in Muslim theology entails a danger that the ultimate truth criteria of Qur'án and Sunna could be replaced by those of peripatetic philosophy.¹⁹ Furthermore, Abduh is critical of many scholastic discussions which he considers to be futile, as they seek to grasp theological ideas which are not rationally comprehensible. Such discussions have often led to unnecessary sectarian divisions that have undermined Muslim doctrinal unity. Abduh's primary aim is to find the essential doctrines of Islam which all Muslims can agree on. He therefore eschews subtle theological speculations which he considers to be counter-productive.²⁰

Abduh legitimises the necessity of philosophical caution in reflecting on God by quoting the following *hadíth*: "Ponder the creation of God, but do not take your meditations into the Divine essence, or you will perish."²¹ In accordance with this *hadíth*, Abduh employs the atomistic theory of philosophy that distinguishes between accidents and substance of a thing.²² Only accidents of a thing, namely its qualities, are accessible for the human mind, while the substance of a thing which lies behind its accidents is not comprehensible, because "reason quite lacks the competence to penetrate the essence of things."²³ Due to the ultimate alterity of God, it is impossible to grasp the divine essence.²⁴ Only some of God's attributes are accessible by the rational faculty. Most problems of theological speculation are not solvable, such as whether the attributes of God are part of the divine essence, separated from it, or what other kind of relationship they have to each other. Such questions transcend human understanding. Any controversy around these issues is a controversy around words which can never fully reflect reality, "for linguistic usage [*isti mál al-lughá*] does not 'grasp' truth [*al-haqíqa*], and even if words do come to expressive grips with reality, the way language put things never does full justice to them as they really are essentially."²⁵ Abduh employs a nominalistic and sometimes even agnostic attitude in order to avoid subtle theological speculations that have divided the Muslim community, but is willing to adopt a philosophical approach to God as long as it promotes his intention to rationalise theology.

Bahá'u'lláh's use of nominalism serves different purposes. In the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, theology and prophetology are connected with cosmology. The structure of Bahá'u'lláh's theological cosmos provides the metaphysical background that illustrates the station of God and the prophets and the function of revelation. Hence, any discussion of theological issues in Bahá'u'lláh's writings has to start with an outline of His metaphysics. The most well-known structuralisation of cosmos is the threefold scheme that distinguishes between the world of God (*'alam al-haqq*), the world of command (*'alam al-amr*), i.e. the world of the Manifestations, and the world of creation (*'alam al-khalq*). The world of the Absolute Truth (*haqq*) stands on top of the hierarchy. It refers to God's primordial divine essence in its non-manifest and undifferentiated status of pure oneness (*ahadiyya*).²⁶ In this realm God is one, as there is no distinction between His substance and His Attributes, and God is absolutely transcendent, as all Attributes ascribed to Him on that level fail to reflect divine Reality and even the Prophets have no access to this realm and cannot comprehend God's pure Essence.²⁷ Since God is con-

tained as a non-manifest essence in the highest realm, any attempt to describe His Being in this stage is futile. An impersonal description of God is dominant in reference to this world. Any description of God can never represent His inaccessible divine Essence and any conceptualisation of the absolute Truth is inevitably misconceived.²⁸ In the Kitáb-i-*qán* Bahá'u'lláh affirms: "So lofty is this station that no testimony can bear witness, neither evidence do justice to its truth . . ." ²⁹ At this stage a negative theology of the *deus absconditus* (the hidden God) prevails, which almost resembles an agnostic attitude.³⁰

Despite the transcendence of the impersonal God, Who is so far beyond mystical experience or philosophical conception³¹ then even the possibility of adequate worship is thrown into doubt,³² Bahá'u'lláh assigns attributes to Him. Following orthodox Islamic theology, God is described as "the Eternal,"³³ "the Powerful, . . . the Almighty"³⁴ and as the omniscient source of all knowledge, having sight, hearing, speech, life and unity.³⁵ However, in accordance with the Mu'tazila, Bahá'u'lláh makes only nominalistic use of these attributes, considering them not as real entities but rather as allegorical descriptions of God's indescribable nature,³⁶ since "it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress . . ." ³⁷ Attributing qualities to God irrespective of their insufficiency illustrates that God is beyond all imperfections.³⁸

God becomes manifest in the realms inferior to the World of Absolute Truth. Only through these manifestations is God approachable. The first manifestation occurs with the emergence of the Primal Will that emanates from the primordial divine essence. This *logos* becomes the point of departure of theology. Since there is no real theology outside God's manifestation, only a negative theology referring to God as the Absolute Truth, one should speak of "manifestation theology"³⁹ or "theophanology."⁴⁰ The Word of God (*kálímát alláh/kalám alláh*) or *logos* is not only the first but also the pivotal attribute that becomes manifested, as it links God's inscrutable essence with creation. The Word of God is the generative and creative force in the universe, being "the Cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof."⁴¹ Bahá'u'lláh is only nominalistic in reference to God in the highest realm to underscore the inaccessibility of divine essence. This negative approach to God becomes the foundation of His manifestation theology. God is only accessible through the revelation of His attributes in the metaphysical realms and for human beings through the appearance of a Manifestation of God.

Hence, the appropriation of Mu'tazila rationalism by Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh depends on how useful it is for the ultimate purposes of their theologies. Abduh's aim is to rationalise religious belief and to achieve Muslim doctrinal unity by eschewing contentious theological controversies. His dogmatic exposition is supposed to be generally accessible and to show the essential beliefs Muslims have in common in order to overcome sectarian divisions.⁴² Islam is presented as *Vernunftreligion*⁴³ (religion of reason) that reconciles revelation with philosophy, because they share the same basic axiom. Philosophy starts from the existence of the necessarily existent Being and Islamic theology is based on the Qur'anic teachings of God that do not contradict, but even confirm the philosophical approach.⁴⁴

Bahá'u'lláh's use of nominalism serves different purposes. For him, theology is not rationalisable, as reason fails to comprehend God who is as a logic-transcending entity beyond all forms of conceptualisation. His negative approach to divine essence illustrates the necessity of the revelation and manifestation of divine attributes in creation. Bahá'u'lláh appropriates Sufi terminology and concepts as a means to expound the dependence of human beings on the Manifestations of God to recognise God. Any knowledge about God stems from His Manifestations alone. Whereas Abduh intends to rationalise theology, Bahá'u'lláh develops theology as a metaphysical framework that makes the continuous revelation of God in history plausible and allows the possibility of a post-Qur'anic revelation.⁴⁵

Ethics

Another approach Bahá'u'lláh and Muhammad Abduh use to rationalise theology is to give prophethood primarily a socio-moral function and to stress the ethical necessity of divine revelation. For both, the prophets or Manifestations provide knowledge of the afterlife, lay the foundations for solidarity and unity of a community, and bring doctrines that become the source of a new civilisation. Individual and collective well-being depends on divine revelation. Both assume the priority of ethics over theological and metaphysical expositions. Abduh follows al-Ghazálí's emphasis on ethics in composing the *Risalat al-tawhíd* as "un traité éthico-

théologique”⁴⁶ which underscore the necessary relevance theological discussions must have to moral questions. Likewise, a shift from metaphysics to ethics is discernible in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. As the nature of metaphysical realities transcends human comprehension and the perception of them depends on the beholder’s perspective, all knowledge of them is inevitably provisional and limited. Therefore, the moral consequences and spiritual message a metaphysical concept conveys are more important than the actual reality of such a concept.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, how prophethood fulfils its moral function is conceived by both in a slightly different way which reveals their different attitudes towards reason. Additionally, Abduh’s exposition of prophecy remains in orthodox framework, whereas Bahá’u’lláh’s employs Sufi concepts and terms to give a new notion of prophethood.

Abduh has an elitist approach towards ethics. Like the Mu‘tazila, Abduh uses an aesthetic point of departure for ethics. According to the Mu‘tazila doctrine, the aesthetic distinction between beautiful and ugly (*hasan wa qabíh*) is inherent to human nature. Although there might be different opinions on what actually defines beauty or ugliness, all human beings agree that there is a basic distinction between both qualities.⁴⁸ This aesthetic distinction is transferred to the ethical sphere, since actions likewise possess beauty or ugliness in themselves or in the results they produce.⁴⁹ Hence, Abduh assumes like the Mu‘tazila, an intuitive aesthetic competence with an ethical counterpart that can discriminate between beautiful and ugly and good and bad, respectively. Therefore, reason would theoretically be sufficient for the determination of moral values without divine revelation.⁵⁰

However, only a small minority is able to use its rational faculty adequately to come to right moral conclusions. Most people can only make limited use of their reason, as its full application is circumscribed by their passions.⁵¹ A small elite can actualise the right moral values on their own without revelation, but the morality of certain acts is difficult to prove rationally to the whole of humanity. Hence, a guidance is necessary that gives an adequate understanding of those aspects of religion and ethics that are not attainable by the majority of people.⁵² The prophets are the mediators that bring knowledge of God and His Attributes to the generality of people and convey those truths, the elite already has realised. Speaking with superior divine authority, they provide secure foundations of religious and moral knowledge and bestow a strong belief, that cannot be achieved by reason.⁵³

In contrast to Abduh, Bahá’u’lláh has a skeptical attitude towards reason and its moral competence. For Him, everybody requires divine revelation, as it conveys knowledge which is unattainable by reason at all. Human beings cannot rely on their nature to determine ethical values, since they only partly follow the natural law as an instinct-reduced being. The dual animal and angelic nature of human beings necessitates guidance that reveals the divine potentialities in them. Revelation is the Archimedic point all morality is rooted in.⁵⁴

Likewise the channels of moral guidance, namely the prophets and Manifestations, are differently conceived. Abduh follows the orthodox Sunni prophetology. He stresses the human nature of the prophets who are ordinary human beings dependent on the conditions of human life and do not differ from others on this purely human level.⁵⁵ He upholds the doctrine of *‘isma* that the prophets are exempted from sin and error. God chooses exceptional souls that are receptive for divine revelation and possess moral and spiritual superiority to their contemporaries to mediate between him and creation. The prophets reveal books which contain the Word of God and which are sufficient proof of the authenticity of their prophecy due to their inimitability.⁵⁶ The authenticity of their prophetic mission encourages obedience to the revealed moral laws. In order to rationalise the Islamic doctrine of prophecy, Abduh restricts the infallibility of the prophets to their prophetic mission.⁵⁷ Abduh particularly stresses that the prophets do not have any authority on scientific issues. Neither reason nor revelation affirms the absolute infallibility of the prophets in all aspects of life.⁵⁸ Abduh excludes prophetic infallibility from science for the purpose of opening scientific research for humans and interpreting prophetic references to nature that might contradict modern sciences allegorically.

In Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, the ethical dimension of revelation is illustrated by placing the Manifestations in the cosmological scheme. Bahá’u’lláh uses the term “manifestation” (*mazhar, zuhúr*) in two senses. On the one hand, it refers to the manifestation of divine attributes in creation as part of the permanent creative process of God. On the other hand, “Manifestation” describes the recipients of the secondary revelation of God, namely the divine prophets and messengers that have been sent to humanity throughout the course of history. This concept of the Manifestations⁵⁹ of God which follows to a certain extent the Islamic prophetology and adopts some

Sufi terms is probably one of the most original aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's theology and plays the most significant role therein. The introduction of this term in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh implies His claim to offer a new vision of revelation and salvation history. The term "Manifestation" is meant to transcend the Islamic terminology, as prophethood or messengerhood represent lower definitions of theophany, whereas the introduction of a new terminology suggests Bahá'u'lláh's intention to provide a fuller understanding of theophany.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the Qur'anic terms prophet (*nabí*) and messenger (*rasúl*) can be found in Bahá'u'lláh's writings as well as the basic prophetological concepts of the Islamic tradition, particularly of Shí'ism. Like the major theologians of Shí'í Islam, Bahá'u'lláh distinguishes between prophets with a merely admonishing function and "prophets endowed with constancy or legislating prophets."⁶¹ The prophets with constancy bring a new law, abrogating the provisions of the previous revelation. Likewise, a book has been revealed to them which becomes the instrument of the new divine legislation.⁶² Like Islamic prophetology, Bahá'u'lláh stresses the sinlessness and moral infallibility (*'isma*) of the prophets with constancy. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, He introduces the concept of the "Most Great Infallibility [*al-'ismat al-kubrâ*]"⁶³ which does not only consist of their moral perfection, but also of their independence from moral laws of the previous revelations. As divine legislators, these prophets act in a non-ethical realm.⁶⁴

In the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, "prophets endowed with constancy" is synonymous with "Manifestations of God." The Manifestations fluctuate between human and divine consciousness and not only transmit the Word of God but are identical with it. They are not ordinary humans or equal to other contingent beings; rather, being identical with the eternal *logos*, They are uncreated and precede the contingent world.⁶⁵ All divine attributes are perfectly reflected in Them and conveyed to creation. Their moral authority stems from Their status as Manifestation of God which perfectly represents divine attributes into creation to enable the spiritual progress of the individual and the material and spiritual progress of society. Human beings have to emulate this reflection to obtain divine attributes, that are inherent in themselves, and to follow the moral laws introduced by the Manifestations for individual and collective well-being.⁶⁶ Despite the conceptual differences between Bahá'u'lláh's and Abduh's prophetology, both stress the ethical dimension of prophethood to make revelation relevant to the requirements of the modern world.

Evolution

Both Bahá'u'lláh and Muhammad Abduh expound an evolutionary notion of salvation history and a dynamic concept of religion. Salvation history is the gradual revelation of the divine will in the course of history that correlates to the evolutionary development of human civilisation. Likewise religion is not a static and immutable entity, but an active force that has to be revitalised and actualised to changing conditions. Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh distinguish between the essential part of religion that cannot be modified, but has to be preserved, and the changeable part that has to be assimilated to the requirements of time in order to keep religion alive as a social force. However, both use this evolutionary and dynamic concept of religion and salvation history for different purposes. Whereas Abduh uses the evolutionary motif to defend the superiority of Islam, Bahá'u'lláh employs it to make the necessity of a new theophany credible.

Particularly, the evolutionary thought of Herbert Spencer is considered to have been an influence on Abduh.⁶⁷ It enabled the development of an evolutionary concept of salvation history that serves as a further legitimisation of the finality of Muhammad's prophethood. The development of humanity in general is analogous to the psychological development of the individual. Humanity passes from its childhood to adolescence and finally reaches its maturity.⁶⁸ The different religions constitute the divine educational programme for humanity and respond to the spiritual and intellectual capacity of the time they appear and convey prescriptions according to the needs of that specific period. Abduh divides history in three stages that represent the development of humanity. In the pre-prophetic period, the primary concern of humanity was the satisfaction of its material and physical needs. In this period, an animistic understanding of nature prevailed. People then became more conscious of the mechanisms of natural law and social life and partly realised the spiritual dimension of their existence in the prophetic period. The divine prophets appeared successively to reveal the divine Will. Humanity now lives in the post-prophetic period which does not require any further prophetic revelation.⁶⁹

The religious education of humanity took place in the prophetic period with three successive revelations that

led humanity from infancy to maturity. The three religions Abduh refers to are very likely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The religion that appeared at humanity's childhood (Judaism) corresponded to the capacity and mentality of the people by appealing to the senses with miracles and containing simple and comprehensible provisions. It guided humanity by a rigorous ethics that demanded complete obedience.⁷⁰ Over the course of time, humanity made spiritual and intellectual progress and reached its adolescence. The religion which appeared at that stage responded to contemporary circumstances and had a purely emotional appeal. The primary objective of the adolescent divine revelation consisted in increasing the spiritual awareness of humanity: "It laid down for men sacred laws of asceticism, drawing them away from the world altogether and turning them towards higher life."⁷¹ But this religion (Christianity) became corrupted by its religious leaders and its ascetic stress on the after-life neglected the material needs of human beings. This religion declined due to sectarian divisions. Anti-intellectual tendencies that revealed a strong hostility to science caused stagnation and social decay.⁷²

The arrival of Muhammad's prophecy and the emergence of Islam mark the ultimate culmination of the evolutionary divine education of humanity. Islam has the most universal appeal, addressing emotion and reason simultaneously.⁷³ For Abduh, Islam introduced the essential unity of all religions, as their basic teachings are identical and they all represented different stages of the divinely guided salvation history: "[Islam] demonstrated that religion with God was one in all generations, that there was a single Divine purpose for their reform without and their cleansing within."⁷⁴ Differences among the religions are explained by the dissimilar conditions and circumstances of the times when new prophets appeared.⁷⁵ Although all religions participate in one single truth, Abduh presents inclusivist Islam as being the complete and final expression of truth.⁷⁶ Due to its complete nature and universal appeal, Islam leads humanity to maturity and builds the transition from the prophetic to the post-prophetic period. As humanity has achieved its maturity, Abduh believed, it does not require any further divine revelation, and as Islam already represents the complete expression of truth that cannot be augmented, prophethood terminated in Muhammad's mission. Hence, Abduh's view of salvation history delivers an evolutionary argument for the finality of Muhammad's prophethood.

Although divine revelation has ceased with Muhammad and brought salvation history to its ultimate climax, the evolutionary development of the Islamic religion does not stop, but the fundamental principles of Islam have to be re-actualised in correlation with the requirements of time. Abduh uses the concept of the *mujaddid* (renewer) who appears periodically to renew Islam by cleansing it from unnecessary traditions and reinstating the pristine faith of the early period.⁷⁷ As other Islamic scholars like Ibn Khaldoun or Ibn Taimiyya, Abduh distinguishes between rules concerned with questions of ritual and worship (*ibádát*) and rules dealing with humans' relations to the world and to each other (*mu'ámalát*). While the former are unquestionably prescribed by revelation and are immutable, the latter consist in abstract principles which have to be interpreted and applied to changing conditions.⁷⁸ Hence, Abduh encourages a new *ijtihád*, employing the general *mu'ámalát* principles to the present needs and aiming at the welfare of society (*maslaha*). He repudiates the imitation (*taqlíd*) of the legal theories of medieval Islamic scholars, because their provisions are not prepared for the demands of the modern world.⁷⁹ *Ijihád* as interpretative instrument and *maslahah* as legal criterion guarantee the flexibility of Islam in order to make it relevant to modern issues.

Bahá'u'lláh introduces a dynamic concept of religion which undergoes different stages in its development. The emergence of a new theophany is referred to as being similar to the season of spring, as the revelation induces a new spirit into humanity and creates a new consciousness. Every religion reaches the zenith of its development, when its doctrines are widespread in society and the civilisation founded by that religion attains its climax.⁸⁰ However, after this period of progress, the decline of a religion inevitably commences, when people start corrupting the religion and its original teachings.⁸¹ Bahá'u'lláh interprets symbolically the eschatological motif that in the Day of Judgement the sun and moon will darken; these signify the oblivion of the genuine teachings of religion and the merely outer performance of its rituals without the right ethical and spiritual consciousness.⁸² In another passage, Bahá'u'lláh, referring to Shí'í Islam, compares the situation at the early days with the present-day conditions and concludes that Shí'í Islam declined because the believers abandoned its genuine doctrines, became dogmatic, and blindly followed the religious leadership.⁸³ The rise and decline of a religion is, hence, "an inevitable and natural process"⁸⁴ which is caused by its adherents.

This dynamic notion of religion going through stages of progress and decline necessitates the continuous

periodical renewal of revelation to re-establish the genuine faith of God which the believers have abandoned. Every new religion breaks “with past traditions; with obsolete, outworn forms and institutions; and with a ritualistic conservatism divested of any meaning.”⁸⁵ In the *Kitáb-i-ġán*, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the “City of Certitude” that is periodically re-constituted by the Manifestations of God.⁸⁶ However, this cyclical scheme with the reconstitution of the genuine Faith of God throughout salvation history is completed with a linear notion of progress. A new theophany does not only fulfil the transhistorical mission of the Manifestations and adapts it to changing circumstances, but each new revelation leads to progress and a higher consciousness.⁸⁷ In accordance with the evolutionary progress of humanity, every new Manifestation reveals a fuller account of truth which goes in line with the increasing receptivity of humanity and, therefore, supersedes the previous revelations.⁸⁸

Bahá'u'lláh's concept of salvation history combines the cyclical theme of return and renewal with the linear theme of evolution and progress. All Manifestations of God are connected with Each Other as the agents of God's continuous evolutionary education of humanity. Salvation history as progressive revelation does not allow any claims to exclusivity or finality of any religion and stresses the continuity of revelation, as “not for a moment hath his grace been withheld, nor have the showers of His living-kindness ceased to rain upon mankind.”⁸⁹ The future will experience likewise the emergence of new theophanies.⁹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh claims to be the Manifestation of God for this age who does not only re-emphasise the essential doctrines of all religions, but likewise provides teachings which contain the solutions for problems of this age. He further claims to be the fulfilment of the eschatological expectations of all religions. By identifying himself with the awaited messianic figures of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism, He does not only underline the essential unity of all Manifestations, as every theophany is the return of the previous ones, but also universalises his claim considering himself to be the Promised One of all religions.⁹¹ His theophany marks the *eschaton* which the scriptures of previous religions anticipate. Therefore, His mission will inaugurate a new age in the history of humanity as promised and will lead to the reconciliation of all religions and the establishment of world peace. Through Bahá'u'lláh's theophany, humanity will reach its maturity.

A radical break with the past occurs with Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, necessitated because tradition does not provide adequate solutions for modern problems. It is not enough to reform the *shari'a*; what was needed was a new *shari'a* equipped for modern challenges.⁹² The concept of progressive revelation provides an explanation for the present decay of Muslim societies which is the inevitable result of the natural decline of the Islamic religion. However, progressive revelation links the new theophany with the previous traditions. It upholds the essential identity of all Manifestations who are part of salvation history and contains the idea of the periodical renewal of the faith of God under varying social circumstances.⁹³ This notion of essential identity between all religions facilitates the acceptance of new authority claims, since it suggests that by becoming a follower of Bahá'u'lláh one does not betray one's own tradition, as the essential beliefs are identical in all religions. Becoming a Bahá'í rather means following the most recent version of the genuine faith of God.

Universalism

The evolutionary scheme of salvation history in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and Muhammad Abduh stresses the essential identity of all prophets and the unity of all religions and explains the differences among them as being the result of the historical and cultural context the prophets appeared in. Hence, Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh give their theologies a universalistic outlook.⁹⁴ Behind the historical Manifestations of religion lies “the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.”⁹⁵ Both construe a “metareligion,” a religion beyond religion that all adherents of concrete historical faiths should acknowledge sharing in common.⁹⁶ Such essentialist notions of religion can be found in the Islamic tradition, particularly in Sufism, which distinguishes between the exoteric (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bātin*) dimension of religion and emphasises likewise the essential esoteric unity of all religions behind the secondary exoteric differences.⁹⁷ Textual support for a universalistic idea of religion can be found in the Qur'án as well.⁹⁸ In addition to these antecedents of theological universalism in the Islamic tradition, Bahá'u'lláh's and Abduh's universalistic approaches conform to modern intentions of philosophy in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to achieve an essentialist view of religion by philosophical abstraction. Enlightenment thinkers like Kant conceived a natural religion behind the positive religions with their theological corruption. This primordial religion of reason with its stress on ethics and spirituality should become the foundation for reconciliation of all religions.⁹⁹

From Bahá'u'lláh's and Abduh's universalistic theology stems their call for practical tolerance and interreligious dialogue. For both, tolerance is the attitude that should determine the behaviour of all religionists to each other. Abduh stresses the tolerant nature of Islam by pointing at its peaceful spread, the actual motivation of which was to defend people's right to convert to Islam. There were neither systematic missionary activities nor forced conversions.¹⁰⁰ On the contrary, all inhabitants of the Muslim territories enjoyed religious freedom and co-existed peacefully regardless of their religious affiliations. The tolerant atmosphere of early Islam even allowed non-Muslims to achieve high positions in the state apparatus and encouraged Jews who were persecuted in Europe to immigrate to Islamic territories.¹⁰¹ Finally, this spirit of tolerance that disregarded social, racial and religious distinctions promoted mass conversions to Islam. In contrast to the Western image of Islam as a religion of violence, Abduh underlines its peaceful character by giving *jihád* a purely defensive character.¹⁰² Likewise, Bahá'u'lláh obliges his followers to adopt a tolerant attitude towards adherents of other religions. As the new source of divine legislative authority He claims to be, He abrogates any Islamic laws and practices He considers to be intolerant. Bahá'u'lláh prohibits *jihád*¹⁰³ and prescribes peaceful missionary activities. Any form of religious discrimination is prohibited, as well as religious fanaticism and factionalism and all practices that discredit other religionists.¹⁰⁴ Bahá'u'lláh explicitly abrogates the Shí'ite concept of the ritual impurity of non-Muslims¹⁰⁵ and the practice of despising and cursing them.¹⁰⁶ Another legal consequence of Bahá'u'lláh's call for tolerance is the lifting of any marital restrictions between adherents of different religions.¹⁰⁷

However, for Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh the mere practice of passive tolerance is not sufficient. Both stress the necessity of dialogue among the adherents of different religions in order to overcome prejudices and the resolve hostility and separation among religions.¹⁰⁸ Abduh is credited with having been involved in interreligious activities between Muslims, Christians, and Jews during his exile in Beirut, aiming at a rapprochement of the three Semitic religions.¹⁰⁹ Bahá'u'lláh makes the participation of his followers in interreligious dialogue a religious obligation.¹¹⁰ Such a dialogue is the requirement for the mutual reconciliation of all religions and the creation of a cosmopolitan consciousness that considers the whole humanity as one family and prioritises the collective welfare of humanity over particular interests.¹¹¹ This dialogical approach expresses the primary objective of Bahá'u'lláh's mission which consists in "the unification and pacification of the whole world."¹¹²

Despite the tolerant and universalistic tone of their theologies, Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh cannot be considered to be proponents of religious pluralism. Although they discourage religious exclusivity and its attendant intolerant excesses, both undertake an inclusivistic approach to other religions. They accept the divine origin and temporary validity of other religions, but their religion—Islam in the case of Abduh and the Bahá'í Faith in the case of Bahá'u'lláh—represents the most accurate version of divine revelation that is fully equipped to face the challenges of the modern world. For Abduh, Islam is the religion that harmonises perfectly with human nature, as it appeals to reason and emotion alike. The egalitarian tendencies and the liberating force of Islam make it a modern religion *par excellence*. According to his exposition, Islam is not only compatible to modernity but can function as a moral foundation of the modern society as well, and be the criterion which discerns the good and bad elements of progress: "Islam could serve both as a principle of change and a salutary control over it."¹¹³ In a similar way, Bahá'u'lláh claims His religion to be the absolute and ultimate truth criterion by virtue of its being the latest divine revelation.¹¹⁴ The inclusivistic appropriation of the previous religions in the concept of progressive revelation implies that the Bahá'í Faith supersedes all previous traditions. Bahá'u'lláh's "cross-cultural messianism"¹¹⁵ is the means to universalise His claim. In order to transcend the boundaries of the Islamic tradition, He claims to be the promised messianic figure of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, the four religions that co-exist in Iran.¹¹⁶ This "multiple messiahship"¹¹⁷ does not aim at supporting religious pluralism, but intends to create a link with other religious traditions in order to facilitate conversions from non-Muslims.

Conclusion: Bahá'u'lláh's post-Islamic and Abduh's modernist response to modernity

W. Shepard distinguishes five Muslim reactions to modernity which he terms Islamic secularism, Islamic modernism, radical Islamism, Islamic traditionalism, and neo-traditionalism.¹¹⁸ Rippin adds to this categorisation a post-modern and a post-Islamic response: "It is a common phenomenon in religion that, if the questioning of the authority of the past is taken far enough in the desire to be able to accommodate or compensate for the changes of the modern period, there is a need for a new source of authority."¹¹⁹ Considering Bahá'u'lláh's

theological concepts, it becomes evident that they intend to introduce Bahá'u'lláh as new source of authority which provides divine guidance in the face of modern requirements. Human beings cannot respond adequately to the modern challenge due to their limited perception of the whole problematique, but God has to respond himself to it via a new revelation, as He is the all-knowing Educator of humanity. Establishing Bahá'u'lláh as new source of authority and breaking with the past traditions endows Him with legislative flexibility, since He has not to compromise with the provisions of the previous traditions. Bahá'u'lláh's legislation is characterised by both a sacralizing and desacralizing process.¹²⁰ He desacralizes provisions and laws of previous religions that He considers to be outdated and sacralizes modern ideas of the Western world by giving them the status of a religious obligation. For instance, in the Lawh-i-Bishárát Bahá'u'lláh prohibits holy war, celibacy, the practice of confession and penance and dress restrictions as part of the desacralizing process and sacralizes modern values and concepts like religious tolerance, constitutionalism, disarmament or scientific and technological progress.¹²¹ Introducing Bahá'u'lláh as new theophany and combining Islamic and non-Islamic elements in his theology implies a gradual dissociation of the Bahá'í Faith from its Islamic origin that characterises it as a post-Islamic response to modernity.¹²²

Certainly, Abduh does not transcend the boundaries of the Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, Abduh's approach is fairly similar to the one of Bahá'u'lláh. Abduh also desacralizes elements of the tradition he considers to be inappropriate and condemns *taqlíd*. For Abduh, this desacralizing process intends to limit the doctrines Muslims must believe in to an essential minimum which is contained in the original sources, the Qur'án and the authenticated Sunna, and was embodied by the early generation of the believers. *Ijtihád*, that denies the authority of the medieval legacy and only holds sacred the original sources, enables the flexibility of the Islamic religion in the light of modern requirements. Despite his claim to refer only to the original Islamic sources, Abduh's understanding of Islam is informed by a Western view, and Islamic concepts are equated with Western ideas, as Hourani points out: "In this line of thought, *maslaha* gradually turns into utility, *shura* into parliamentary democracy, *ijma'* into public opinion; Islam itself becomes identical with civilization and activity, the norms of nineteenth-century social thought."¹²³ Hence, Abduh is eclectic in his method, selecting and re-interpreting elements of the Islamic tradition which support his view of Islam and can be reconciled or even equated with modern ideas.¹²⁴ This approach characterises Abduh as a representative of Islamic modernism.

Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh definitely differ in their assessment of the modern relevance of Islam. Whereas Abduh tries to re-universalise Islam for modernity, Bahá'u'lláh intends to overcome Islam and to re-universalise religion by establishing a new one. What promoted conversion to the Bahá'í Faith from Muslims and members of the religious minorities in Iran at the end of the last century was the "combination of traditional religious symbolism and modernistic or rationalist argumentation."¹²⁵ For the converts, Bahá'u'lláh preserved the essence of past religions while actualising it to the modern context. The good parts of tradition were kept and completed with modern ideas. Such a characterisation *mutatis mutandis* applies to Abduh's approach as well. Although never leaving Islam, Abduh attempts to give an updated version of his religion, preserving elements of tradition that are authentic and essential and harmonising them with modernity. Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh have the objective in common to integrate modern values in a religious framework to counter the negative developments that are inseparably connected with the dialectics of modernity. The German sociologist Max Weber describes this dialectics by characterising the rationalising drive of modernity as making the world orderly and reliable but not meaningful.¹²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh and Abduh try to provide modern life in a rationalised and disenchanted world with religious meaning. No matter how one assesses the success of both to reconcile religion and modernity in their theologies, this issue is not only relevant to Middle Easterners in the Nineteenth Century, but remains an important issue in the present. The rapid spread of Western modernity through the forces of globalisation at the end of the Twentieth Century makes the conservation of a distinct cultural and religious identity even more difficult. In an increasingly secular environment, living a religious life becomes actually more challenging. Hence, the struggle for a religious identity will continue and affects Muslims, Bahá'ís and other religionists alike.

Notes

1) See Amanat 1989, 24ff..

2) Not surprisingly, messianic aspirations were revitalised in such a crisis milieu. The decay of Islam requires the appearance of the

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- Mahdí who would restore the dignity of Muslims and defeat the infidels. The Mahdí uprisings in Sudan that were directed against British colonialist rule in North Africa are just one example of the chiliastic tone religious responses to modernity could adopt.
- 3) See Michel/Razik 1925, Introduction, LVI.
 - 4) See Uthman 1944, 60.
 - 5) See Abduh 1966, 41; Horten 1916, 86.
 - 6) *mumkin li-dhātihí*
 - 7) *wájib li-dhātihí*
 - 8) *mustahíl li-dhātihí*
 - 9) Abduh 1966, 41.
 - 10) See Abduh 1966, 41.
 - 11) See Abduh 1966, 44; Horten 1916, 86.
 - 12) Abduh 1966, 45.
 - 13) See Abduh 1966, 46.
 - 14) See Abduh 1966, 47ff.
 - 15) See Michel/Razik 1925, Introduction, LVII.
 - 16) Abduh 1966, 51.
 - 17) See Abduh 1966, 52; Adams 1933, 146.
 - 18) Interestingly, one can perceive a rather impersonal description of God, Who is called the necessarily existent Being (*wájib al-wujúd*) in order to find less anthropomorphic terms for God and His attributes. This impersonalism is meant to give Abduh's theology a more universal and rational outlook in contrast to an anthropomorphic representation of God in Christianity.
 - 19) See Jomier 1954, 131.
 - 20) See Adams 1933, 116f.
 - 21) Abduh 1966, 53.
 - 22) See Adams 1933, 117; Michel/Razik 1925, Introduction, LIX..
 - 23) Abduh 1966, 54.
 - 24) See Abduh 1966, 55.
 - 25) Abduh 1966, 56.
 - 26) See Momen 1988, Relativism, 3.
 - 27) Bahá'ulláh himself admits His ignorance referring to this realm: "And I, verily, in view of My injury and My misery am not informed of even a letter thereof." (Lawh-kullu't-Ta'ám II, 16)
 - 28) See McLean 1992, 54.
 - 29) *Kitáb-i-`qán* 91.
 - 30) See Cole 1982, 3.
 - 31) See Schaefer 1995, 118.
 - 32) That ideal King hath, throughout eternity, been in His Essence independent of the comprehension of all beings, and will continue, for ever, in His own Being to be exalted above the adoration of every soul.
(*Kitáb-i-`qán* 52f.)
 - 33) *Kitáb-i-`qán* 135.
 - 34) *Kitáb-i-`qán* 219.
 - 35) See Cole 1982, 3.
 - 36) See Cole 1982, 3f.
 - 37) *Kitáb-i-`qán* 98.
 - 38) See Ma'sumian 1994, 3.
 - 39) McLean 1992, 25
 - 40) Cole 1982, 2.
 - 41) *Tablets* 140.
 - 42) See Uthman 1944, 123f.

- 43) Goldziher 1920, 363.
- 44) Particularly, Ibn Khaldún’s influence on Abduh’s exposition of the history of Islamic theological discourse can be discerned. Abduh adopts Ibn Khaldún’s definition of *tawhíd*, the philosophical proof of God’s existence and nominalistic notions of God from the Prolegomena. See Binder 1964, 66ff.
- 45) Bahá’ulláh’s and Abduh’s different intentions are recognisable in their use of allegorical interpretation of the Qur’án (*ta’wíl*). For Abduh, *ta’wíl* is the exegetical instrument to resolve tensions between revelation and reason by searching for a symbolic meaning behind the literal contents of a Qur’ánic passage (See Uthman 1944, 137). Bahá’ulláh likewise employs allegorical Qur’ánic interpretation in His writings, which has a long tradition in Shí‘ism. However, the symbolic reading of eschatological passages in the Qur’án shall not only de-emphasise the miraculous meaning of a passage, but prove that Bahá’ulláh fulfils eschatological prophecies not in a literal, but in a symbolic sense: “The reading Bahá’ulláh rejects is a suspension of natural law. The reading he offers is an engagement of spiritual law, portrayed as vivifying the visionary landscape of the heart. The reader, open to a new interpretation will be open to a fresh source of authority.” (Buck 1998, 6)
- 46) Uthman 1944, 124.
- 47) See Momen 1988, 15.
- 48) See Abduh 1966, 67.
- 49) See Abduh 1966, 68.
- 50) See Caspar 1957, 165.
- 51) See Michel/Razik 1925, Introduction, LXV.
- 52) See Abduh 1966, 74f.
- 53) Only by dint of the revealed law do we have knowledge of obligation and of the good in that quality of certainty which brings peace to the soul.
(Abduh 1966, 76)
- 54) See Schaefer 1997, 49.
- 55) See Abduh 1966, 78.
- 56) See Abduh 1966, 78.
- 57) Abduh refers to a tradition on the pollination of palm trees. According to this tradition, the Prophet initially prohibited the pollination of the trees, but later changed His mind: “He did so in order to teach men that their practices in such economic and practical fields are the results of their experiments and researches, and that these last are quite valid, so long as the Divine laws are observed and fine virtues maintained.” (Abduh 1966, 80)
- 58) See Abduh 1966, 80.
- 59) Manifestation with capital “M” will be used referring to the Prophets and Messengers in order to distinguish Them from the general sense of the manifestation of divine attributes in creation.
- 60) See Cole 1982, 14.
- 61) See Cole 1982, 9f.
- 62) 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 [the major book written by the Báb]; 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 which standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme.
Kitáb-i-‘qán 199f
- 63) See *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 36.
- 64) See *Tablets* 106ff.; Cole 1982, 11.
- 65) See *Lawh-i-Zuhúr* 2.
- 66) See Cole 1982, 30f.
- 67) See Hourani 1962, 143; Uthman 1944, 127.
- 68) See Adams 1933, 157.
- 69) See Uthman 1944, 105ff.
- 70) See Abduh 1966, 132.
- 71) Abduh 1966, 133.
- 72) See Abduh 1966, 133.
- 73) See Abduh 1966, 134.
- 74) Abduh 1966, 134.
- 75) See Abduh 1966 130.

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- 76) See Michel/Razik 1925, Introduction, LXXVI; Uthman 1944, 150.
- 77) See Uthman 1944, 127.
- 78) See Hourani 1962, 148; Badawi 1976, 82f.
- 79) See Badawi 1976, 79f.
- 80) See Lundberg 1996, 9.
- 81) See Schaefer 1995, 139.
- 82) See *Kitáb-i-`qán* 41.
- 83) Behold, O Muhammad, how the sayings and doings of the followers of Shí'ih Islam have dulled the joy and fervor of its early days, and tarnished the pristine brilliancy of its light. In its primitive days, whilst they still adhered to the precepts associated with the name of their Prophet, the Lord of mankind, their career was marked by an unbroken chain of victories and triumphs. As they gradually strayed from the path of their Ideal Leader and Master, as they turned away from the Light of God and corrupted the principle of His Divine unity, and as they increasingly centered their attention upon them who were only the revealers of the potency of His Word, their power was turned into weakness, their glory into shame, their courage into fear.
- Gleanings 69
- 84) Lundberg 1996, 12.
- 85) Schaefer 1995, 140.
- 86) See *Kitáb-i-`qán* 199f.
- 87) See Schaefer 1995, 141.
- 88) See *Kitáb-i-`qán* 44.
- 89) *Kitáb-i-`qán* 14.
- 90) See Schaefer 1995, 142f.
- 91) See Lundberg 1996, 4.
- 92) See Amanat 1989, 406f.
- 93) See Amanat 1989, 408.
- 94) Abduh's essentialist view of religion can be observed in his characterisation of religious reform programmes. For him, any religious reform that aims at a return to original sources means a rapprochement to other religions, since the fundamental teachings of all religions are identical. In discussing Protestantism, he stresses its similarities with Islam. The Protestant opposition to ecclesiastic authority and the emphasis on an open and independent individual interpretation of the Bible allowed the emergence of modern sciences. However, according to Abduh's exposition, Protestantism kept dogmatic intolerance, supported literal scripturalism and contained anti-intellectualist tendencies. (See Michel/Razik 1925, Introduction, XLVI; Ayyub 1974, 129ff.)
- 95) *Gleanings* 136.
- 96) Cole 1998, 150.
- 97) See Cole 1998, 151.
- 98) To you hath He prescribed the faith [dín] which He commanded unto Noah, and which we revealed to thee, and which we commanded unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus. (42:11); Say ye: "We believe in God, and that which hath been sent down to us, and that which hath been sent down to Abraham and Ismael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes and that which hath been given to Moses and to Jesus, and that which was given to the prophets from their Lord. No difference do we make between any of them: and to God are we resigned (Muslims)." (2:130)
- 99) See Figl 1993, 170ff.
- 100) See Abduh 1966, 143f.
- 101) See Abduh 1966, 144.
- 102) See Abduh 1966, 147.
- 103) The first Glad-Tidings which the Mother Book hath, in this Most Great Revelation, imparted unto all the peoples of the world is that the law of holy war hath been blotted out from the Book.
- (*Tablets* 21)
- 104) See Schaefer 1997, 43.
- 105) See *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 47.
- 106) Now let us beseech God—praised be His glory—to graciously guide aright the followers of the Shí'ih sect and to purge them of unseemly conduct. From the lips of the members of this sect foul imprecations fall unceasingly, while they invoke the word "Mal'ún" (accursed)—uttered with a guttural sound of the letter 'ayn—as their daily relish.

Lights of ‘Irfán

(Tablets 92)

- 107) See *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 69f.
108) See Michel/Razik 1925, Introduction, XLVII; Schaefer 1997, 44f.
109) See Uthman 1953, 72.
110) Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God. Beware lest amidst men the flame of foolish ignorance overpower you. All things proceed from God and unto Him they return. He is the source of all things and in Him all things are ended.

(*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 72)

- 111) See Schaefer 1997, 16ff.
112) Smith 1987, 75.
113) Hourani 1962, p. 139
114) See Schaefer 1997, 33 ff.
115) Buck 1986, 157.
116) See Buck 1986, 162ff.
117) Buck 1996, 158.
118) See Rippin 1993, 34ff.
119) Rippin 1993, 32.
120) See Buck 1999, 146.
121) See Tablets 21ff.; Buck 1999, 147ff.
122) See Rippin 1993, 33f.; Buck 1999, 175.
123) Hourani 1962, p. 144
124) See Hourani 1962, p. 143
125) Smith 1987, 93f.
126) See Cole 1998, 4.

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Mysticism in African Traditional Religion and in the Bahá'í Faith:
Classification of Concepts and Practices

by Enoch N. Tanyi

Introduction

It can be inferred from the Bahá'í Writings that African Traditional Religion (henceforth, "ATR") is divine in its origin. Two passages are cited below in support of this inference:

[T]he peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source . . .¹

[T]he divers communions of the earth, and the manifold systems of religious belief . . . have proceeded from one Source . . .²

The Bahá'í Faith further teaches that:

The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character.³

African Traditional Religion can, therefore, also be said to be mystical in character.

As the topic implies, the object of this paper is to classify the concepts and practices of mysticism in both religions. But, to classify in what manner?

To answer this question, the author is presenting four main steps:

- i. to examine the dictionary or popular understanding of the term mysticism
- ii. to determine the classification or major types of mysticism as derived from the Bahá'í Writings
- iii. to locate or identify the concepts in ATR can be considered "mystical"
- iv. to place the ATR concepts within the classification derived from Bahá'í Writings.

Following these four steps, the concepts of mysticism in ATR are classified in the light of the Bahá'í teachings.

The Meanings of the Term "Mysticism"

A look at the dictionary meaning of the word *mysticism* would lead us to also seek the meanings of the words *mystical*, *mystic*, *magic*, and *occult*. The meanings are as follows:

mysticism n. 1: the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics 2a: religion based on mystical communion b: a theory of mystical knowledge 3a: obscure or irrational speculation b: a theory postulating the possibility of direct and intuitive acquisition of ineffable knowledge or power.

mystical adj. 1: having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence 2a: of, relating to, or resulting from an individual's direct communion with God or ultimate reality b: based upon intuition, insight, or similar subjective experience 3. UNINTELLIGIBLE, CRYPTIC 4: MYSTIC 2.

mystic adj. 1: MYSTICAL 1 2: of or relating to mysteries or esoteric rites: OCCULT 3: of or relating to mysticism or mystics 4a: MYSTERIOUS b: ENIGMATIC, OBSCURE c: Inducing a feeling of awe or wonder d: having magical properties.

magic n. 1a: the use of means (as charms, spells) believed to have supernatural power over natural forces . . . 2a: an extraordinary power or influence seemingly from a supernatural source b: something that seems to cast a spell: ENCHANTMENT

occultism n. a belief in or study of supernatural powers and the possibility of subjecting them to human control.

occult adj. 1: not revealed. Secret 2: ABSTRUSE, MYSTERIOUS 3: not able to be seen or detected: concealed 4: of or relating to supernatural agencies, their effects, and knowledge of them.⁴

An examination of the words *mysticism*, *mystical*, and *mystic* reveals six key features associated with the word or concept *mysticism*. They are:

1. the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality,
2. inducing a feeling of awe or wonder,
3. having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence,
4. anything based upon intuition, insight, or similar subjective experience,
5. of or relating to mysteries or esoteric rites: occult,
6. having magical powers.

In this paper, the first two features would constitute what this author terms types one and two mysticism. The third and the fourth features constitute the third type of mysticism. The fourth type mysticism is unique and not described in the dictionary as *mysticism*. Features five and six form the fifth and the sixth type mysticism collectively, not respectively.

The Types of Mysticism—A Classification Inferred from Bahá’í Writings

There are six types or classes of mysticism:

Class One or “True Mysticism”: The ecstatic joy that results from communion with the Souls of the Manifestations leading to physical martyrdom⁵ or the living of a life of self-sacrifice and saintliness.⁶ This is a more refined state of Incipient True Mysticism. (The meaning of self-sacrifice is explained under the discussion on *self-surrender* and in note 1.)

Class Two or “Incipient True Mysticism”: The state of spiritual communion or feeling (which is the core of religious faith) which can be chiefly brought about and maintained by means of worship, prayer and meditation, for the sake of union with God and the acquisition of human virtues and powers for the development of the individual and society.⁷

Class Three or “Cognitive or Coronary Mysticism”: The realm of spiritual meanings and realities not apparent to the senses or obvious to the intelligence. This has to do with reflection upon scriptural and religious writings, and striving to unravel the abstruse or the mystic meanings of the words and symbols in the Holy Writ, the profound emanations of sages and mystics, or the spiritual significance of certain religious acts. (The reason for describing this type of mysticism as “*coronary*” is explained in note 4.)

Class Four or “Biological and Societal Mysticism”: This is the adolescent, developmental stage of an individual or the stage

in the evolution of the organisation of human society . . . in the collective life of mankind . . . endowing the whole human race with such potentialities of well-being as shall provide . . . the chief incentive required for the eventual fulfillment of its high destiny.⁸

Class Five or “Natural” or “Mundane Mysticism”: Mystic concepts and practices not purely for communion with God and the development of human virtues, but aimed basically at solving mundane and orthodox occult problems and, in some cases, keeping harmony between the living world on one hand, and the world of spirit and the spirit of ancestors on the other. These concepts are, largely, either upheld in a general way by the Bahá’í teachings or they are neutral, meaning that the Bahá’í teachings are silent over them. They are basically true.

Class Six or “Orthodox Occultism”: Mystic concepts and practices not purely for union with God and the development of human virtues, but aimed basically at giving free rein to the ego, or at seeking to appear mys-

terious and powerful before other mortals. They are often used for nefarious or inimical activities, and are either prohibited by the Bahá'í teachings or discouraged.

Having outlined a Bahá'í classification of *mysticism*, the next task is to identify African Traditional Religion's concepts of *mysticism*. After consulting a number of books,⁹ the concepts mentioned are: Ancestral Reverence, Dreams and Visions, Healing, Herbalism, Libation, Magic, Medicine, Miracles, Prayer, Sacrifice, Soothsaying, Sorcery, Spirit-possession, Traditional medicine, Talismans and Charms, Witchcraft and Worship. Ancestral Reverence, in this author's opinion, is implicit in ATR mysticism. This theme is, usually, not treated under mystical or mysterious forces.

The Application of the Terms "Mystic," "Occult," and "Psychic" to Cultural Practices

This classification was made because there is no explicit, authoritative Bahá'í classification. The difficulty of applying such terms as *mystic*, *occult*, and *psychic* to cultural practices is acknowledged by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice in the extract below:

We have not been able to locate any explicit definition of "occult" in the Bahá'í Writings. While we understand the difficulties which can arise when one tries to apply such terms as "psychic" and "occult" to specific cultural practices, the most explicit guidance we have located appears in the statement from the Universal House of Justice letter quoted . . .¹⁰(as):

It is clear that what 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi had in mind when warning the believers against meddling with psychic forces were those that spiritualists believe come from a deliberate effort on the part of individuals to establish communication with the departed.¹¹

The guidance then continues that

[T]he meaning of "mystic" is dependent upon the context in which it occurs. Occasionally "occult" and "mystic" do refer to the same type of phenomena. For example . . . we are discouraged from seeking "occult experiences" and "the hearing of mystic voices. . . ."¹²

On the other hand, "mystic" is also used to refer to a very different sphere of human experience, the reality and importance of which is frequently emphasized. For example, in another statement we are encouraged to seek "that mystic feeling that unites man with God" and to "cultivate the sense of spirituality through meditation and prayer,

[f]or the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling that unites man with God. . . . Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organization, and become a dead thing.¹³

The epitome of this guidance is that *mystic* has two major meanings. In one sense, it is synonymous with "occult." This meaning of the concept *mystic* or *occult* includes *psychicism* or *psychic phenomena*. The concepts in this group are discouraged. In the second major sense, *mystic* is not synonymous with "occult," is highly encouraged, and seeking this kind of *mystic* experience is vital to the individual's spiritual development. How to identify "that mystic feeling that unites man with God" varies from one individual to the other, and this is expressed in note 3. The full text of this guidance is reproduced in note 2 for the reader's benefit.

First and Second Class Mysticism

Worship, Prayer, and Meditation

In this section, two things will be attempted. First of all, the author will try to show that the concepts in each class really fit into their class by definition. Secondly, the author will try to show whether or not a given concept applies to both religions, and the extent to which it applies.

The supreme and most exalted goal of man is to get near to and to be united with God. Bahá'u'lláh wrote: Let the flame of search burn with such fierceness within your hearts as to enable you to attain your supreme and most exalted goal—the station at which ye can draw nigh unto, and be united with, your Best-Beloved. . . .¹⁴

Attaining to this station requires intense search. But we must also learn to commune with the Souls of the Manifestations of God as they are the intermediaries between us and God, and God cannot be known directly

by us puny mortals. This “True Mysticism” is expressed in the Bahá’í teachings thus:

We liken God to the Sun, which gives us all our life. So the Spirit of God reaches us through the Souls of the Manifestations. We must learn to commune with Their Souls, and this is what the Martyrs seemed to have done, and what brought them such ecstasy of joy that life became nothing. This is the true mysticism, and the secret, inner meaning of life which humanity has at present, drifted so far from.¹⁵

True mysticism is not mentioned in the African Traditional Religions. The class of Bahá’í mysticism to which ATR gets very close is the less refined, lower degree, second class or “Incipient True Mysticism.” To attain this state of communion and union with God, this Incipient True Mysticism, the best and the chief instrument is worship (respect or reverence paid to a divine being or a form of religious practice with its creed and ritual) which includes prayer and meditation. Meditation, as a spiritual exercise, is not stressed at all in ATR. The converse is true in the Bahá’í teachings. The cardinal role of worship—which includes prayer and meditation—in mysticism are made clear in reference number 17. In ATR, worship and prayer are basic in mysticism, as can be seen in this passage of Mbiti in which he defines worship as

a means of renewing contact between people and God, or between people and the invisible world.¹⁶

Self-Surrender

Essentially united with God through worship, prayer, and meditation, is self-surrender, for this quality is absolutely essential for the attainment of union with God. The Bahá’í teachings say that:

By self-surrender and perpetual union with God is meant that men should merge their will wholly in the Will of God, and regard their desires as utter nothingness beside His Purpose. Whatsoever the Creator commandeth His creatures to observe, the same must they diligently, and with the utmost joy and eagerness, arise and fulfil.¹⁷

Essentially, ATR also stresses submission to the Will of God. But with its submission to the dominating influence of adulteration due to changing times and minds divergent from the original teachings, whatever they might have been, we have in the tenets of ATR, concepts and practices which are at variance with the Will of God.

Third Class or Cognitive Mysticism

African Traditional Religion has no Holy Scripture as such, in the sense of a Bible for Christians or the Kitáb-i-Aqdas for the Bahá’ís, but its proverbs, songs and emblems contain great wisdom that might be traced to a divine Source.

An example of a wise saying from Sierra Leone, in West Africa, is

If God dishes you rice in a basket, do not wish to eat soup!¹⁸

One obvious meaning of this proverb is contentment with the Will of God. Pithy though this saying may be, without the clear backing of authentic scripture, it does not rise above the heaven of poetry.

On the contrary, this citation from the Bahá’í teachings gives a clear example of the third type of mysticism:

[T]he heart is endowed with four stages, which would be recounted should a kindred soul be found.¹⁹

How can the heart have four stages? The fact that the Author of this verse states that these four stages of the heart can only be recounted if a kindred soul is found indicates that the meaning of that citation transcends human understanding and intelligence.

Fourth Class or Biological and Societal Mysticism

In the Bahá’í teachings, coming of age, adolescence, is described as:

That mystic, all-pervasive, yet indefinable change, which we associate with the stage of maturity inevitable in the life of the individual and . . . must . . . have its counterpart in the evolution of the organisation of human society.²⁰

This stage is, therefore, considered to form a special class of mysticism.

According to the Bahá’í teachings, for the individual, this is the age of spiritual maturity fixed at the age of

fifteen: “it marks that point in life at which the believer takes firmly into his own hands the responsibility for his spiritual destiny. At age fifteen, the individual has the privilege of affirming, in his own name, his faith in Bahá’u’lláh.”²¹ Starting from this age, the recitation of the obligatory prayer is obligatory,²² fasting during the prescribed month of fasting is binding,²³ marriage may be contracted,²⁴ the obligatory, congregational Prayer for the Dead must be recited for the departed before burial,²⁵ and the burial ring worn on the finger of the corpse before burial.²⁶ Administratively, this is the age for the assumption of some administrative responsibilities, precisely, serving on committees.²⁷

The significance of the age of maturity, however, goes far beyond the fulfillment of responsibilities. The following extract from a tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá links the attainment of maturity with the deepening of one’s understanding and comprehension of the realities of life, and the enhancement of one’s very capacity for understanding:

Know thou that before maturity man liveth from day to day and comprehendeth only such matters as are superficial and outwardly obvious. However, when he cometh of age he understandeth the realities of things and the inner truths. Indeed, in his comprehension, his feelings, his deductions and his discoveries, every day of his life after maturity is equal to a year before it.²⁸

In the collective life of human society, this is the stage “endowing the whole human race with such potentialities of well-being as shall provide . . . the chief incentive required for the eventual fulfillment of its high destiny.”²⁹ This Bahá’í meaning of mysticism in the collective life of mankind has no parallel in ATR. But on the individual plane, this period in ATR is referred to as the initiation period, and in

. . . that period a person goes through physical, emotional and psychological changes, which take him from childhood to adolescence and adulthood.³¹

Fifth Class, Natural or Mundane Mysticism

Medicine

In African Traditional Religion, medicine is defined differently from medicine in the Western culture, as the use of the neutral, vital, supernatural force in the universe to fight witchcraft, to diagnose and to cure diseases, to prepare good luck charms, and, in some cases, to cause *harm*.³¹

The definition above tells us that the main thrust of medicine in ATR is to solve mundane and orthodox occult problems, and, not to seek union with God or to acquire human virtues.

Considering this definition from the Bahá’í point of view, three elements have to be addressed—the nature of the supernatural force, the fight against witchcraft, the diagnosis and the cure of diseases, the preparation of good luck charms, and the causing of harm. If this supernatural force is from the invocation of the spirit of the departed, which is strongly discouraged (see section under *necromancy*), whatever use that force is put to cannot be approved. But if this supernatural force is from some other source, its effects are acceptable. The aspects of fighting witchcraft, diagnosing and curing diseases, and the preparation of good luck charms are discussed in this paper. Even though no religion approves of causing harm to any soul, power in the hands of either a Bahá’í or a non-Bahá’í can be misused. Medicine may, therefore, either be upheld or disapproved of by the Bahá’í teachings depending upon the source of the supernatural force animating the work of the medicine man.

Traditional Medicine

In ATR, traditional medicine “is the art of using the available forces of nature to prevent diseases and to restore and preserve health.”³² Traditional medicine men, therefore, “carry out the work of healing the sick . . .”³³ Persistent and serious complaints are “usually said to be magic, sorcery, witchcraft, broken taboos or the work of spirits.”³⁴ In this case, the medicine man “prescribes a cure which may include herbs, religious rituals and the observance of certain prohibitions or directions.”³⁵

Traditional medicine, therefore, entails healing the sick and fighting witchcraft and sorcery.

As for the aspect of healing the sick, the Bahá’í Faith teaches that:

It is clear from . . . statements made by the Guardian, as well as from the practice of Bahá’u’lláh, the Master and the Guardian himself, that by “a scientific system of medicine” he was not limiting this choice

to the medical theories currently dominant in western countries. The House of Justice, therefore, does not exclude the use of traditional native healers, . . . There is, nevertheless, an important borderline between unorthodox medical practice and sheer quackery or superstition, and this we should be careful not to cross.³⁶

As to the matter of fighting witchcraft and sorcery, the Bahá'í Faith acknowledges the existence of these forces and recommends the method of quelling them.

The Bahá'í teachings state that there is no independent force of evil in the world. However, there are negative forces which are described as evil and which can affect an individual adversely. It is reassuring to note that in a letter of 26 November 1939 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer there appears the statement:

Evil forces do take control of our life, but it is within our power to free ourselves from falling under their subjection.³⁷

How to free one's self from falling under their subjection is elaborated on the same page in which reference 43 is found and in another memorandum dated 13 June 1999. To enter into the details would be a digression.

It can be seen from the above discussion that the concept of traditional medicine is common to both religions even though they differ from each other in some details of practices. It can also be seen that the main objective of traditional medicine is to solve mundane problems, and not to seek union with God or to acquire human virtues. It, therefore, falls under the fifth class.

The Gift of Healing

In several African societies, there are people reputed to be solely healers, and to possess the gift of healing which they may harness by any method, one of which is the laying on of hands or massaging the affected part.

As to a definition of the "gift of healing," the Research Department wrote that it ". . . *has not found a precise definition of the phrase 'the gift of healing' in the Bahá'í Writings.*"³⁸ Even though there is no precise definition, there is some guidance:

The so-called "gift of healing" is a God-given talent. . . . There is nothing in the Teachings to prohibit the friends from discovering, either for themselves or with the help of experts if they wish, that they have such a gift . . . a Bahá'í is free to practice such powers as long as he does so without attributing his or her powers to the Faith or to Bahá'u'lláh. . . . Bahá'ís are free to accept treatment from individuals whom they believe to be endowed with such a gift.³⁹

The guidance further explains that:

It appears to us that this phrase is associated with different aspects of 'spiritual' healing, depending upon the context in which it is used.⁴⁰

With this approval of the *gift of healing* which, obviously, seeks to heal illnesses and, thus, solve a mundane problem, this concept fits into the fifth class.

Herbalism

Herbalism, the application of herbs and other plant parts for the treatment of diseases is a common practice in African societies.

The Bahá'í Faith upholds pure herbalism in the words below:

Treat disease through diet, by preference, refraining from the use of drugs; and if you find what is required in a single herb, do not resort to a compounded medicament.⁴¹

But, when herbalism is combined with religious elements,⁴² the Bahá'í Faith sounds a note of caution in these words:

[O]ne must consider the context in which a herbal treatment is used in order to know if it is a simple therapeutic remedy, or part of some ritualistic practice which may or may not conflict with Bahá'í Teachings.⁴³

Herbalism is directed solely towards solving physical or mundane problems. It, therefore, comes under the fifth class mysticism.

Soothsaying

Soothsaying, another common practice in traditional African communities, is not condemned in the Bahá'í teachings. For the Bahá'í view on consulting soothsayers, the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice says that it is “*not aware of texts which specifically prohibit these practices*”⁴⁴ and “*does not equate consulting soothsayers and diviners*” with “*occult experiences.*”⁴⁵

Ancestral Reverence

Africans do not worship their departed relatives. It is true that departed relatives are believed to continue to live and to show interest in their surviving families. These families may show their belief by building shrines for the departed and placing bits of food or drink there or on the graves, and sometimes mentioning them in their prayers.⁴⁶

The Bahá'í Faith upholds the importance of remembering one's forebears, especially one's parents, and in making certain types of offerings in their names.⁴⁷

Some of these offerings are “*charity and beneficence*” and the imploration of “*pardon and remission of sins.*”⁴⁸

Even though “*With regard to the question of ancestor rituals, the Research Department has not, to date, been able to locate any statement in the Bahá'í Writings . . .*”⁴⁹ the reader has been given general guidelines with respect to determining the acceptability of cultural practices, including ancestor ritual:

Bahá'ís should be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith.⁵⁰

Looking at the texts above, one can say that as far as maintaining a healthy link with one's ancestors, especially one's parents, is concerned, the two religions are in accord. They may only differ insofar as placing bits of food and sprinkling drops of drink on ancestral graves and shrines is concerned, for these, in the Bahá'í view, are offerings far inferior to feeding the poor or performing other acts of charity in the name of the ancestors. Praying for their soul's progress and for the remission of their sins are acts common to both religions.

Since ancestral reverence is solely aimed at maintaining harmony with the ancestors, it rightly falls under class five mysticism.

Talismans and Charms (Religious Articles and Objects)

“*Religious articles and objects are many, and we find them in all African societies.*”⁵¹ These objects, also called talismans and/or charms which

are empowered magically through the repetition of set words . . . may be used for a variety of purposes: attracting a lover, gaining employment, protecting from witchcraft, productivity of gardens, accumulation of wealth, protection from sickness and . . . to protect warriors from . . . bullets in modern warfare.⁵²

Though discussion of talismans is rare in the Bahá'í writings, their use was upheld by the earlier teachings of the Báb:

Dieu a fixé pour les gens du Béyán, deux grands bienfaits. . . C'est le <héikel> pour les hommes. . . Pour les spectacles du Bá (les femmes), il a permis des cercles. . .⁵³

This author translates this passage as: “God has ordained for the people of Bayán, two great blessings. . . It is the pentacle for men . . . For (women), He has permitted circles.”

The influence to be exerted by these objects is also mentioned. For the pentacles of men:

Tout ce qu'on écrira dans ces <héikèl>, l'influence s'en manifesterá sur la personnalité de celui qui l'aura écrit, mot pour mot, point par point.⁵⁴

This translates as:

The influence of all that is written in these pentacles will be manifested word for word, point by point, on the personality of the writer.

For women, the influence of the circles is to protect them morally:

“ces cercles les protègent moralement.”⁵⁵

In the Bahá'í Faith, there is also

a charm-like prayer, in pentacle form, for protection. It is called Du'áy-i-Haykal (Prayer of Haykal). Bahá'u'lláh . . . has given . . . instructions on how this prayer should be copied, in what color and with what kind of ink, and how it should be carried.⁵⁶

The two religions are in agreement on this theme. But, in the Bahá'í Faith there is room for ascending to class one mysticism if the writer of the talisman beseeches God for spiritual qualities and for martyrdom and through prayer.

Protection against Knife Cuts and Bullets

Some African native doctors specialize, among others, in giving treatments that protect the user from knife cuts and bullets.

From the Bahá'í view, the Research Department, referring to a letter from the Universal House of Justice answered that:

The Salient point . . . seems to be the distinction between something that is prescribed as a simple therapeutic remedy and something that is taken as part of a religious ritual as a form of sacrament.' We note, also, that the House of Justice points out that there is “an important borderline between unorthodox medical practice and sheer quackery or superstition, and this we should be careful not to cross.”⁵⁷

Protection against knife cuts and bullets is to attain a mundane goal. It has nothing to do with seeking communion with God.

Libation

This is the act of pouring some liquid to the spirits and the act is accompanied by a prayer.⁵⁸

The concept of libation is not mentioned in the Bahá'í teachings. The place of prayer in the Bahá'í teachings has already been discussed. Libation is, therefore, a purely ATR concept. Its significance “*lies in the belief that since the liquid softens the ground, it symbolically opens the way to the presence of the divine Power or powers.*”⁵⁹ Libation, in essence, is, therefore, a symbol.

Animal Sacrifice

“*Sacrifice is the act of offering the life of an animal or person, or some object to the divine Power or powers.*”⁶⁰ This offering is also made to deities, divinities, ancestors and kings.

The object of offering sacrifice is to maintain

contact or communion between the divine and man. It serves as the best way through which man maintains an established relationship between himself and his object of worship.⁶¹

On the matter of sacrifice, the Research Department wrote that:

The sacrifice of animals is an ancient custom and a familiar theme in the history of religion.⁶²

The Bahá'í Faith further explains this symbol in this way:

Just as the sheep sacrificed its life, likewise this natural state of man, which is the animalistic state, must be sacrificed. How should it be sacrificed? The vices of the animalistic state of man must be entirely annihilated, and he must be characterized with divine virtues.⁶³

With the . . . greater spiritual maturity of the people, the symbolic act of self-sacrifice largely replaced the sacrificial animals, and it is this symbolic act that is most acceptable in this Day.⁶⁴

This means that the sacrifice of animals is a reminder that human beings must completely overcome their evil qualities and replace them with virtues. Clearly, therefore, human sacrifice is at variance with the Bahá'í teachings and animal sacrifice is abrogated. Its major objective is conciliation and propitiation with the divine which could have made it class one mysticism. But the fact that it is just a symbol makes it fitted for class five mysticism.

Other Offerings

The offerings considered here are bits of food, and alcohol. This has been treated under Ancestral Reverence.

The Bahá'í Faith upholds the importance of remembering one's forebears, especially one's parents, and in making certain types of offerings in their names.⁶⁵

These are:

the intercession and the sincere prayers of other human souls, or through the charities and important good works which are performed in its name.⁶⁶

Offerings are, therefore, made in both religions, but the nature differs from one to the other.

Dreams and Visions

Like many other peoples, Africans consider dreams a method by which the ancestral spirits can communicate with the living. . . . Dreams are usually taken seriously.⁶⁷

This definition is limited because, in reality, dreams are also considered to be a method by which God communicates with the living. The same definition applies to visions. Therefore, both terms are used synonymously. Dreams and visions in ATR can be evoked after certain traditional practices. It could be the wearing of a special talisman before going to bed. The powers of this talisman then enable the wearer to receive whatever message is communicated or revealed to him.

Dreams and visions are very important in the Bahá'í Faith. It is considered to be "*the most mysterious of the signs of God amongst men.*"⁶⁸

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that:

There are three kinds of visions or dreams. First, those that arise from over-excited nerves, or disordered stomach, and of no use whatever. Second, when God sends a revelation to a soul that is not entirely pure from the world: to such an one He sends visions in symbols and signs, and these experiences need an interpreter. The third kind is when a soul who is severed from the world receives a revelation from God. In this station everything is clear and pure and needs no explanation.⁶⁹

In the Bahá'í Faith, therefore, not all dreams should be taken seriously. Those that are due to over-excited nerves, if they can be identified, must be discarded. Those that are symbolic must be handled with caution because they need an infallible interpreter. The third type is clear and needs no explanation.

The Bahá'í Faith teaches further that

there can be, under certain rare circumstances . . . communion with some soul gone before into the invisible world, but that most of this type of experience which people often claim to have with departed souls is nothing but the product of their own imaginations—however real it may seem to them to be.⁷⁰

It is possible, the Bahá'í Faith teaches, to receive communication with the soul of the departed even though this experience is rare. There are instances in Africa where people have been instructed in dreams by some ancestor and taught the cure for certain ailments.

In the Bahá'í Faith, dreams and visions are not to be sought by any means unless they occur by themselves. This is what it says:

When a person endeavors to develop faculties so that they might enjoy visions, dreams, etc., actually what they are doing is weakening certain of their spiritual capacities; and thus under such circumstances, dreams and visions have no reality, and ultimately lead to the destruction of the character of the person.⁷¹

To summarize, both religions, in principle, share in the belief in dreams and visions. But the Bahá'í Faith, unlike the ATR, identifies three types of dreams, teaches that the type due to over-excited nerves or disordered stomach are useless. The second type, symbolic dreams, if properly interpreted may lead one into the third, second and first class mysticism, inasmuch as they lead one to truth and to seeking closer union with God. The third type of dreams is clear and needs no interpretation. It "*comes to an individual through the grace of God.*"⁷² It often leads to truth.

When either of the two true dream-types comes to an individual involuntarily, it is desirable; if evoked by some rituals, it is harmful to the soul of the individual.

Because dreams and visions also have the attribute of the second and the third class mysticism, it makes it difficult to restrict it to class five mysticism. On the other hand, because it can be evoked—and, this seems to be the more common practice in society—often for mundane or orthodox occult reasons having little or nothing to do with the sanctification of the soul, this concept is classed under class five mysticism.

Miracles or Supernatural Acts

Miracles is a concept that runs through many other concepts in African Traditional Religion.

The Bahá’í Faith teaches about miracles attributed to the Manifestations of God as proof of Their role, and about those attributed to conjurors. For the first case, it teaches that:

Our purpose is not to deny such miracles; our only meaning is that they do not constitute decisive proofs, and that they have an inner significance.⁷³

For the second case, the Bahá’í Faith states that:

Extraordinary feats have also been related to some conjurors.⁷⁴

It goes on to state that:

The outward miracles have no importance for the people of reality. If a blind man receives sight, for example, he will finally again become sightless, for he will die and be deprived of all his senses and powers. Therefore, causing the blind man to see is comparatively of little importance, for this faculty of sight will at last disappear.⁷⁵

This statement should not be taken too far out of the context. True, if a man has protection against knife cuts or bullets, he would eventually die of some other cause. But in the situation of civil disorder and traditional warfare, one can countenance this feat.

One effect of miracles, though, is that they fill some people with awe and bafflement at the omnipotence of God. Even the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is no proof of His Manifestation. But it fills one with awe and reminds one of the supremacy of God—“*God does what He will.*”⁷⁶

Miracles are not performed with the objective of attaining union with God, but for the purpose of solving mundane problems. For these reasons they fall under class five mysticism.

Class Six Mysticism or Orthodox Occultism

Magic, Witchcraft (or Wizardry) and Sorcery

In African Traditional Religion, “*Magic can be defined as an attempt by man to tap and control . . . supernatural powers or resources of the universe for his own benefit.*” White magic is “*primarily used for protection against the evil forces that are found everywhere.*”⁷⁷ Black magic “*is intended primarily to harm people and property.*”⁷⁸ “*Sorcery is defined as the use of black magic and medicines against others.*”⁷⁹ Witchcraft “*is a manifestation of . . . mystical forces which may be inborn in a person, inherited or acquired in various ways.*”⁸⁰ It is distinct from sorcery. “*Its distinctive feature is that there is no palpable apparatus connected with it, no rites, ceremonies, incantations or invocations that the witch has to perform.*”⁸¹

More informative than these rather vague definitions is the popular observation that these phenomena are often practised with evil intent.

These concepts are not specifically defined in the Bahá’í teachings, and no clear synonymy exists between witchcraft and psychic forces (see note 5), but the elements involved, except for white magic, are worth noting. Some guidance is given below:

[T]he term “voodoo” generally refers to a variety of practices often including sorcery, the supposed summoning of spirits, elaborate rituals, and animal sacrifices. While nothing has been found in the Bahá’í Writings specifically on the set of beliefs and practices which make up voodoo, Bahá’ís can readily use the authoritative texts of the Faith as a standard with which to assess the various elements of voodoo.⁸²

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Since voodoo involves summoning spirits, practising elaborate rituals and doing evil, it would seem quite justified to proscribe these concepts and practices. The Universal House of Justice, referring to *ju-ju* and magic, a reference that very well applies to witchcraft, sorcery and psychic forces, wrote: “. . . educate the friends to avoid such practices . . .”⁸³

The purport of the above concepts is to do evil, seeking, therefore, to accentuate the ego of the practitioner. It therefore fits this definition of orthodox mysticism.

Necromancy

Necromancy is synonymous to psychicism in the Bahá'í teachings. It is the practice of summoning spirits. As stated in reference numbers 16 and 93 (below), the believers are strongly warned against summoning the spirits of the departed.

The mere fact that necromancy is proscribed qualifies it for class six mysticism.

Mediumship

“*Mediums are people who get in touch with the spirit world.*”⁸⁴ If this connection is made involuntarily, the Bahá'í teachings are not against it. But if this connection is cultivated, the Bahá'í Faith is against it. It says that:

What ‘Abdu’l-Bahá always pointed out in this matter is that these psychic powers were not to be used in this world, and that, indeed, it was dangerous to cultivate them here. They should be left dormant, and not exploited, even when we do so with the sincere belief we are helping others. . . .

If children are inclined to be psychic they should not be blamed for it too harshly; they should not be encouraged to strengthen their powers in this direction.⁸⁵

It is commonly observed that this faculty is often cultivated. For this reason, mediumship is against the Bahá'í teachings and placed under class six mysticism. A hint to this understanding is found in the refusal of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to accept a medium into his fold. He telegraphed:

CONCERNING MEDIUM DO NOT ADVISE ACCEPTANCE MEMBERSHIP.⁸⁶

Spirit Possession

This is a rather vexed theme. There are, generally speaking, two types of spirit-possession. One type is described below:

Amid dancing, drumming, and the carrying of carved objects . . . the deity will descend upon a devotee. . . . she or he will gasp ecstatically and go limp, then suddenly leap into tremendous activity and take on the characteristics of the spirit. . . . People may ask questions of the possessed and receive answers in the name of the divine.⁸⁷

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that:

Regarding the materialization of spirits through mediums: A person finding himself in a state of trance, or unconsciousness, is like one who sleeps; whatever he feels and sees he imagines to be matter and of material things, but in reality they are wholly immaterial.⁸⁸

Outside the bounty of the Holy Spirit, whatsoever thou hearest as to the effect of trances, or the mediums' trumpets, conveying the singing voices of the dead, is imagination pure and simple.⁸⁹

This statement, perhaps, needs some commentary. Since the Bahá'í teachings mention that the situation outside the bounty of the Holy Spirit is pure imagination, this supposes that within the bounty of the Holy Spirit mediums can have true revelations. But, whatever they perceive is not material: it is spiritual. Like a type two dream, it needs to be interpreted. And this is where a wide zone is created for groping in the dark.

This type of mediumship is accepted if it develops involuntarily and if its impressions can be correctly interpreted. However, even if its perceptions can be correctly interpreted, it is not permitted to cultivate mediumship intentionally. It is also difficult to classify this type as good or evil, as what counts is the kind of communication received and the intention for evoking such influence. It has nothing to do with developing human virtues.

The second type of spirit-possession is one in which it is believed that supernatural, evil power can possess one or manipulate one's behaviour. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that

the condition of those people who are described in the Gospel as being possessed of devils . . . should be interpreted figuratively . . .⁹⁰

Here, again, the absence of correct, authoritative interpretation poses difficulties.

Contrary to the meaning of the above statement, the Bahá'í teachings affirm that sometimes people are influenced by evil, supernatural forces. Two relevant citations are found below:

Evil forces do take control of our life, but it is within our power to free ourselves from falling under their subjection.⁹¹

The second one states that:

The House of Justice fully appreciates that . . . there are many instances of individuals being affected adversely by the psychic arts of the other people.⁹²

Even though this second type of spirit-possession is true, because it is evil and has nothing to do with acquiring human virtues, it is condemned and, therefore, placed under class six mysticism.

Dreams and Visions

The category of dreams and visions that fall under this class of mysticism is that sought with the aid of some special rites or practices. Dreams and visions of this type are those that prove harmful to the seeker's soul. This has been discussed earlier and is disapproved of.

Talismans and Charms

Talismans and charms appear under this group in the cases where they are used as paraphernalia in orthodox occult practices aimed at causing evil. The objective for employing them in this case is not to seek communion with God or to acquire human virtues, but to seek mystic experiences.

Conclusions

Mysticism in the Bahá'í teachings can be placed under six classes, which can be placed descending order of importance. Class one or True mysticism has no parallel in African Traditional Religion. Class two mysticism is common to both religions insofar as worship and prayer are concerned in basic principles. Class three mysticism is also shared by both religions, but the absence of a proof of a divine, authentic source in ATR, the sayings and acts in ATR are limited to the emanations of sages, mystics, and religious leaders. Class four mysticism is shared by both only insofar as in ATR, adolescence or the coming of age of the individual is concerned. But, in general, African Traditional Religion does not consider adolescence as mysticism.

It can be seen, therefore, that almost all the concepts in ATR fit into classes five and six. This underlines the fact that, the older a religion, the further away from the essence of its teachings do the adherents move, thus calling for its renewal.

In addition, this paper has broadened the understanding of mysticism in African Traditional Religion by shedding some new light on adolescence, and it has shown the irrelevance of the popular concepts of mysticism in ATR to the spiritual development of the individual and to modern society.

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- 1) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 217.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 287.
- 3) *Compilation of Compilations*, volume two, p. 238
- 4) All definitions taken from *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*.
- 5) Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, pp. 406-7.
- 6) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West* 5: VIII: 6: 65.
- 7) Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 8 December 1935, cited on p. 4 of a memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice dated 21 Jan. 1996.

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- 8) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 163-164.
- 9) See nos. 4, 9, 11, and 18 of the Bibliography.
- 10) Memorandum dated 21 Jan. 1996, p. 4.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 12) *Ibid.*
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 14) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, ch. CLIII, pp. 323-4.
- 15) Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, pp. 406-7.
- 16) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 60.
- 17) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 337.
- 18) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 209.
- 19) Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, p. 41.
- 20) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 163f.
- 21) The Universal House of Justice, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, p. 665.
- 22) Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 144.
- 23) *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- 24) *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- 25) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 157, no. 427.
- 26) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 126, Question 70.
- 27) The Universal House of Justice, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, p. 665.
- 28) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 132, no. 371.
- 29) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 164.
- 30) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 96.
- 31) Tanyi, *African Traditional Religion and the Bahá'í Faith* (unpublished ms.), p. 46.
- 32) Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, p. 240.
- 33) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 154.
- 34) *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- 35) *Ibid.*
- 36) *Ibid.*
- 37) *Issues Related to the Practices of African Traditional Healers (IRPATH)*, p. 4.
- 38) Memorandum dated 13 June 1999., p. 1.
- 39) Memorandum dated 31 March 1988., p. 5.
- 40) Memorandum dated 13 June 1999., p. 1.
- 41) *IRPATH*, p.1.
- 42) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, pp. 77-8.
- 43) Memorandum dated 21 Jan., 1996, p. 6.
- 44) Memorandum dated 27 Dec., 1994, p. 7.
- 45) Memorandum dated 6 March 1997, p. 1.
- 46) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p 18.
- 47) Memorandum dated 17 October 1991, p. 1.
- 48) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 231, 232.
- 49) Memorandum dated 17 October 1991, p. 2.
- 50) *Ibid.*
- 51) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 24.
- 52) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 71.
- 53) The Báb, *Le Béyan Persan*, translated from Persian into French by A.L.M. Nicholas, p. 26.

- 54) *Ibid.*
- 55) *Ibid.*
- 56) Reported in an article by Iraj Ayman in *The Lamp*, Vol.5, number 2, June 2000, p. 4, online at www.wilmetteinstitute.org/lamps
- 57) Memorandum dated 27 Dec., 1994, p.6.
- 58) Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, p.128.
- 59) *Ibid.*
- 60) *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- 61) *Ibid.*
- 62) Memorandum dated 31 March 1988., p. 1.
- 63) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West* 3: IV: 12: 205.
- 64) Memorandum dated 31 March 1988., p. 1.
- 65) Memorandum dated 17 October 1991, p.1.
- 66) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 240.
- 67) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 142.
- 68) Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 187.
- 69) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West* 8: 14: 7: 211.
- 70) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 389, no. 1054.
- 71) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 390, no. 1057.
- 72) *Ibid.*
- 73) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 38.
- 74) *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 75) *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 76) Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, súra 14: 32.
- 77) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 69.
- 78) *Ibid.*
- 79) *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 80) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 166.
- 81) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 72.
- 82) *Aspects of Traditional African Culture*, p. 45, no. 38.
- 83) *Ibid.*, p. 40, no. 32.
- 84) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 158.
- 85) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 387, no. 1048.
- 86) Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 175.
- 87) King, *African Cosmos*, p. 60.
- 88) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 394, no. 1074.
- 89) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 160, no. 139.
- 90) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 385, no. 1043.
- 91) *IRPATH*, p. 4.
- 92) *Aspects of Traditional African Culture*, p. 41, no. 35.

Notes

I. A text that supports and expresses reference no. 11 is:

Sacrifice of life is of two kinds. To be killed for the Cause is not so difficult as to live for it in absolute obedience to the commands of God.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West* 5: VIII:6:65

The teaching about the symbolism in animal sacrifice dates as far as the Old Testament days. But as usual, humanity quickly turns away

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from the essence of the teachings of God, and holds on to superstition. The Book of Psalms, in chapter 50 verses 8-13 and chapter 51 verse 16, tells us that God does not need animal sacrifice. The sacrifice that is acceptable to Him is indicated in verses 14 and 15 of the same chapter in these words:

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High . . .

Psalm 51 verse 17, gives us more guidance on the acceptable sacrifice:

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise . . .

'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies the meaning of thanksgiving in these words:

In this day, to thank God for His bounties consisteth in possessing a radiant heart, and a soul open to the promptings of the spirit. This is the essence of thanksgiving.

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 179, no. 153.

This understanding ties in with the second meaning of sacrifice giving by 'Abdu'l-Bahá above, for sacrifice in the path of God and obedience to His commands mean the same thing, and it is this obedience or sacrifice that brings about a pure, contrite and radiant heart.

Thus, even before the Bahá'í Dispensation, God had revealed the symbolism in animal sacrifice, and taught that true sacrifice is the spiritual conditions of possessing a pure and radiant heart which come about by keeping one's vows to God, in other words, obeying God's commands, and by repenting from one's sins.

II. The whole of reference number 17, which is a letter dated 8 December 1935 written on behalf of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, is cited below:

It is this condition, so sadly morbid, into which society has fallen, that religion seeks to improve and transform. For the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling that unites man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason why Bahá'u'lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. It is not sufficient for a believer to merely accept and observe the teachings. He should, in addition, cultivate the sense of spirituality, which he can acquire chiefly by the means of prayer. The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man that has first to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide. Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organization, and become a dead thing.

III. A question that one might naturally ask is how to identify this mystic feeling. The answer to this question is given below:

With regard to Mr. . . . 's question about how one can identify "that mystic feeling that unites man with God," it is the view of the Research Department that the answer is to be derived from personal meditation and may well be different for each person.

A memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice dated 9 April 1996.

IV. The third class of mysticism is given the adjective "coronary" because this class deals with understanding scripture, and several references in scripture show that the heart is the seat of understanding. Some of these are: Isaiah 6: 10, Matt.13:14, John 12:40; Súras 7:179 and 63:3; The Hidden Words (Persian), numbers 16,33, and 36, *Bahá'í Prayers* (Wilmette, Ill.: B.P.T., 1991), p.165, and Gleanings, pp.293, 303.

Another reason is that, understanding of scripture is the purpose for which scripture is revealed. Bahá'u'lláh wrote that:

. . . in every age, the reading of the scriptures and holy books is for no other purpose except to enable the reader to apprehend their meaning and unravel their innermost mysteries. Otherwise, reading without understanding, is of no abiding profit unto man.

Kitáb-i-[^]qán, London, England: B.P.T., 1961 edition., pp. 110-111.

Thus, Bahá'u'lláh makes a direct link between the understanding of scripture and mysticism in stating that the sole purpose for reading scripture has always been, is, and will always be, to understand their meaning and to unravel their mysteries.

V Talking of psychic powers and witchcraft, one might want to know the relationship between these two. The answer is given below:

The Research Department has found nothing in the Writings clarifying the relationship between the use of "psychic powers" and what some call "witchcraft."

A memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice to an individual dated 5 April 1999

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An Exposition on the Fire Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh:
(Lawh-i-Qad Ihtaraqá'l-Mukhlisún)

by James B. Thomas

Preface

To understand Bahá'u'lláh's famous Fire Tablet it is essential to know about the events and conditions regarding the state of the Bahá'í Faith that preceded the time of its revelation. The emotion expressed is so plaintive that the human station of Bahá'u'lláh seems to dominate His soul yet His divine station wells up with such reverence for God that a mystical intercourse between these two stations of His being produces a profound message for all Bahá'ís and those yet unborn. It is a message of victory, of steadfastness, and of great promise.

The Fire Tablet's full title, taken from its opening lines, is "Lawh-i-Qad Ihtaraqá'l-Mukhlisún." The literal translation of this is "Tablet of 'The Faithful Ones [*mukhlisún*] have Burned [*qad ihtaraq*]," which Shoghi Effendi translated as "the hearts of the sincere are consumed in the fire of separation."¹ The Fire Tablet is often recited by Bahá'ís at times of suffering and difficulties and it was revealed when great afflictions and sorrows had surrounded Bahá'u'lláh. However, many believers, even those who are deeply moved by its tone, often state that they do not entirely understand it. This celebrated Tablet therefore deserves study with respect to its real and mystical implications.

In the closing days of the exile of Bahá'u'lláh and His followers in Adrianople, certain catastrophic events occurred within the fragile Bahá'í community that deeply affected Bahá'u'lláh. The divisiveness inculcated by Siyyid Muhammad that had begun earlier in Constantinople, which was in fact the cause of further exile to Adrianople, struck at the very heart of the embryonic Faith established by Bahá'u'lláh. Mírzá Yahyá, Bahá'u'lláh's half brother, was a victim of his own vanity, probably due to the Báb's appointment of him as the nominal leader of His followers, for reasons not pertaining to his capacities.² Yahyá developed an insatiable lust for power and recognition within the very community of Bahá'ís that Bahá'u'lláh had so miraculously regenerated. It was during this time that the followers of the Báb, the Herald and precursor of Bahá'u'lláh, began to identify themselves as Bahá'ís rather than Bábís.³

Introduction

For the purpose of reviewing The Fire Tablet, it is important to appreciate the depth of the extraordinary phenomenon of regeneration that occurred in an earlier time of the first exile to Baghdad after Bahá'u'lláh's terrible incarceration in the Síyáh-Chál, the "dark pit" in Tehran. Indeed this phenomenon would recur on a greater scale in His fourth and final exile to the inhospitable prison city of 'Akká. In each instance of repression experienced by the fledgling Bábí community it was the resplendent figure of Bahá'u'lláh that would inspire them, and ultimately the world, through numerous tablets that were revealed even during the time of His own severe duress.

The cowardice Yahyá exhibited innumerable times going back to the Baghdad exile now turned into arrogance under the influence of the "Anti-Christ" of the Bahá'í Dispensation, Siyyid Muhammad. A pattern of insurrection unfolded that culminated in an attempt on the life of a Divine Messenger of God. Bahá'u'lláh had always protected and nurtured His half brother, and for him to turn on Bahá'u'lláh in this way was heart-rending. Moreover, Yahyá rent so deep a schism on the most basic tenet of the Faith, the principle of unity, that it would prove to be the most damaging thing that Bahá'u'lláh would ever face in spite of great personal and physical ordeals exacted by outside enemies of the Faith.

The machinations of Siyyid Muhammad and Mírzá Yahyá provoked such consternation with the Turkish authorities that a further final exile was ordered, to the prison-city of 'Akká, Palestine. Ultimately the party was divided, one group would go with Bahá'u'lláh to 'Akká and the other group would go with Mírzá Yahyá to Cyprus. On August 31, 1868 Bahá'u'lláh and seventy followers arrived at "the most great prison," 'Akká.

Unfortunately, some followers of Yahyá were put in the group with Bahá'u'lláh, including Siyyid Muhammad, and four followers of Bahá'u'lláh were put in the group with Yahyá. This was most distressing for the believers, for whom separation from their Beloved was unbearable. For Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the Bahá'ís, the presence of Siyyid Muhammad would provide endless torment during the early years in 'Akká. One loyal follower actually attempted suicide to avoid separation from his Beloved.

Conditions in the prison were harsh and very unhealthy, so much so that three persons died while suffering extreme fever. All the prisoners were subjected to strict confinement by their captors. But the worst aspect of life in the barracks was brought on by the covenant breakers. The Siyyid and three others campaigned with lies to defame Bahá'u'lláh. Then they colluded with the authorities to prevent pilgrims, some of whom traveled great distances on foot, from seeing or even communicating with Him.⁴ This meant that the persecuted believers in Persia were left bereft of guidance from their Lord; indeed, many did not know whether He was alive or dead. Then something happened that utterly devastated Bahá'u'lláh and His family.

Shoghi Effendi describes this tragic event:

To the galling weight of these tribulations was now added the bitter grief of a sudden tragedy—the premature loss of the noble, the pious Mírzá Mihdí, the Purest Branch, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's twenty-two year old brother, an amanuensis of Bahá'u'lláh and a companion of His exile from the days when, as a child, he was brought from Tíhran to Baghdad to join his Father after His return from Sulaymáníyyih. He was pacing the roof of the barracks in the twilight, one evening, wrapped in his customary devotions, when he fell through the unguarded skylight onto a wooden crate, standing on the floor beneath, which pierced his ribs, and caused, twenty-two hours later, his death, on the 23rd of Rabí'u'l-Avval 1287 A.H. (June 23, 1870). His dying supplication to a grieving Father was that his life might be accepted as a ransom for those who were prevented from attaining the presence of their Beloved.⁵

This poignant episode provides the clearest example of the great suffering endured by Bahá'u'lláh throughout His long ministry. Bahá'u'lláh revealed a prayer in memory of His son that is reminiscent of Abraham's intended sacrifice of His son:

Glorified art Thou, O Lord, my God! Thou seest me in the hands of Mine enemies, and My son blood-stained before Thy face, O Thou in Whose hands is the kingdom of all names. I have, O my Lord, offered up that which Thou hast given Me, that Thy servants may be quickened and all that dwell on earth be united.⁶

It must be noted that Bahá'u'lláh, having the power of life and death, suffered an enormous sacrifice by acquiescing to His son's wish to ransom his life for the opening of the gates of the prison.⁷

Profundity of Suffering

When reviewing the dispensations of the past it becomes readily apparent that all Divine Messengers suffered greatly in various ways simply because They were bringing the teachings of God to mankind. Bahá'u'lláh, perhaps because of His longevity and because of the scope of His Revelation, seemed to bear an inordinate burden throughout His earthly life.

In a tablet, He encapsulates these phenomena while identifying Himself with the Messengers of the past:

At one time Thou didst deliver me into the hands of Nimrod; at another Thou hast allowed Pharaoh's rod to persecute me. Thou alone canst estimate, through Thine all-encompassing knowledge and the operation of Thy Will, the incalculable afflictions I have suffered at their hands. Again Thou didst cast me into the prison-cell of the ungodly for no reason except that I was moved to whisper into the ears of the well-favored denizens of Thy kingdom an intimation of the vision with which Thou hadst, through Thy knowledge, inspired me and revealed to me its meaning through the potency of Thy might. And again Thou didst decree that I be beheaded by the sword of the infidel. Again I was crucified for having unveiled to men's eyes the hidden gems of Thy glorious unity, for having revealed to them the wondrous signs of Thy sovereign and everlasting power. How bitter the humiliations heaped upon me, in a subsequent age, on the plain of Karbilá! How lonely did I feel amidst Thy people; to what state of helplessness I was reduced in that land! Unsatisfied with such indignities, my persecutors decapitated me and carrying aloft my head

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from land to land paraded it before the gaze of the unbelieving multitude and deposited it on the seats of the perverse and faithless. In a later age I was suspended and my breast was made a target to the darts of the malicious cruelty of my foes. My limbs were riddled with bullets and my body was torn asunder. Finally, behold how in this day my treacherous enemies have leagued themselves against me, and are continually plotting to instill the venom of hate and malice into the souls of Thy servants. With all their might they are scheming to accomplish their purpose. . . .⁸

It was in this milieu of despair, tragedy and torment that Bahá'u'lláh revealed the Lawh-i-Qad Ihtaraqa'l-Mukhlisún, or the "Fire Tablet" as it is known in the West. The Tablet was revealed in 1871 for a young devoted follower named Hájí Siyyid 'Alí-Akbar.¹⁰ It may be studied in three parts. (1) First, Bahá'u'lláh, in His human station, describes conditions of abject sorrow followed by invocations to God pertinent to those conditions in such poignant terms that it is reminiscent of the plaintive call by Christ during His crucifixion when He asked "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"⁹ Then He reverently addresses God by His attributes. (2) God, speaking through His Messenger, responds to the call of Bahá'u'lláh with omnipotent authority, explaining why such conditions exist, and then addresses Him in most endearing terms. (3) The call of God is answered by Bahá'u'lláh, in His station of Divine Messenger, in a most provocative way bursting through the ashes of despair like a phoenix rising with the triumph of sacrifice.

I have attempted to associate specific conditions with each invocation. There were many incidents, feeding one into another, which occurred over a number of years that were related to this Tablet. Only a few are represented here. The Súriy-i-Mulúk (Súrih of Kings) contains some elements of Bahá'u'lláh's experience prior to His banishment to "The Most Great Prison" that influenced the writing of the Fire Tablet. This famous Tablet expresses, in a sense, the culmination of emotions and truths associated with the tribulations experienced by Bahá'u'lláh and His company for a period that spanned nineteen years. All of this has since been transformed miraculously into ultimate victory for His cause.

In the following passages, text in italics is from the Fire Tablet, unless otherwise identified.

Despair and Invocation

Bahá'u'lláh begins by addressing God in terms of ultimate respect for His station such as the "First Cause" and the "Supreme Being."

In the Name of God, the Most Ancient, the Most Great.

He then begins His plaintive calls:

Indeed the hearts of the sincere are consumed in the fire of separation: Where is the gleaming of the light of Thy Countenance, O Beloved of the worlds?

This refers to the heart-rending fact that the closest the followers of Bahá'u'lláh could approach was the city gate of 'Akká, and then only His hand would be visible waving in the distance. Within the prison, forced separation between members in His company created a sense of isolation and they began to feel spiritually bereft, deprived of the resplendent presence of Bahá'u'lláh. Some were expelled from 'Akká due to the machinations of Siyyid Muhammad.

Separation, the opposite of unity, was perhaps the most grievous of any condition experienced by the Bahá'ís. The beloved Guardian quotes Áqáy-Kalím on the occasion of the final rupture between Bahá'u'lláh and Mírzá Yahyá in Adrianople: "All the companions lamented in their separation from the Blessed Beauty. 'Those days,' is the written testimony of one of those companions, 'were marked by tumult and confusion. We were sore-perplexed, and greatly feared lest we be permanently deprived of the bounty of His presence.'"¹¹

Again He calls:

Those who are near unto Thee have been abandoned in the darkness of desolation: Where is the shining of the morn of Thy reunion, O Desire of the worlds?

Bahá'u'lláh is referring to the conditions in 'Akká, which were abominable. Also, the authorities were

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required to treat the believers harshly while others had been forced to remain behind along the path of exile.

He cries out:

The bodies of Thy chosen ones lie quivering on distant sands: Where is the ocean of Thy presence, O Enchanter of the worlds?

Here He speaks about the remnants of the Bábí community, which remained devastated in their homeland and thirsted for spiritual guidance, and a few of whom were forced to travel to the island of Cyprus with the archenemy of the Faith, Mírzá Yahyá.

Earlier, when the exiles were still in Adrianople, ominous events began to occur. Shoghi Effendi describes the events that transpired:

Emboldened by the recent ordeals with which Bahá'u'lláh had been so cruelly afflicted, these enemies, who had been momentarily quiescent, began to demonstrate afresh, and in a number of ways, the latent animosity they nursed in their hearts. A persecution, varying in the degree of its severity, began once more to break out in various countries. In Ádharbáyján and Zanján, in Nishápúr and Tihrán, the adherents of the Faith were either imprisoned, vilified, penalized, tortured or put to death. Among the sufferers may be singled out the intrepid Najaf-'Alí-i-Zanjání, a survivor of the struggle of Zanján, and immortalized in the "Epistle to the Son of the Wolf," who, bequeathing the gold in his possession to his executioner, was heard to shout aloud "Yá Rabbíya'l-Abhá" before he was beheaded. In Egypt, a greedy and vicious consul-general extorted no less than a hundred thousand tumans from a wealthy Persian convert, named Hájí Abu'l-Qásim-i-Shírází; arrested Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí and six of his fellow-believers, and instigated their condemnation to a nine year exile in Khartúm, confiscating all the writings in their possession, and then threw into prison, Nabil, whom Bahá'u'lláh had sent to appeal to the Khedive on their behalf. In Baghdad and Kázimayn indefatigable enemies, watching their opportunity, subjected Bahá'u'lláh's faithful supporters to harsh and ignominious treatment; savagely disemboweled 'Abdu'r-Rasúl-i-Qumí, as he was carrying water in a skin, at the hour of dawn, from the river to the Most Great House, and banished, amidst scenes of public derision, about seventy companions to Mosul, including women and children.¹²

Then He laments:

Longing hands are uplifted to the heaven of Thy grace and generosity: Where are the rains of Thy bestowal, O Answerer of the worlds?

Despair had gripped the company of Bahá'u'lláh and many felt that they were near the end of their endurance.

Again He cries:

The infidels have arisen in tyranny on every hand: Where is the compelling power of Thine ordaining pen, O Conqueror of the worlds?

Unbelievers in very high places of power across the Ottoman Empire had colluded to destroy the infant Faith promulgated by Bahá'u'lláh by imposing unbearable conditions upon His followers. Repression extended throughout the realm as well.

In *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* He writes:

Twenty years have passed, O kings, during which We have, each day, tasted the agony of a fresh tribulation. No one of them that were before Us hath endured the things We have endured. Would that ye could perceive it! They that rose up against Us have put us to death, have shed our blood, have plundered our property, and violated our honor. Though aware of most of our afflictions, ye, nevertheless, have failed to stay the hand of the aggressor. For is it not your clear duty to restrain the tyranny of the oppressor, and to deal equitably with your subjects, that your high sense of justice may be fully demonstrated to all mankind?¹³

He exclaims:

The barking of dogs is loud on every side: Where is the lion of the forest of Thy might, O Chastiser of the worlds?

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This multiple metaphor includes a follower, Mírzá Ridá-Qulí, who had been dismissed by Bahá'u'lláh after disgracing the Faith by committing shameful deeds. He joined forces with his sister Badrí Ján, Mírzá Yahyá, and Siyyid Muhammad in a campaign of calumnies against Bahá'u'lláh. Their efforts were so devastating that the citizens of 'Akká began to show enmity and malice toward the believers. All of them were as "barking dogs."

He includes the world in His lament:

Coldness hath gripped all mankind: Where is the warmth of Thy love, O Fire of the worlds?

The pain that Bahá'u'lláh is bearing at this time is exacerbated by events far beyond the "Most Great Prison." The corruption and perversion of religion in Persia and Turkey were always of deep concern to Bahá'u'lláh, both with regard to His followers and ultimately to the populace in general.

He then exclaims:

Calamity hath reached its height: Where are the signs of Thy succor, O Salvation of the worlds?

Sedition caused by the Azalís had reached a fevered pitch. The venom of their hostility had endangered the very life of Bahá'u'lláh yet He admonished His small company to be patient and forbearing.¹⁴

He expresses deep concern:

Darkness hath enveloped most of the peoples: Where is the brightness of Thy splendor, O Radiance of the worlds?

Though a few were still steadfast in their faith, the spiritual light in most countries was flickering out in a sea of disbelief. This condition is clarified when He addresses the rulers in Constantinople:

We behold in thee the foolish ruling over the wise, and darkness vaunting itself against the light. Thou art indeed filled with manifest pride. Hath thine outward splendor made thee vainglorious? By Him Who is the Lord of mankind! It shall soon perish, and thy daughters and thy widows and all the kindreds that dwell within thee shall lament. Thus informeth thee the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.¹⁵

The pattern continues; He rephrases exclamatory statements of despair, followed by variations of His questions. These are repeated in cadence as He appeals to God with exalted titles and attributes.

The necks of men are stretched out in malice: Where are the swords of Thy vengeance, O Destroyer of the worlds?

Only God can wreak vengeance. Bahá'u'lláh constantly restrained His followers against punishing the oppressors of the Faith. Whenever they went against His will, tragedy followed.

Abasement hath reached its lowest depth: Where are the emblems of Thy glory, O Glory of the worlds?

There are two conditions of abasement referred to by Bahá'u'lláh: one is related to Himself and the other to the people and rulers. The first is actually of greater importance because it concerns the abasement that was forced upon the person of Bahá'u'lláh, an abasement which He considered His glory!

Sorrows have afflicted the Revealer of Thy Name, the All-Merciful: Where is the joy of the Dayspring of Thy Revelation, O Delight of the worlds?

The Guardian identifies the rebellion of Mírzá Yahyá as the greatest source of sorrow for Bahá'u'lláh: "This supreme crisis Bahá'u'lláh Himself designated as the *Ayyám-i-Shidád* (Days of Stress), during which *the most grievous veil* was torn asunder, and the *most great separation* was irrevocably effected. It immensely gratified and emboldened its external enemies, both civil and ecclesiastical, played into their hands, and evoked their unconcealed derision. It perplexed and confused the friends and supporters of Bahá'u'lláh, and seriously damaged the prestige of the Faith in the eyes of its western admirers. It had been brewing ever since the early days of Bahá'u'lláh's sojourn in Baghdad, was temporarily suppressed by the creative forces which, under His as yet unproclaimed leadership, reanimated a disintegrating community, and finally broke out, in all its violence, in the years immediately preceding the proclamation of His Message. It brought incalculable sorrow to Bahá'u'lláh, visibly aged Him, and inflicted, through its repercussions, the heaviest blow ever sustained by Him in His lifetime."¹⁶

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Anguish hath befallen all the peoples of the earth: Where are the ensigns of Thy gladness, O Joy of the worlds?

Militant materialism had taken the reins of power in Europe, and would threaten peace far beyond that continent. In the Orient a despotic empire, centered in Constantinople, brought unbearable pressure on the Faith that was destined to save mankind from its spiritual self-destruction.

Thou seest the Dawning Place of Thy signs veiled by evil suggestions: Where are the fingers of Thy might, O Power of the worlds?

Siyid Muhammad and Áqá Ján wrote anonymous letters which perverted the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, and which accused Him of having conspired with Bulgarian leaders and certain ministers of European powers to achieve, with the help of some thousands of His followers, the conquest of Constantinople. Government officials were alarmed by this, and determined to isolate Bahá’u’lláh and reduce Him to powerlessness. He was in seclusion during these events.¹⁷

In a broader sense, Bahá’u’lláh makes mention:

My face hath come forth from the veils, and shed its radiance upon all that is in heaven and on earth; and yet, ye turned not towards Him, notwithstanding that ye were created for Him, O concourse of kings!¹⁸

Sore thirst hath overcome all men: Where is the river of Thy bounty, O Mercy of the worlds?

A spiritual vacuum permeated the world that left humans in a state of confusion beyond their own awareness or understanding.

Greed hath made captive all mankind: Where are the embodiments of detachment, O Lord of the worlds?

Lust for power, corruption at all levels of society, gluttony for wealth, and an insatiable appetite for prestige or fame had brought what was once the most civilized of nations to the lowest level of spiritual poverty. The kings of the earth are admonished for what they pride themselves in, especially ornaments and treasures.

Thou seest this Wronged One lonely in exile: Where are the hosts of the heaven of Thy Command, O Sovereign of the worlds?

The Beloved Guardian describes the restrictions imposed on Bahá’u’lláh and His family: “Explicit orders had been issued by the Sultán and his ministers to subject the exiles, who were accused of having grievously erred and led others far astray, to the strictest confinement. Hopes were confidently expressed that the sentence of life-long imprisonment pronounced against them would lead to their eventual extermination. The farmán of Sultán ‘Abdu’l-‘Azíz, dated the fifth of Rabi ‘u’th-Thání 1285 A.H. (July 26, 1868), not only condemned them to perpetual banishment, but stipulated their strict incarceration, and forbade them to associate either with each other or with the local inhabitants.”¹⁹

I have been forsaken in a foreign land: Where are the emblems of Thy faithfulness, O Trust of the worlds?

Bahá’u’lláh, in His human station of “the wronged One,” is desirous of a sign of reassurance.

The agonies of death have laid hold on all men: Where is the surging of Thine ocean of eternal life, O Life of the worlds?

He is deeply disturbed by the spiritual sickness of mankind.

The whisperings of Satan have been breathed to every creature: Where is the meteor of Thy fire, O Light of the worlds?

The divisiveness caused by Mírzá Yahyá and his agents is so devastating that it seems to permeate the world. Shoghi Effendi explains: “It was engineered throughout by the tortuous intrigues and incessant machinations of that same diabolical Siyyid Muhammad, that vile whisperer who, disregarding Bahá’u’lláh’s advice, had insisted on accompanying Him to Constantinople and Adrianople, and was now redoubling his efforts, with unrelaxing vigilance, to bring it to a head.”²⁰

The drunkenness of passion hath perverted most of mankind: Where are the day springs of purity, O Desire of the worlds?

Greed, zeal for fame, and lust for power on the part of the bulk of mankind lay at the root of the problems

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facing the early Bahá'ís, both in the immediate vicinity of 'Akká and in the Ottoman Empire as a whole.

In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Bahá'u'lláh asks the people of Constantinople: "Hath the drunkenness of passion laid hold upon you, or is it that ye are sunk in heedlessness? O Spot that art situate on the shores of the two seas! The throne of tyranny hath, verily, been established upon thee, and the flame of hatred hath been kindled within thy bosom. . . ."21

Thou seest this Wronged One veiled in tyranny among the Syrians: Where is the radiance of Thy dawning light, O Light of the worlds?

The "dawning light" emanated from those lands that had been introduced to the Faith by early believers, first in Persia, then Iraq and Turkey. Added to them during Bahá'u'lláh's sojourn in Adrianople were the Caucasus and Syria. Nabíl had converted a number of those early pioneers. 'Akká was part of the province of Syria.²²

Thou seest Me forbidden to speak forth: Then from where will spring Thy melodies, O Nightingale of the worlds?

Bahá'u'lláh has now withdrawn from all contact with others.

Most of the people are enraptured in fancy and idle imaginings: Where are the exponents of Thy certitude, O Assurance of the worlds?

Bahá'u'lláh addressed the kings of Christendom in no uncertain terms when He questioned them about the sayings of Jesus regarding the many signs of the Christ's return:

"When He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth." And yet, behold how, when He did bring the truth, ye refused to turn your faces towards Him, and persisted in disporting yourselves with your pastimes and fancies.²³

Bahá is drowning in a sea of tribulation: Where is the Ark of Thy salvation, O Savior of the worlds?

Shoghi Effendi describes a fresh danger that clearly threatened the life of Bahá'u'lláh: "Though He Himself had stringently forbidden His followers, on several occasions, both verbally and in writing, any retaliatory acts against their tormentors, and had even sent back to Beirut an irresponsible Arab convert, who had meditated avenging the wrongs suffered by his beloved Leader, seven of the companions clandestinely sought out and slew three of their persecutors, among whom were Siyyid Muhammad and Áqá Ján. The consternation that seized an already oppressed community was indescribable. Bahá'u'lláh's indignation knew no bounds."²⁴

After this horrendous act "Even the children of the imprisoned exiles, whenever they ventured to show themselves in the streets during those days, would be pursued, vilified and pelted with stones. . . . The cup of Bahá'u'lláh's tribulations was now filled to overflowing . . ."²⁵

If we pause a moment and visualize a vast reservoir that may be likened to the great capacity that Bahá'u'lláh possessed for sensitivity, compassion, love and suffering, we can sense the enormous despair that befell Him after nineteen long years of relentless attack from without and from within the embryonic community of believers. That reservoir of pain had been fed by rivers and streams of tribulation, flowing in from every direction beginning with His incarceration in the "black pit" of Tehran in August 1852. The level of duress had finally reached its capacity and began flooding over the "dam" until it literally broke and released a cataract of power and emotion that became this, the Fire Tablet.

Thou seest the Dayspring of Thine utterance in the darkness of creation: Where is the sun of the heaven of Thy grace, O Lightgiver of the worlds?

Jealousy became one of the motivating factors in the multifarious complicities purportedly involving Bahá'u'lláh. Mírzá Husayn-Khán, the Muṣḥíru 'd-Dawlih, and his associates arose to take full advantage of the recent troubles that had been experienced by Bahá'u'lláh and to assure His destruction. In Constantinople, the esteem shown Bahá'u'lláh by the governor Muhammad Páshá-i-Qibrisí and his successors incensed the authorities. Aware of the instabilities prevailing in their own countris, they were disturbed by the constant comings and goings of pilgrims in Adrianople and by the exaggerated reports of Fu'ád Páshá. They were further provoked by petitions of Mírzá Yahyá that reached them through his agent, Siyyid Muhammad.²⁶

The lamps of truth and purity, of loyalty and honor, have been put out: Where are the signs of Thine aveng-

ing wrath, O Mover of the worlds?

When Bahá'u'lláh went into seclusion after the rebellion of Mírzá Yahyá, He found even more perplexities resulting from the collusion of Siyyid Muhammad and Mírzá Yahyá. They had written calumnious letters about Bahá'u'lláh and had them disseminated in Persia and Iraq. They also wrote petitions couched in obsequious language and sent them to the governor of Adrianople. Mírzá Yahyá then “dispatched one of his wives to the government house to complain that her husband had been cheated out of his rights and that her children were on the verge of starvation.” Meanwhile, Siyyid Muhammad had journeyed to the capital and, speaking to the Persian Ambassador, accused Bahá'u'lláh of sending an agent to assassinate Násiri'd-Dín-Sháh.²⁷

Canst Thou see any who have championed Thy Self, or who ponder on what hath befallen Him in the pathway of Thy love? Now doth My pen halt, O Beloved of the worlds.

Consternation within the mind of Bahá'u'lláh had now reached its zenith. It is reminiscent of Lot who long ago tried to save the cities of Sodom and Gomorra but failed in his attempt to identify people of virtue. But with Bahá'u'lláh there were such individuals.

The branches of the Divine Lote-Tree lie broken by the onrushing gales of destiny: Where are the banners of Thy succor, O Champion of the worlds?

The human side of Bahá'u'lláh had become utterly devastated by events. He is likened to a lote tree that in ancient times was planted at the end of a road beyond which there is no passing.²⁸

This Face is hidden in the dust of slander: Where are the breezes of Thy compassion, O Mercy of the worlds?

Regarding Mírzá Yahyá, Bahá'u'lláh admonishes: “Thou hast perpetrated against thy Brother what no man hath perpetrated against another.” “What hath proceeded from thy pen,” He, furthermore, has affirmed, “hath caused the Countenances of Glory to be prostrated upon the dust, hath rent in twain the Veil of Grandeur in the Sublime Paradise, and lacerated the hearts of the favored ones established upon the loftiest seats.”²⁹

The robe of sanctity is sullied by the people of deceit: Where is the vesture of Thy holiness, O Adorner of the worlds?

Siyyid Muhammad, Áqá Ján, and Mírzá Ridá-Qulí had indulged in a campaign of abuse, calumny and intrigue against Bahá'u'lláh which exceeded that of the campaign launched in Constantinople earlier by Siyyid Muhammad, the “Anti-Christ” of the Bahá'í Faith.³⁰

The sea of grace is stilled for what the hands of men have wrought: Where are the waves of Thy bounty, O Desire of the worlds?

The manner in which the prisoners were treated from the first days in 'Akká had remained so egregious, so flagrantly abusive, and under such abominable conditions that it was designated “The Most Great Prison.” Worse, Bahá'u'lláh was isolated in the prison. Later He would withdraw for the sake of unity.

The door leading to the Divine Presence is locked through the tyranny of Thy foes: Where is the key of Thy bestowal, O Unlocker of the worlds?

Periodically the evil machinations conducted by the foes of the Faith from within produced such intractable divisiveness that Bahá'u'lláh would withdraw into solitude for a time. This occurred in Baghdad, Adrianople, and finally in 'Akká.

The leaves are yellowed by the poisoning winds of sedition: Where is the downpour of the clouds of Thy bounty, O Giver of the worlds?

The insidious, relentless acts of deceit and subversion by Siyyid Muhammad and his cohorts had affected friends of the Faith in negative ways and had bolstered its enemies.

The universe is darkened with the dust of sin: Where are the breezes of Thy forgiveness, O Forgiver of the worlds?

The devastating impact of Mírzá Yahyá's rebellion was so significant that it overwhelmed the infant Faith for

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a time. Bahá'u'lláh expands His lamentation to include all of the spiritual reality of man.

This Youth is lonely in a desolate land: Where is the rain of Thy heavenly grace, O Bestower of the worlds?

In His seclusion Bahá'u'lláh was utterly alone and He had to bear this in order to eventually restore unity in the Bahá'í community.

Among the forgoing Bahá'u'lláh has, in a spiritual sense, referred to extreme cold, calamity, the wicked, stirrers of sedition, confinement of prisoners, loneliness, banishment, abasement, affliction, and hearts full of hate.

Another Voice

God now answers Bahá'u'lláh in most endearing Terms:

O Supreme Pen, We have heard Thy most sweet call in the eternal realm: Give Thou ear unto what the Tongue of Grandeur uttereth, O Wronged One of the worlds!

One by one He answers the questions that had been put to Him by Bahá'u'lláh.

Were it not for the cold, how would the heat of Thy words prevail, O Expounder of the worlds?

Were it not for calamity, how would the sun of Thy patience shine, O Light of the worlds?

Lament not because of the wicked. Thou wert created to bear and endure, O Patience of the worlds.

How sweet was Thy dawning on the horizon of the Covenant among the stirrers of sedition, and Thy yearning after God, O Love of the worlds.

By Thee the banner of independence was planted on the highest peaks, and the sea of bounty surged, O Rapture of the worlds.

By Thine aloneness the Sun of Oneness shone, and by Thy banishment the land of Unity was adorned. Be patient, O Thou Exile of the worlds.

We have made abasement the garment of glory, and affliction the adornment of Thy temple, O Pride of the worlds.

Thou seest the hearts are filled with hate, and to overlook is Thine, O Thou Concealer of the sins of the worlds.

When the swords flash, go forward! When the shafts fly, press onward! O Thou Sacrifice of the worlds.

Dost Thou wail, or shall I wail? Rather shall I weep at the fewness of Thy champions, O Thou Who hast caused the wailing of the worlds.

Triumph and Certitude

Bahá'u'lláh, speaking now as a Divine Messenger, responds to the admonitions of God:

Verily, I have heard Thy Call, O All-Glorious Beloved; and now is the face of Bahá flaming with the heat of tribulation and with the fire of Thy shining word, and He hath risen up in faithfulness at the place of sacrifice, looking toward Thy pleasure, O Ordainer of the worlds.

Then as Bahá'u'lláh addresses the recipient of this potent tablet, we may also consider that He is addressing the Bahá'ís of the world!

O 'Alí-Akbar,³¹ thank thy Lord for this Tablet whence thou canst breathe the fragrance of My meekness, and know what hath beset Us in the path of God, the Adored of all the worlds.

Finally, His confirming certitude:

Should all the servants read and ponder this, there shall be kindled in their veins a fire that shall set aflame the worlds.

—Bahá'u'lláh³²

Notes

- 1) Taherzadeh: *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. 3, p. 226.
 - 2) *Ibid.*, Vol.1, p. 53
 - 3) Balyuzi: *Bahá'u'lláh The King Of Glory*, p. 250.
 - 4) Shoghi Effendi: *God Passes By*, p. 187.
 - 5) *Ibid.*, p. 188.
 - 6) Shoghi Effendi: *Messages to America*, p. 34.
 - 7) Taherzadeh: *Rev. of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol 3, p. 208.
 - 8) Shoghi Effendi: *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 118-119.
 - 9) Matthew 27:46.
 - 10) Taherzadeh: *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol 3, p. 226.
 - 11) Shoghi Effendi: *God Passes By*, p. 167-168.
 - 12) *Ibid.*, p. 178.
 - 13) Bahá'u'lláh: *Gleanings*, p. 247.
 - 14) Balyuzi: *Bahá'u'lláh: The King Of Glory*, p. 321.
 - 15) Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 53.
 - 16) Shoghi Effendi: *God Passes By*, p. 163-164.
 - 17) *Ibid.*, p. 178-179.
 - 18) Shoghi Effendi: *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 22.
 - 19) Shoghi Effendi: *God Passes By*, p. 186.
 - 20) *Ibid.*, p. 164.
 - 21) Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 52-53.
 - 22) Shoghi Effendi: *God Passes By*, p. 176.
 - 23) Bahá'u'lláh: *Gleanings*, p. 246.
 - 24) Shoghi Effendi: *God Passes By*, p. 189.
 - 25) *Ibid.*, p. 191.
 - 26) *Ibid.*, p. 178-179.
 - 27) *Ibid.*, p. 167-168.
 - 28) *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, p. 141.
 - 29) Shoghi Effendi: *God Passes By*, p. 169-170.
 - 30) *Ibid.*, p. 189.
 - 31) Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. 2, p. 275.
- 'Alí-Akbar was a young devoted believer for whom Bahá'u'lláh had great affection. He had a "sweet melodius voice" which had a profound effect upon the listener when he chanted prayers.
- 32) Bahá'u'lláh: *Bahá'í Prayers* (US), p. 214-220.

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The Influence of Bábí Teachings on Ling Ming Tang and Nineteenth-century China

by Jianping Wang

The terms “Báb” and “Bábí” (in Chinese, “Bábu”) can be found in the Sufi teachings of Ma Lingming, the founder of the Ling Ming Tang (Chinese: “Sufi hospice of soul enlightening”) Sufi order of Lanzhou. This fact first came to my attention in 1996 when I was reading Ma Tong’s book *Traces of the Original Sources of Islamic Sects and Tariqas in China*. I found it very interesting: a Sufi Order in China may have had historical connections with the Bábí movement or the Bahá’í Faith in the interaction between Iranian Islam and the *tariqas* in China. However I had not further pursued this historical research until the International Conference of Religion, Ethics and Culture jointly held by Institute of World Religions, CASS and Pacific Rim Institute for Development and Education (PRIDE) in Oct. 1998. In that conference I met Dr. Moojan Momen, a specialist in the fields of Shí‘a Islam and Bahá’í studies from England. We talked about the possibility of such a connection, and about the conception of the Báb in the Sufism of the Ling Ming Tang school. Dr. Momen suggested the need for further study of the cross-religious impact in Northwest China, a region which had been penetrated by different spiritual thoughts since its functioned on Silk Road in history and was a contact zone among Persian religions, Indian religions, Arabic Islam, and Chinese religions.

Inspired by this idea I surveyed the available materials on Ling Ming Tang, and corresponded with Dr. Momen from time by time through E-mail. He encouraged me to begin the worthwhile historical investigation in Lanzhou. I was able to undertake some fieldwork in Lanzhou and its surroundings during Jan. 23 to Feb. 4, 2001.¹ The following is my report of this field visit and a study of Ling Ming Tang’s relationship to the teachings of the Báb as recorded and discussed by available Chinese sources.

Ling Ming Tang’s Relationship with the Bábí Movement

The word “Báb” appears in Ma Lingming’s will, which states that “*awla*’ [Arabic: the friends of Alláh, or the high ranked Sufi saints] are the divinely nominated persons at the doorway of the Báb.” Akhund Ma Xiangzhen, one of the disciples of Ma Lingming, said in his article “Praising the Grandiose Path of *awla*’” that “*awla*’, *awla*’, the true *awla*’, the authentic *silsila* [Arabic: “series,” mystical teachings of Muhammad passed down through a Sufi order’s succession of *shaykhs*] comes from Baghdad. There is the divinely nominated man on the threshold of Báb, Islam will not be passed to the other than *awla*.’”² He said more in a poem entitled “Phrase of Three Characters on *awla*’”: “*awla*’ path, way of returning to Alláh; the door of Báb, just be here; there is Heaven Lord, there is the Law; One divides into three, three merges into One.”³ There are two different explanations for the numerals “One” and “three” in the poem. The first is that the “One” means Islam and “three” refers to *Khafiyya*, *Qadriyya*, and a special secret “*dhikr*” (Arabic: “remembrance” chanting, esp. of the divine names of Alláh and the Prophet Muhammad); or refers to *Qadriyya*, *Khafiyya* and Ling Ming Tang. The second explanation is that the “One” refers to “Alláh” and the “three” refers to the Prophet, the saints, and the ordinary believers.⁴

The word “Báb” is also found in the oral sources in the will of Ma Lingming that is circulated and kept in memories among the clerics and followers of Ling Ming Tang today. On several occasions during my investigations, it was said to me that: “*awla*’ is the dragon⁵ for those who answer at the threshold of the Báb to the inquiring people.”⁶ I first heard this phrase containing the word “Báb” from Wang Yuguang, the older brother of the current spiritual chief (*Shaykh*) and the Third Successor of Ling Ming Tang, Wang Shoutian. Wang Yuguang, then eighty-three years of age, cited this word at the same time he related to me: “I began studying Sufism at the Ling Ming Tang *qubba* [Arabic: “tomb, shrine”] when I was a young boy. I had safeguarded the tomb of Ma Lingming for twenty years. Under the guidance of Shan Ziju, the *Shaykh* and the Second Successor of Ling Ming Tang, I had also studied the Sufi textbooks.”⁷ In a personal meeting with *Shaykh* Wang Shoutian himself, he recited the same phrase to me.⁸ Later on I found the word “Báb” used in a phrase similar to the one I heard from Wang brothers in a hand-copied text on Ma Lingming’s will preserved by Ma Ruqi, the

grandfather of Ma Hengyuan, a young Madrasah student with whom I became acquaintance during my field-work at Ling Ming Tang.⁹

There are two controversial arguments over the question of the relation between Ling Ming Tang and the term “Báb” in the available written and oral sources. Akhund Ma Zhanhai, the Shaykh of Xidaoyuan (the Western Courtyard of Ling Ming Tang), a group which split from Ling Ming Tang in the 1930s, thinks there is no such connection with Babism. In an interview with me he claimed that “Ma Tong [the author aforementioned] relates the word “Báb” in the will of Ma Lingming to the Bábí movement and Bábí insurrection in Iran of the 1840s. This is not true with regard to the historical facts. Our Ling Ming Tang belongs to the Sunni sect, a true and righteous Islam. The Bábí sect was a group of the Shí‘a, and the Bábí sect betrayed Islam, so it became the heresy or evil religion. Professor Ma Tong arbitrarily put these two different groups [Ling Ming Tang and the Bábí movement] together and inter-related them, but such an action does not fit to the reality and is entirely groundless. It would be a shame to further discuss any such links between Ling Ming Tang and the Bábí sect.”¹⁰

Ma Zhanhai’s rejection of an historical linkage seems to derive from his attitude and background: as an orthodox Sunni, he assumes that Ling Ming Tang must have had no historical connection with the Shí‘a-influenced Bábís. However, such a personal value judgement does not automatically refute the evidence for the possibility of a linkage.

My argument advocating an historical link is supported by several elders of Ling Ming Tang, as well as the sources recorded by that Sufi order itself in its past history. Wang Shoutian himself, the current leader of Ling Ming Tang, confirmed in an interview with me that Ling Ming Tang’s teaching was inspired by the thought of the Bábí.

Papa [Persian and Eastern Turkish: “grandfather”; Turkish: “father”]¹¹ Jing Duzi [Jidaz?] of the Qadriyya instructed Ma Lingming, who was twenty-five years old then [1877], in the Sufism and passed to him the true silsila [i.e., the authentic mystical teachings passed down from the Prophet Muhammad]. This took place in Yuzhong County where Ma Lingming lived for a short time while escaping the turmoil of war. After Ma Lingming received the teaching from Papa, he left for Lanzhou that very evening. This transmission of Sufi knowledge did not only pass the doctrines of the four Sufi orders [i.e. the Khafiyya and Jahriyya orders of Naqshbandiyya, plus Qadriyya and Kubruwiyya] to Ma Lingming, but also passed the teachings of the Báb on to him.¹²

The “Papa Jing Duzi” mentioned by Wang Shoutian refers to a Sufi Shaykh from Kashghar Qubba or Khanaqah (Persian: Sufi hostel used for praying, ceremonial services, education, dormitory, charity, and pilgrimage spot)—more precisely, from Apak Qubba near Kashghar. This information is confirmed by a hand-copied source circulated among the believers of Ling Ming Tang, although with variation over the age of Ma Lingming when Papa Jing Duzi taught him:

Ma Lingming kept his cultivation in Sufi doctrine till the time of his fortieth year [1893, the 18th year of Guangxu Reign], then a Shaykh with his honoring title Wafiya al-Dín, named Jing Duzi from Kashghar Qubba the holy land, sent the ijazat [Arabic: “license,” the proof of the silsila, the transmission of the authentic Sufi doctrine] to the Founder of Ling Ming Tang. From that day, Ma Lingming began to disseminate this Sufi creed in public, and inherited the true Light of the Prophet Muhammad teaching, and became the first Shaykh in the silsila [i.e., authorized Shaykh] of Ling Ming Tang.¹³

Ma Lingming was probably introduced to Sufism when twenty-five years old and received the ijazat, i.e. permission for transmitting the knowledge, at age forty. He either had one instructor named Papa Jing Duzi who taught him at two separate times, or he had two different Sufi Shaykhs who taught him on two different occasions. It cannot be ruled out that, between his twenty-fifth and fortieth years, Ma Lingming had contact with different spiritual sources transformed by different teachers of mysticism, including that of the Bábí and Bahá’í Faith.

However, the name of Papa Jing Duzi has been also confused with another name of “Great Fragrant Papa” (*Da xiang papa*) in several recordings of Ling Ming Tang’s history. While speaking on the connection of Ling Ming Tang with Babism, Shaykh Wang Shoutian also told me about Fragrant Papa’s mission to Ma Lingming: “Salim, the Arabian Sufi, taught Ma Lingming Sufism at Sanjiaji Town of Guanghe County, and the soul of

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Great Founder of the [Khafiyya Naqshbandiyya] Sufi Order with fragrance echoed in the mind of Ma Lingming, the Founder of Ling Ming Tang.”¹⁴ “Salim” here is definitely confused with Habíb Alláh, whom the other sources identify as “Fragrant Papa.” For example, according to “Brief Notes of the Great Fragrant Master” recorded by one of Ma Lingming’s disciples:

His Arabic Sufi name was Habíb Alláh who came from Daihailai [Tehran?] wenyi [?]. He traveled to Yemen and Baghdad for his religious studies in order to disseminate the authentic Islam and help people in the world. He had studied Sufism in the záwiya [Arabic: “Sufi hospice”] of Shaykh Ray and had served Shaykh Halil, the respected scholar, for eighteen years. One night he had a dream in which, while training in the military horseback-riding range, he shot two arrows in an easterly direction. He hit and felled two targets: a dragon and a phoenix. He related his dream to the Shaykh, who congratulated him and said: “Please go to China at once and instruct the great saints there in the Sufi doctrine.” He obeyed the Shaykh’s order and embarked on the journey. He arrived in Lanzhou in the 9th Month of the Chinese Lunar Calendar, 1877. The teacher [Habíb Alláh] met the disciple [Ma Lingming], enabling this Sufi tariqa [Arabic: “Sufi order”] to spread to China. The Great Master had such a pleasant, fragrant smell that he was referred to by all as “Fragrant Papa.” The Master suffered from armed robbery and war-fighting when he traveled to Suzhou on his way back to Arabia, and became a martyr who dedicated his life to Islam. The date of Fragrant Papa’s passing is the 1st day of the 1st Month in Chinese Lunar Calendar, in the 4th Year of Guangxu Reign [1878].¹⁵

A source recorded much earlier describes Fragrant Papa’s meeting with Ma Lingming with a vivid narration:

When he was twenty-five years old [on the 9th Day of the 9th Month of Chinese Lunar Calendar, the 3rd Year of Guangxu Reign, 1877] Ma Lingming met Habíb Alláh who, known as Great Fragrant Papa, had come to Lanzhou of Gansu for teaching Sufism. Habíb Alláh declared that he was born in Dehailai [Tehran?] wenyi of India [Iran], and traveled to Baghdad where he studied at a Sufi hospice headed by Shaykh Riwal al-Dín who taught disciples the Qadriyya Sufi knowledge. In the meeting of Lanzhou, Habíb Alláh talked with Ma Lingming so intimately, and the two were in agreement on so many issues, that the former instructed the latter in the doctrine of the Qadriyya under the cypresses at the Qubba of the Fourth Great Grandpa Hai. After three months of the first teaching, Habíb Alláh passed true religious light of the Prophet [Muhammad] to Ma Lingming, and relinquished his post as a chief of the tariqa in favor of him. At the same time he also informed him the preconditions of disseminating Sufi knowledge, and finally gave him the proofs of Sufi teaching and missionary beside the well in the backyard of Xiuheyan Mosque.¹⁶ Soon after that, Habíb Alláh departed for his home country, but on the journey he was killed by armed robberies in Suzhou [Jiuquan today] on the 1st Day of the 1st Month in Chinese Lunar Calendar, the 4th Year of Guangxu Reign [1878].¹⁷

Both documents indicate that Habíb Alláh (Fragrant Papa) came to Lanzhou of China in 1877 when Ma Lingming was twenty-five, and disseminated the Sufism originated from Yemen, Baghdad and probably Iran. If the latter two recordings are reliable, then Habíb Alláh studied Islamic mysticism in Baghdad and perhaps in Iran around the 1850s, the same time the Bábí movement was cruelly suppressed by the Iranian rulers and Bahá’ulláh along with the surviving Bábí community was exiled to Baghdad. After suffering numerous massacres, the Bábí movement went underground and continued to spread the Báb’s (and soon Bahá’u’lláh’s) teachings. In my opinion, Habíb Alláh might have made contact with the disciples of Bahá’ullah or with other Bábís in Baghdad, Iran, or Central Asia and received some mystical Islamic ideas from the teaching of Báb.

If we combine all three sources into an ordered event we find they are very similar: a “Papa” with various names arrived in Lanzhou from Arabia and Iran or India via Central Asia and the Kashghar region in Xinjiang in a mission of teaching Sufi mystic Islam mingled with Bábí teachings. That mission initiated Ma Lingming who was then twenty-five and who, fifteen years later at age forty, founded a new Sufi group. These sources also report that this Papa was killed in an armed robbery on his way back to Arabia (more likely Iran) after he had initiated Ma Lingming. So there are two possibilities which I believe can be deduced from the above materials. First, Papa Jing Duzi (Wafiya al-Dín) and Papa Habíb Alláh could be the same person, since both share the title “papa” with Fragrant Papa, or Great Fragrant Papa. The confusion in names would be due to the length in time in which the oral narration and manuscripts of the followers of Ling Ming Tang have confused the names in their historical memorials. Second, Papa Jing Duzi and Fragrant Papa Salim or Habíb Alláh may be

two different Sufi or Bábí teachers who transmitted their mystical knowledge in different times. While both possibilities have historical merit, I think the former is more likely.

So what is the most likely real name of “Papa,” and where was he from? These details are not as important, because all available sources agree on the facts that a Papa (or Papas) with “fragrant smell” from Iran (or Arabia or India) who studied in Baghdad and Yemen came to Lanzhou. He (or they) passed Sufi creeds, including the Báb’s teachings, to Ma Lingming, the founder of Ling Ming Tang, sometime between 1877 and 1893, probably closer to 1877.

However, other materials which attempt to trace the event of Fragrant Papa’s meeting Ma Lingming have shown a wide range diversity in dates and names. For example, one says:

Reviewing the silsila of the Founder, Ma Lingming’s Sufi teaching lineage starts in the period of the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing dynasties [i.e. in the Seventeenth Century]. Hamíd al-Dín, born in Hamadán in South Xinjiang [sic], the Grand Fragrant Founder or the descendant of the Prophet Muhammad in the twenty-fifth generations, accepted the Sufi doctrines of the Naqshbandíyya and Qadriyya orders in Yemen and Baghdad. He revealed the secrets of Alláh on Truth to Ancestral Grandfather Hai, Great Grandfather Mi, Great Grandfather Ma, Young Akhund Shi, Grandfather Mu, and Belly Bai. Seven generations’ disciples had spread the Light. They had the task of safeguarding the seal and waiting for the wali [a reference to Ma Ling Ming] to receive the seal.¹⁸

The author of this source mistakenly located Hamadán in South Xinjiang; it is actually in Iran. He also confused the event of Fragrant Papa’s meeting Ma Lingming with the time that Khoja Apak, the leader of the White Mountainous Group in East Turkestan, came to Northwest China to teach Khafíyya Sufism among the Hui Sufis during his life in exile following a failed power struggle with the Black Mountainous Group.¹⁹

Ma Wanrui, a ninety-three-year-old disciple of the second Ling Ming Tang shaykh, also believes that Hamíd al-Dín, who lived in the Seventeenth Century, transmitted the *silsila* to Ling Ming Tang, which was founded in the turning of the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries:

The Sufi doctrine passed by the First Founder of Ling Ming Tang is a true teaching of the true religion. It was instructed by the Shaykhs in Yemen and Baghdad [in the period of the Song Dynasty, 960-1279] to Hamíd al-Dín, the tariqa’s Ancestry Fragrant Founder [in the period of the Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644], and was inherited by Habíb Alláh [in the period of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty, 1736-1795].²⁰

He adds that “[Ling Ming Tang]’s name is *ismu dhat* [Arabic: “name attribute”], its *silsila* is that Fragrant Shaykh Azíz Hamíd al-Dín Amír from Yemen and Baghdad transmitted his personal teachings [secrets] to Haníf al-Dín Alláh [Ma Lingming, founder of Ling Ming Tang].”²¹

The obvious problem here is, how can a person who lived in the Seventeenth Century have met a person who lived in the Nineteenth Century? Or how can a Sufi who lived in the period of the Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries have taught Sufism to someone who lived in the period of the Fourteenth and the Seventeenth Centuries? Ma Wanrui as a Sufi has no doubts about this, for he thinks that Alláh can create miracles and can help two remote generations to communicate through the Holy Spirit. In the Sufi tradition Khidr, the hidden prophet in Islam, can convey communication between the dead and the living, between people across a span of several generations, between the Prophet Muhammad and His followers, and between two remote regions. In my field notes, I find the content of the *silsila* of Ling Ming Tang which includes this declaration:

After the Prophet Muhammad was born, the transmission of the True Path was restored to the sealed stage for ten thousand prophets. The true secret was passed to the four Caliphs and then passed to the saints among the offspring of succeeding generations of the Prophet Muhammad. The descendants of the Prophet in the twenty-fifth generations from the Naqshbandíyya and the Qadriyya passed it to Hamíd al-Dín, the Great Fragrant Founder of Hamadani Qubba in Kashghar. He passed down the silsila to the disciples for the eleven generations that inherited the secret and the seal. The personal transmission will last to the end of time, and the True Light of Qutbu Osh will guide the True Path forever.²²

On the basis of the *silsila* of Ling Ming Tang and the other sources of Sufi mysticism transmitted to Ma Ling Ming in Lanzhou, we can summarize the scattered information and clues concerning Fragrant Papa to reach the following likely conclusions:

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Real name: Either Jing Duzi or Wafiya al-Dín; or Salim or Habíb Alláh or Hamíd al-Dín; or Azíz Hamíd al-Dín Amír.

Date: either the Sixteenth-Seventeenth Centuries or the Eighteenth-Nineteenth Centuries.

Itinerary of his travels: Arabia, Yemen, Baghdad to “Daihailan wenyi” (which, though identified as being in India, is more likely Tehran) to Hamadan to Kashghar to Lanzhou (where he met Ma Lingming).

Knowledge transmission: Qadriyya to mystical Sufism to Qadriyya and Naqshbandíyya [Khafiyya] including Bábí teachings.

I notice in my fieldwork at Ling Ming Tang that the date of Fragrant Papa’s murder in Suzhou on his way back to his homeland Arabia (actually, Iran) has been memorialized by the believers. This annual memorial service is always held on the 1st Day of the 1st Month in Chinese Lunar Calendar. Such a memorial service strongly indicates that Fragrant Papa was an actual historical figure. According to the death date commemorated by the followers of Ma Lingming, I believe that *Lanzhou Lingming gongbei jiao shi* (History of Lingming Qubba *tariqa* in Lanzhou), a manuscript circulated among the followers of Ling Ming Tang in the early part of the Twentieth Century, and Ma Xiangzhen’s work *Qingzhen zhexue qiyu lu* (Notes of the Wonderful Words in Islamic Philosophy), are both more credible and perhaps much closer to the fact. According to the *silsila* of Ling Ming Tang, Fragrant Papa Hamíd al-Dín, after leaving his home of Hamadan, had studied for a time in Baghdad and Yemen before departing for Lanzhou where in 1877 he initiated Ma Lingming with Sufi ideas and Bábí teachings. Such a description has great similarity to the figure of Habíb Alláh or Papa Jing Duzi, who taught Ma Lingming the Sufi knowledge and Bábí teaching. Therefore, Habíb Alláh or Papa Jing Duzi was actually Persian, not an Arab or a Turk from Kashghar. The sources recorded Habíb Alláh or Salim as being Arab because he had studied in Baghdad and Yemen for eighteen years and he had command of the Arabic language. People thought him coming from Kashghar Qubba because he traveled from Iran via Kashghar in South Xinjiang (East Turkestan) and perhaps lived at the Khoja Apak Qubba for some time. That is the reason why the followers of Ling Ming Tang confused him with Khoja Apak, Shaykh of the White Mountains group, who lived in the period of the Seventeenth to the Eighteenth Centuries. Therefore, they mistakenly confused the names, the span of time, the different generations, and the different locations. The divergence in name, date and location concerning Great Fragrant Papa’s teaching to Ma Lingming from various sources is also certainly due to such a long time procession of the oral and written historic composition in which many believers of Ling Ming Tang in different generations have participated. Errors and confusion could certainly have occurred.

Now we turn to the question of the possible relation—or more exactly, the linkage—between Fragrant Papa or Papa Jing Duzi and the Báb’s teachings which swept through Iran in the mid-Nineteenth Century. My explanation of their connection is based on following logical conceptions: First, the region of Iran was always one of the main sources for transmission of Islam to China. The Silk Road that linked the Persian Chinese Empires in trade and cultural contacts was the main channel through which Islam entered China, and Muslim merchants, soldiers, and priests came from Iran to China. In this way, the Persian and Central Asian Muslims played a prominent role in forming the Muslim community in China. Even the Silk Road stopped functioning as the main Eurasian trade route after the Indian Ocean became the dominant route for marine navigation in the Fifteenth Century. Its passage remains as the arch-line for the Muslim hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and for transmission of Sufi mystical teaching between China and the Islamic world. This is evidenced by the many Persian living habits and Persian vocabulary which have become deeply rooted in the cultural life of Muslim communities in China in the historic process of the Persian Islam’s penetration into China.

Second, the regions of Iran and Central Asia were not only home to many of Sufi orders which later took root in China, but were themselves crucial to the dissemination of Sufi teachings. The main Sufi orders, including the Naqshbandíyya, Qadriyya, Kubrawiyya, and Chistiyya, have all traced their original sources and their founders to Persia or Persianized Central Asia.²³

Third, China was the region historically to which the Shí’a and other religious minorities in Iran would flee for safety when they faced religious persecution and suppression. This happened in the time of the Umayyads cracking down on the Shí’a movement, in the time of the Abbasids persecuting the Khawalijis, and in the time of the Safavids suppressing Sufism. So it is most likely that, after the Iranian authorities executed the Báb and

suppressed His movement across the whole of Iran, some Bábís may have fled to China to escape persecution from the Qajar rulers and even for their very survival. Bábí refugees, or those of their childrens’ generation, may have taken the names of Fragrant Papa (implicating spice trade activity) or Hamíd al-Dín or Papa Jing Duzi etc. They stepped on the ancient Silk Road through Central Asia via Kashghar to Lanzhou, a place on this famous route but with a concentrated Muslim population, for living or religious teaching since they had a good command of Arabic and native Persian knowledge. Such linguistic skill in Arabic and Persian was always deemed by Chinese Muslims as a good virtue for a cleric’s qualification or nomination in community.

Fourth, because Bábí teaching would be regarded as heresy and Shí‘a Islam already received hostility among the Sunni Muslims in China that time, Fragrant Papa (i.e. Jing Duzi or Salim or Habíb Alláh or Hamíd al-Dín) had to pretend to be a Sufi and teach Sufism among the Sufis in China, and meanwhile tried to continue his Bábí doctrine’s dissemination among the Chinese Muslim communities. On the basis of such possibilities, it is conceivable that Babism could have been transmitted from Iran to Ling Ming Tang, one of the Sufi orders in Northwest China along the old Silk Road in the late Nineteenth Century. Anyway, the phenomena that the spiritual seeds from Persia were carried to China through the social, cultural and economic channels have been repeated many times in that region in past and present.

Before we make more explicit the logical link between the Báb’s teachings and the Sufi thought of Ma Lingming, we will introduce briefly the history of the Prophet/Founder of the Bábí Faith and Its arising in Iran in the Nineteenth Century. The founder of the Bábí movement, Sayyid ‘Alí Muhammad “the Báb” (1820-1851), was born into a merchant family in Shiraz, Iran. He briefly attended lectures of a famous scholar, Sayyid Kázim Rašhtí, head of the Shaykhí school in Karbala, Iraq. The Shaykhís advocated the creed that the Mahdí, the Twelfth Imám, the Salvation Lord of Islam, would soon come to the world. They thought that after one thousand years of disappearance, “occultation,” the Mahdí would return to this world when it was full of laments and unhappiness, and he would right the world’s inequalities.

In 1844 Sayyid ‘Alí Muhammad declared himself the Báb and the One Whose coming Sayyid Kázim Rašhtí had promised. He revealed a book entitled *Bayán* (Arabic and Persian: “exposition” or “meditation”). The mission of the Báb was to prepare the people of the world for the coming of the Mahdí, “He Whom God will make manifest.” In 1848, following a series of Bábí upheavals in Iran, the Sháh put the Báb in jail in Mákú and later Chihríq, and executed Him in 1851. The Bábí movement was severely suppressed by the Sháh and the ruling classes in Iran. Afterward, many Bábís escaped to the marginal areas around the country. No doubt some Bábí believers escaped to Central Asia and India where they survived under the shelter of the Bahá’í Faith later on. It is very possible that some Bábís came to China and hid as Sufis living among the Muslims in China to avoid the persecution in Iran.

Another reason has strongly convinced me that a linkage between Ma Lingming or Sufi order in China with the Bábí teaching from Iran is very possible if we refer to the following historical fact. Dr. Momen E-mailed the following to me: “I have been doing some research regarding a Bahá’í teacher who traveled very extensively in Asia. His name was Jamál Effendi. He traveled to Ladakh and then on towards Yaqand [Shache of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region today]. This route probably took him southeast at first skirting the Karakorum Range and entering Tibet. As a consequence of frost-bite which affected his feet, he was forced to remain in Yaqand for six months, probably the winter of 1888-9 or 1889-90. I wonder whether Ma Lingming may have met him there, heard about the Bahá’í teachings and then taken this back to Gansu Province.”²⁴ As a matter of fact, Ma Lingming had never traveled to Xinjiang. However, his disciples had traveled extensively in Xinjiang (for this point we will discuss below).

So following such a clue provided by Dr. Momen it is certainly possible that the Báb’s teaching arrived in Xinjiang, China’s East Turkestan in late Nineteenth Century through different routes. Bábí or Bahá’í teachers identified as Papa Jing Duzi (Wafiya al-Dín), Habíb Alláh, Hamíd al-Dín, and Salim and possibly disciples of Jamál Effendi in Xinjiang, disseminated Bábí and Sufi teachings to Ma Lingming in Lanzhou. Alternatively, Ma Lingming’s disciples may have gone Xinjiang and met Jamál Effendi or his believers, and thereby been exposed to Bábí thought. So anyway, these events begin a new chapter in Sufi orders’ history in China. If Jamál Effendi really taught his Bahá’í Faith to some Uighurs in South Xinjiang, it also likely that Habíb Alláh or Salim, or Hamíd al-Dín, one of the disciples of Jamál Effendi, revealed a mystical idea (Báb teaching) to Ma Lingming in Lanzhou when he was forty years old (1893). Perhaps, Ma Lingming received Báb teaching sev-

eral times in his life. Just as reflected in the comments by Wang Shoutian: someone from outside China transmitted all Sufi doctrines from various Sufi orders, including Bábí teaching, to Ma Lingming, the founder of Ling Ming Tang.²⁵

Why Ma Lingming accepted the Báb's Teachings

After having read all the materials I had collected and acquired during the investigation in Lanzhou, I found myself asking, why it was only Ma Lingming, and not other Sufis or Sufi groups in Lanzhou or in Gansu, who accepted the Báb's teachings transmitted by Papa(s) from Iran via Xinjiang? Why is it only in Ling Ming Tang's Sufism that the concepts of Báb can be found, and in all other Sufi orders in China we cannot find it? To answer this question we must understand the personality of Ma Lingming, his background, his living time, and the miserable sufferings Ling Ming Tang experienced afterward in the development of his order.

Ma Lingming's real name was Ma Yilong, and Lingming (Chinese: "soul enlightenment"; Ling Ming Tang actually takes after Ma Lingming's given name) was his pen name. His Sufi name was Qutb Hanif al-Dín Alláh (Arabic: "the true axis of God's religion"). He was born in the provincial capital, Lanzhou, in 1853 (the 20th Day of the 11th Month of Chinese Lunar Calendar, the 3rd Year of Xianfeng Reign)²⁶ and died at age of seventy-three in 1925 (the 19th Day of the 3rd Month in Chinese Lunar Calendar, the 14th Year of the Republic). At the age of seven Ma began studying Chinese and Arabic in school, the *madrassa*, and became the class's best pupil. After he grew up he became a very pure Muslim who observed the Quranic teachings and Sunna. At the age of ten he lived through the Hui Muslim rebellion in Shaanxi and Gansu provinces against the Manchu Empire. He was fourteen when, in the 5th Year of Tongzhi Reign (1866), the Military Commander of Lanzhou led a mutiny during which people suffered a serious famine. In such an environment Ma accompanied his mother fleeing from home for the safety of their lives. They settled in Ningding (Guanghe County today). His mother died in the following year and "he had to work as a laborer for a rich family during the daytime and recite the Quran and other Sufi texts in the evening. Although life was very hard and the work was tiring, he had never given up prayer."²⁷

Ma Lingming later migrated to Yuzhong County and from there he moved farther to Hezhou (today's Linxia) of Gansu, afterwards sojourning in Xining of Qinghai. He spent time as a beggar and at same time sought knowledge from religious teachers. When thirty-five years old (the 14th Year of Guangxu Reign, or 1888), he was invited to the post of Imám (Chinese *jiaozhang*, or "religious chief") of Yejiqou Mosque in Yuzhong of Gansu, and later to the post of Imám of other mosques in different places in that province. "He emphasized externally the five pillars of Islam sanctioned by the Shari 'a, and made great efforts internally in *tariqa* training and meditation. He was ready to distribute the alms that his believers handed him to the poor as charity and he never kept money for his personal pocket."²⁸

At forty-two years of age, when the turmoil of Region of He River and Huang River broke out in 1895, Ma Lingming, carrying his daughters, fled to Lanzhou with his wife, and rented out two rooms for living. At that time he had already received Qadriyya teaching from Salim (more likely Papa Jing Duzi), Khafiyya teaching from Habíb Alláh, and teachings of the Báb. "After he concentrated wholly in spreading the creed of *awla*' path Ma Lingming often begged food as a dervish (Sufi wanderer) to make his living. He would stop to beg as soon as he got minimal food for his family living. If someone gave him clothes and money, he would decline the offer. He sometimes sang songs to himself and danced alone, and would often be seen playing games with children in a lane or on the street. He was so innocent and simple-minded that he always acted like a young boy." "He would not be angry when he was beaten, nor when abuse was shouted at him, and he was carefree about being mocked in public. There was always a smile on his face whenever he met any situations, and he never sought revenge for others' mischief against him. People called him a "madman." But whenever someone was confused or had troubles and came to him for consultation, he would illustrate the meaning by present reality, or tell a story of the past, or cite a current example to let the other person understand for himself or herself what the truth was. At first people might not comprehend what his meaning, but people saw the signs from the facts in Ma's illustration later on." He came to be respected and revered by many people.²⁹

Until his death Ma Lingming had always lived a very spare life and contributed food, clothing, and money—whatever he possessed—to those who were in need and poor. Even during his late years, when Ling Ming Tang had developed into an influential Sufi group in Lanzhou and was receiving ample donations from its believers,

Ma Lingming continued to keep his life as simple as in his early stages of life. Because he and his followers lived such an austere life and often helped the poor and weak, Ling Ming Tang was highly attractive to the many people who lived in a society full of injustice, corruption, exploitation, repression, immorality, war turmoil, and natural disasters. To these people who felt so hopeless in such a miserable life, Ma Lingming's Sufi and Bábí teachings were a shining beacon for their future. This is reminiscent of the history of the Báb and Bahá'ulláh, whose Faiths found fertile ground amongst a populace that could no longer tolerate further repression by the ruling authorities in Iran. The Báb, Bahá'ulláh, and Ma Lingming were all true representatives of the poor people and lower classes in the society. They in different ways protested society's injustices, and challenged the authority of tyrants. That's why Ma Lingming easily incorporated Bábí teachings: the religions of Báb and Ma Lingming alike were often first adopted by peasants and by society's lower- and middle-classes, those who were deprived of the rights of the basic living means.

Ma Lingming disseminated his Sufi teaching mainly among the merchants and traders, and the peddlers who sold food on the streets of the city. They belonged to the lower- and middle-classes, and they followed him in large number. In the rural countryside, Ma Lingming's followers were largely composed of poor peasants.³⁰ This is another similarity between Babism and Ma Lingming's Ling Ming Tang. The Báb came from a merchant family and the social base of His following was largely lower- to middle-class, including a number of merchants, traders, and peddlers. The similar background and the almost same social basis could relate two religious movements closely in two remote regions through some intermediate role: the refugees of Bábí movement and Bahá'í teachers transmitted a mystical creed consisting of an amalgam of Bábí teachings and Sufism, to a Sufi order in Northwest China which faced the similar social crisis Báb had faced decades earlier.

The Bábí movement was suppressed and persecuted by the authorities in Iran. The same fate befell the believers of Ling Ming Tang in its history. As Ma Lingming began teaching Bábí ideas and a new Sufi creed, he and his religion was charged by others as "madmen" spreading heresy, and they wanted the authorities to arrest him and execute him.³¹ The Order was eventually closed and the body of Ma Lingming was moved out of the *qubba* in 1958. Ten years later the authorities demolished the *qubba*, and a state-owned factory occupied its place during the Cultural Revolution of China. Many religious clerics of Ling Ming Tang were put in jail and some of them were persecuted and even killed.³² Wang Shoutian was incarcerated for many years, and in the 1970s was himself sentenced to death, escaping execution only accident.³³ Not until the 1980s was Ling Ming Tang allowed to resume its religious activity in public.

Ling Ming Tang and its Connection to Hami and Kashghar, Xinjiang

As demonstrated above, both Chinese sources and information given me by Dr. Momen testify that Bábí or Bahá'í teachings came from Iran and Central Asia via Kashghar or South Xinjiang and influenced the Sufi creed of Ling Ming Tang in Lanzhou founded by Ma Lingming in the late Nineteenth Century. Papa Jing Duzi, or Habíb Alláh and Hamíd Al-Dín visited the Kashghar Qubba (Qubba of Khoja Apak) and stayed there for a time. The early Bahá'í teacher Jamál Effendi traveled through Pakistan's Kashmir Ladakh to Yarqand in South Xinjiang. Jamál Effendi's Bábí and Bahá'í beliefs, which may have become commingled with Sufi ideas, were transmitted to his Uighur disciples in Yarqand. From there, Bábí teachings filtered to Kashghar, Hami, and other parts of Xinjiang. The geographic location of Xinjiang has thus played a crucial role in the transmission of Bábí teaching between Iran and Lanzhou of China, eventually resulting in the creation of a new Sufi order. Because of this historical connection between Lanzhou of Ling Ming Tang and the Sufi saints' *qubbas* in Xinjiang, Ling Ming Tang kept sending its missionaries and religious envoys to Xinjiang, particularly to Hami and Kashghar, to disseminate its teachings and seek new followers. Ling Ming Tang in Lanzhou regards Kashghar and Hami in Xinjiang as the primary source of its Sufi teaching. Because of this missionary and teaching-studying activity, Ling Ming Tang set up a sub-branch in Hami. It was named Kao Fu Tang, modeled on its founder Kao Fu who was one of the main disciples of Ma Lingming in Lanzhou. From Hami, religious personnel were sent to the southern Xinjiang for the further missionary work.

Following are the abstracts from the materials of Ling Ming Tang's history to show how a branch was formed in Hami, how the contacts with Kashghar were maintained, how the Muslims in Xinjiang converted to Ling Ming Tang's teaching, and how Ling Ming Tang Sufism penetrated to the South Xinjiang where Ling

Ming Tang receiving its spiritual influence.

Kao Fu, one of the disciples of Ma Lingming, under his Master's instruction embarked upon missionary work to disseminate Ma Lingming's Sufism among the Muslims of Hami, in Xinjiang. Many Hui and Uighurs in Xinjiang converted to Ling Ming Tang. Therefore, the Hui and Uighur Muslims in many areas of Xinjiang were the followers of Ling Ming Tang. Even today the Western Courtyard of Ling Ming Tang [i.e., its branch in Hami] has more than 20,000 followers.³⁴

In spring of the 11th Year of the Republic [1922], the founder of Ling Ming Tang ordered his disciple Shan Zijiu³⁵ to Hami in Xinjiang for missionary work.³⁶ Shan Zijiu began his journey from Hami to the Kafi Cave on the 1st Day of the 1st Month in Chinese Lunar Calendar, the 12th Year of the Republic [1923]. He arrived at the cave after a few days of walking, thereby fulfilling this pilgrimage, and chanted the *du'á* [Arabic: "prayer"]. He went on to Kuche where he visited the *qubba* of *Hidaya al-Dín Alláh* [Khoja Apak]. This *qubba* was the holiest place for Sufism in China. There was an old *Shaykh* with the family name Ma who, at the age of 120, was still in quite good health. He congratulated Shan Zijiu with a Sufi gesture as he met him. All believers around prayed in *da'ir* [Arabic: "circle"] by kneeling down, and they chanted the Quranic verses for good wishes. Afterwards, the old *Shaykh* asked to look at a classic Sufi text Shan Zijiu had brought with him. Shan handed him the scroll, and the *Shaykh* unfolded it. Tears came to his eyes as he recited the passages of the text. He closed the scrolls and cried that the holiest doctrine had enlightened China. After the prayer, the believers requested Shan Zijiu to lead the ritual of holding hands in *dhikr* or *salát* [Arabic: "obligatory Muslim prayer"]. The *Shaykh* then issued the traveling certificate to Shan for his return back to Hami.³⁷

Shan Zijiu reported his pilgrimage to the Kafi Cave and his visiting the Kuche *qubba* to the Founder of Ling Ming Tang [Ma Lingming]. The founder was so happy after he heard of these experiences that he gave his instruction [ijaz]: "Now the way of *awla'* ["friends of God," i.e. Sufi saints] is brightened!"

In the first ten days of the 5th Month in Chinese Lunar Calendar [1923], the founder of Ling Ming Tang ordered Shan Zijiu to go to Hami again to collect alms for construction of the *qubba* [in Lanzhou].³⁸

In the 14th Year of the Republic [1925], the Founder of Ling Ming Tang passed away. After the commemoration of the 40th Day of the deceased [Founder], Shan went to Hami with Ma Yuming to announce the news of the Founder's passing to the believers there. Shan performed the commemoration of the One Hundredth Day of the Founder's decease with the believers in Hami.³⁹

Even in the 1950s and in the 1960s, during a time when religious activities were not fully eradicated but were severely restricted by the authorities in China, Ling Ming Tang still sent its missionaries to Xinjiang, particularly southern Xinjiang to disseminate its Sufi doctrine clandestinely among the Uighur and Hui Muslims.⁴⁰ Also Professor Du Shaoyuan from the Xinjiang School of the Communist Party heard, during his historical investigation in the South Xinjiang in the early 1950s, that there was a Bábí group among the various Sufi orders in the Turkic-speaking Muslim communities.⁴¹

Ling Ming Tang Today

As mentioned, Wang Shoutian is the Third Successor of Ma Lingming and the current leader of Ling Ming Tang. He began his speech celebrating the opening ceremonies of the rebuilt wooden framework of the Eight Diagram Palace of Ling Ming Tang *Qubba* with these words:

What is Ling Ming Tang? Ling Ming Tang is a banner-pole set up on the earth by Alláh's true religion Islam; It is the axis of heaven and earth, the resting place of the Noble Prophet and the focus of pilgrimage for many *dustani* [Persian: "friends with faith"].⁴²

Such a remark certainly incites criticism from the traditional Sunni Muslim communities, especially the *Ikhwani*⁴³ communities in Northwest China, which regard Sufis like Ling Ming Tang as heretics.⁴⁴ Still, Ling Ming Tang has managed to develop dramatically, even in the antagonistic environment of the last twenty years.

After the Cultural Revolutions, as religion gradually resumed activities under a new policy taken by a more pragmatic Communist Party, the Lanzhou Municipal Government agreed to return the site of the demolished *qubba* to Ling Ming Tang in the early 1980s. However, by that time the site housed a small factory. This pro-

posal was turned down by Wang Shoutian who thought such a plan would be too costly for the factory and the many workers who would lose their jobs in its re-location. He also recognized that the old site of Ling Ming Tang *qubba* was too small and would not meet the demands of the expanding community for long. Instead of seeking to regain the old property, he suggested that the government allocate a bare hill on Wuxing Ping (Pentagon Apron) in the suburb of Lanzhou for the new Ling Ming Tang *qubba*. The local authorities promptly approved his proposal, so without seeking compensation from the factory Wang Shoutian led his believers in 1984 to settle down on a bare hill where there was no water, no grass, no electricity, and not even a road. Wuxing Ping was a place well known by local people as “stones rolling when wind blows,” a slope without life.⁴⁵ Life was harsh at first for the followers of Ling Ming Tang who took up residence there. Wang Shoutian recalled those days as being “so cold in the winter, and hot with so many mosquito in the summer as we lived in two shabby sheds. Every day we sent people going down the hill to fetch water for our basic consumption.”⁴⁶

Soon they began to work over and to make green this bare hill. They planted various trees including fruit trees; they built a road to the top of hill; they dug a deep well with the assistance of a government agency; and they built a water pool for drinking and irrigating trees and gardens. They spent 10,000 Yuan, their entire savings at the time, to buy five cows and six sheep from Xinjiang for breeding in 1986. Fifteen years has passed since then, and when I visited Ling Ming Tang recently I saw their herd had nearly reached to 100 cows and 600 sheep. The cows produce 500 kilograms of fresh milk per day. The net income of selling milk to the inhabitants in Lanzhou is about 1,500 Yuan every day, and with that money Ling Ming Tang has bought several trucks and vehicles for transportation.⁴⁷

In 1985, Ling Ming Tang started the construction work for its new *qubba* complex, using funds entirely collected from the donation of its believers. After sixteen years' endeavors, Ling Ming Tang has completed construction of a grand complex of buildings which includes a mosque with a size of 2,500 square meters by 30 meters in height that can hold one thousand people performing prayer; the Eight Diagram Palace in which the remains of Ma Lingming and Shan Ziju are buried; the Front Hall where the believers hold memorial services for Fragrant Papa, the Founder, and his successors; the Madrasa Building in which religious students study Sufi knowledge; the monastery residence; the wing buildings; student dormitories; the Five Arch Rostrum; Dining Hall and gardens, and more. The entire *qubba* is 40,000 square meters in size and contains about 16,000 square meters of architectural area. Standing on the top of Pentagon Apron, it looks like a large, tall, and grand stronghold rising up from the surrounding landscape, where it is looked up to by all. Once the encompassing brick walls had been built, the *qubba* became the largest *qubba* and mosque complex in Lanzhou.⁴⁸ The believers of Ling Ming Tang, led by Wang Shoutian, have invested 20,000,000 Yuan to make green fourteen hectares of bare land on the hill, planted 300,000 trees, and built three Chinese rose gardens. Its beauty has attracted more than 10,000 tourists from both China and abroad for the last few years and become one of the gems of Lanzhou's tourist industry.⁴⁹

At present Ling Ming Tang claims approximately 300,000 followers in China.⁵⁰ The believers with their families live in Gansu, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Qinghai, Henan, and other regions.⁵¹ The headquarters of Ling Ming Tang is located in Lanzhou, but it has several branch hospices in Guyuan, Ningxia and in Hami, Xinjiang. The followers of Ling Ming Tang in the Minhe County of the Qinghai Province founded a branch hall in the 1990s, but it was banned because its establishment did not receive the permission (*ijaz*) from Shaykh Wang Shoutian.⁵² Currently, Wang Shoutian has recruited twenty-six *mawlláh* (Persian and Turkish: “Madrasa students”) and several teachers to engage in Islamic Sufism education. Religious students and pious followers, including a group of young people who come from different parts of the country, are living at the Ling Ming Tang *qubba*. They study and work as volunteers for the Order on Pentagon Apron. The once-bare hill has become a large, beautiful garden. There is a remarkable similarity between Ling Ming Tang and the Bahá'í Faith, for Bahá'í believers around the world have come together to fund the construction of the “Arc,” a complex of beautiful buildings and gardens in Haifa, Israel, which also functions as the Bahá'í World Center. My pilgrimage to the Arc in 1998 left the same indelible impressions on me as my visits to the Ling Ming Tang *qubba*.

While resembling the Bahá'í Faith, Ling Ming Tang's Sufism has also absorbed other spiritual elements from other religions such as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Ling Ming Tang maintained good relations with the clerics of Buddhism and Taoism during the times of Ma Ling Ming and Shan Ziju. When Shan Ziju

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passed away, Taoist monks came to Ling Ming Tang for mourning.⁵³ Even today, Wang Shoutian often makes friends with the Taoists in Lanzhou and holds dialogue with them in religious doctrine. All *shaykhs* of Ling Ming Tang over three generations keep their life in celibacy in the Order. This is different from other Muslim communities, and is one of the main reasons traditional Sunni groups accuse Ling Ming Tang of heresy.

Although Ling Ming Tang's headquarters in Lanzhou functions primarily as a Sufi hospice, it also maintains a wide-ranging connection with society. Ling Ming Tang has frequently contributed funds to help the high schools in the poor mountainous areas where mainly the minority ethnic groups reside. It has also often donated money, clothing, food and other materials to areas struck by natural disasters such as earthquake, flood, and drought.⁵⁴ Like the Bahá'í Faith, Ling Ming Tang tries its best to maintain an approach that is not anti-government in its political line. *Shaykh* Wang Shoutian is very skillful in keeping on good terms with the authorities at all levels. He holds several official positions, such as Deputy Chairman of Islamic Association of Gansu Province, the Standing Member of the Political Consultation Committee of Lanzhou Municipality, and Deputy Chairman of Islamic Association of Lanzhou. Several celebrated leaders, including the provincial governor, the provincial general secretary of the Communist Party, and even a daughter of the late Chairman Mao Zedong came to visit Ling Ming Tang. Their words of dedication are carved in calligraphy on wooden tablets and hung on the gates and the rostrum of the Order. By this way Ling Ming Tang maintains a solid social base and expands its influence in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-spiritual society. Perhaps the Bábí teachings mixed in with its Sufism have contributed to Ling Ming Tang's success and to its great revival in post-Mao and post-Deng China. Like the Bahá'í Faith, Ling Ming Tang strives to build a beautiful garden on the earth for its followers and for the whole of mankind.

Conclusion and Summary

It is very likely that the teachings of the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh impacted upon the Sufi doctrine of Ling Ming Tang in Lanzhou, China in the period of the end of the Nineteenth to the early Twentieth Centuries. Such a hypothesis is based on the aforementioned fact that in Ma Lingming's teaching of Sufism he promulgated the concept of the Báb, the Mahdí who instructed Ma Lingming to lead his followers on the righteous path toward God. The concept of "Báb" has not been found among other Sufi orders in China which, along with the traditional Sunni Hui majority, accused the idea of the Báb as embraced by Ling Ming Tang as "the astray" and "[heretical] Shí'a." The second reason to support the hypothesis of the linkage between the Bábí movement and Ling Ming Tang is that, according to both written and oral recordings from Ling Ming Tang a Sufi by name of Grand Fragrant Papa Jing Duzi (Jidaz?), or Habíb Alláh, or Hamíd al-Dín, or Salim, or maybe several Sufis with these names came to Lanzhou from Iran by way of Baghdad, India and Kashghar to initiate Ma Lingming in Sufi and Bábí teachings.

The sources from Ling Ming Tang are also compatible with Bahá'í reports that an Iranian Bahá'í named Jamál Effendi had traveled extensively in India and Central Asia, coming as far as Yaqand in South Xinjiang in the latter Nineteenth Century, disguised as a Sufi dervish but disseminating Bahá'í teachings.⁵⁵ From this point of view it is possible that one of Jamál Effendi's disciples in South Xinjiang traveled to Lanzhou to proclaim the advent of and the teachings of the Báb to Ma Lingming, who subsequently launched a new Sufi order in Northwest China.

The argument of the possible linkage of the Bábí movement in Iran with Ling Ming Tang in China has been strongly supported by the historical phenomenon that China, particularly Northwest China, was often a niche for those who fled religious persecution in Iran. So it is not surprising that persecuted Bábís (and later, Bahá'ís) would flee to China, seeking refuge from slaughter. Finally, the paper discusses the similarities between the Bábí movement in Iran and Ling Ming Tang in China to strengthen the argument that both mystical movements have had at least some interaction. These similarities include that both religious organizations have almost the same social basis and social background, both advocate tolerance of other religious traditions and an attitude of inclusiveness toward them, both make great efforts to build a beautiful garden on the earth, and both came to advocate a neutral but friendly attitude toward the civil government. Finally, the paper put the interaction between the Bábí movement and Ling Ming Tang into the broader context of the encounters and contacts between Persian and Chinese religions which history records. It shows that no culture or civilization can develop in isolation, and that interaction between two different religious traditions or among the several spiritual

cultures creates the opportunities for dialogue and compromise necessary for human beings to bridge the differences which will inevitably arise in our globalized future. Only by following this guideline are any spiritual groups such as Bahá’í and Ling Ming Tang able to flourish and achieve their goals.

Notes

- 1) I am grateful to the Haj Mehdi Arjmand Memorial Fund for its very kind support to make this fieldwork possible and support my traveling expenses to London for the 35th Session of the Irfán Colloquium. Also I am deeply indebted to Dr. Moojan Momen for his carefulness in reading this paper and giving comments and suggestion to correct the errors in the text.
- 2) Concerning Baghdad Mr. Wang Yuguang, the older brother of Wang Shoutian who is the current leader of Ling Ming Tang, confirmed to me that “Our teaching came from Baghdad, for this we have the evidence to testify the true fact.” See the recording of my interview with him, on Jan. 25, 2001.
- 3) Ma Xiangzhen: *Qingzhen zhexue qiyu lu* (Notes of Wonderful Words in Islamic Philosophy), a manuscript hand-copied by Yan Qifeng, p. 82 and p. 195. These citations are included in Ma Tong’s book *Zhongguo Yisilan jiaopai menhuan suyuan* (Traces of the Original Sources of Islamic Sects and Tariqas in China), Yinchuan: Ningxia People’s Press, 1995, second edition, p. 132.
- 4) Ma Tong: *Zhongguo Yisilan jiaopai menhuan suyuan*, p. 130.
- 5) Dragon, Chinese *long*, here symbolizes the founder of Ling Ming Tang and his successors because all of them have the Chinese character *long* in their style names in the *silsila* of the Ling Ming Tang Sufi Order.
- 6) In Professor Ma Tong’s book it was recorded as “*awla*” is the *faridat* [Arabic: “imperative, obligation”] at the gateway of Báb.” See *Zhongguo Yisilan jiaopai menhuan suyuan*, p. 132.
- 7) Interviews with Mr. Wang Yuguang on Jan. 25, and Jan. 26, 2001.
- 8) Personal interview with Shaykh Wang Shoutian on Jan. 27, 2001.
- 9) *Lingming shangren zhuanlue* (Brief Biography of Saint Lingming), hand-copied by Ma Ruqi, p. 2.
- 10) Akhund Ma Zhanhai, the chief of the Western Courtyard of Ling Ming Tang in the third generation, personal interview, evening of Jan. 28, 2001.
- 11) In Persian and Turkish it also has the meaning of the representative of the hidden Imám Mahdí of Shí’a Islam, see the article “Báb” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. 2, 1st edition, Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- 12) Personal interview with Wang Shoutian, then age eighty-one, on Jan. 25, 2001.
- 13) Ma Xinglu narrated and copied by Ma Ustadh and revised by Han Shou (a Ling Ming Tang follower): *Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang dao tang jianli* (Brief Notes of Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang Qubba), May of 1994, p. 2.
- 14) Personal interview with Wang Shoutian on Jan. 25, 2001.
- 15) Ma Xiangzhen (probably a disciple of Ma Ling Ming): *Qingzhen zhexue qiyu lu* (Notes of the Wonderful Words in Islamic Philosophy), hand-copied by Yan Qifeng. P. 100.
- 16) This mosque, one of the oldest mosques in Lanzhou, remains open to this day.
- 17) *Lanzhou Lingming gongbei jiao shi* (History of Lingming Qubba *tariqa* in Lanzhou), a manuscript cited from Ma Tong: *Zhongguo Yisilan jiaopai menhuan suyuan* (Traces of the Original Sources of Islamic Sects and Tariqas in China), *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.
- 18) *Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang dao tang jianli* (Brief Notes of Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang Qubba), narrated by Ma Xinglu, hand-copied by Ma Ustadh and revised by Han Shou in May of 1994, p. 2.
- 19) For this event of Khoja Apak please refer to the book by Ma Tong: *Zhongguo Yisilan jiaopai menhuan suyuan* (Traces of the Original Sources of Islamic Sects and Tariqas in China), *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.
- 20) Ma Wanrui narrates: “The Lineage of the True Mainstream,” *Ling Ming Tang shiji* (Historical Notes of Ling Ming Tang), recorded by Ma Jieli, hand-copied in March of 1990, pp. 5-6. Akhund Ma Zhanhai holds the date of Qianlong Reign a mistake. According to his view, it should be in the late Nineteenth Century.
- 21) Ma Wanrui narrates: “The Lineage of the True Mainstream,” *Ling Ming Tang shiji*, *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 22) Extract from the inscription carved on the left brick wall of Rostrum of Three Flowers, Ling Ming Tang *Qubba*, copied by me on Jan. 25, 2001.
- 23) For this argument, please refer to Jianping Wang’s paper “Historical Connection between Persian Sufis and *Tariqas* in China,” presented to the International Conference of Mawlláh Sadra Philosophical Thinking (Tehran, May 1999).
- 24) Moojan Momen, personal E-mail dated Aug. 27, 2000.
- 25) Refer to my personal interview with Wang Shoutian on Jan. 25, 2001.
- 26) Another source gives the birth year as 1852, the 2nd Year of the Xianfeng Reign. See Ma Wanrui narrates: “Biography of Founder of Ling Ming Tang,” *Ling Ming Tang shiji*, *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 27) *Lanzhou Lingming gongbei jiao shi* (History of Lingming Qubba *tariqa* in Lanzhou), a manuscript cited from Ma Tong:

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- Zhongguo Yisilan jiaopai menhuan suyuan* (Traces of the Original Sources of Islamic Sects and *Tariqas* in China), *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.
- 28) *Lanzhou Lingming gongbei jiao shi*, *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 29) *Ibid.*
- 30) Ma Tong: *Zhongguo Yisilan jiaopai menhuan suyuan*, *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- 31) *Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang daotang jianli* (Brief Notes of Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang *Qubba*), *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 32) Ma Wanrui narrates: "The Will of Shan Zijiu, the Chief Successor of Ling Ming Tang," *Ling Ming Tang shiji*, *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 33) Personal interview with Wang Shoutian, Jan. 25, 2001.
- 34) Akhund Ma Zhanhai, the chief of the Western Courtyard of Ling Ming Tang in the third generation, personal interview, evening of Jan. 28, 2001.
- 35) Shan Zijiu (-1956), his pen name Yulong, became the Chief Successor of Ling Ming Tang in the second generation after the death of Ma Ling Ming in 1925.
- 36) Ma Renpu: *Yulong shangren luezhuan* (A Short Biography of Yulong, the disciple of the Founder), manuscript, hand-copied, pp. 5-6
- 37) Ma Renpu: *Yulong shangren luezhuan*, *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
- 38) Ma Renpu: *Yulong shangren luezhuan*, *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9
- 39) Ma Renpu: *Yulong shangren luezhuan*, *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
- 40) My personal interview with Akhund Ma, a close disciple of Wang Shoutian, the Third Successor of Ling Ming Tang, on Jan. 27, 2001. Akhund Ma comes from Qinghai Province and lives in Lanzhou now.
- 41) See Du Shaoyuan's manuscript, "A Brief Introduction of Islamic Sects in Kashghar, Yarkand and Hotan Regions," paper submitted to the First Conference of Islamic Studies in China, Beijing, September of 1986, p. 49.
- 42) Cited from *Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang daotang jianli* (Brief Notes of Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang *Qubba*), narrated by Ma Xinglu, *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 43) *ikhwan* [Arabic: "brotherhood"], a movement influenced by Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia at the end of the Nineteenth Century by Chinese Hui Muslims who returned from hajj. It remains powerful in the Muslim communities in Northwest and Southwest China today.
- 44) I noticed this kind of hostility from the neighboring communities in Lanzhou when I was doing my fieldwork. Han Shou, a member of Ling Ming Tang, told me that his ex-wife and son who belonged to *Ikhwani* group had even beaten him because they thought Ling Ming Tang a heretic organization and, therefore, a betrayal of Islam. Even Ma Zhanhai, the chief of the branch which split off from Ling Ming Tang, was accused of straying from the righteous path. (personal interviews with Han Shou on Jan. 25, 2001 and with Ma Zhanhai on Jan. 28, 2001)
- 45) Li Hao liang: "Man Sows Seed on Sleeping Ox Hill," *Lanzhou Evening Newspaper*, Oct. 26, 1999, p. 2.
- 46) My interview with Wang Shoutian, on Jan. 26, 2001, p. 2.
- 47) Lu Kaidong and Wang Zhenxiang: "Dare Changing Bare Hill into Green Garden," *Qilihe Newspaper*, Jan. 12, 2000, p. 4.
- 48) Ma Qiang: "An Investigative Study of Mosques and *Qubbas* in Lanzhou," *Hui zu yanjiu* (Journal of Hui Studies), no. 4, 2000, p. 46.
- 49) Li Hao liang: "Man Sows Seed on Sleeping Ox Hill," *Lanzhou Evening Newspaper*, Oct. 26, 1999, p. 2.
- 50) My interview with Wang Shoutian, on Jan. 26, 2001, p. 2.
- 51) People from other Sufi orders in Lanzhou say that the figure of Ling Ming Tang's population is exaggerated. However, another piece of information recorded by Ling Ming Tang says that its followers number one million. See *Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang daotang jianli* (Brief Notes of Lanzhou Ling Ming Tang *Qubba*), narrated by Ma Xinglu, *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 52) Wang Shengli, a local cadre working at Bureau of Ethnic Minority and Religion of Qilihe District, Lanzhou, supplied this information. He was a close nephew of Wang Shoutian, the Third Successor of Ling Ming Tang (personal interview, Jan. 25, 2001). Even in Beijing I met a follower of Ling Ming Tang who owns an Islamic restaurant.
- 53) Interview with Zhang Qiang who comes from Minhe County in Qinghai, Jan. 27, 2001.
- 54) Ma Wanrui narrates: "The Lineage of the True Mainstream," *Ling Ming Tang shiji* (Historical Notes of Ling Ming Tang), *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 55) Liang Guoning: "Hui Elder Care of Education for Ethnic Minorities," *Lanzhou Evening Newspaper*, Jun. 21st, 1999, p. 16; Lu Xiangxin and Liang Guoning: "Ling Ming Tang on Pentagon Apron," *Lanzhou T.V. Program Newsletter*, etc.
- 56) Moojan Momen: "An Account of the Activities and an Analysis of the Role of Jamál Effendi in the Propagation of the Bahá'í Faith throughout Asia," later published as "Jamál Effendi and the early spread of the Bahá'í Faith in South Asia."

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Appendix

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