

Udo Schaefer

Bahā'u'llāh's Unity Paradigm —
A Contribution to Interfaith Dialogue on
a Global Ethic?¹

1 Lecture given on 30 September 1994 at an international interfaith congress, organised by the University of Erlangen/Nuremberg in collaboration with Prof. Dr. Hans Küng (V. Nuremberg Forum). The topic (“Das Projekt Weltethos’ in der Erziehung”) referred to Hans Küng’s book *Projekt Weltethos*, München ²1990, the English edition of which has been published under the title *Global Responsibility. In Search of a new World Ethic*, London 1993. The German text of this paper (*Bahā'u'llāhs Einheitsparadigma — Grundlage eines Ethos ohne falsche Vereinnahmung?*) has meanwhile been published: Johannes Lähnemann (ed.), *Das Projekt Weltethos’ in der Erziehung*, Hamburg 1995. The author is most grateful to both translators for the great care taken in undertaking this time-consuming and difficult task.

I.

The Bahā'ī Faith is a religion founded in modern times which has been relatively little researched by scholars working in the field of comparative religion. Therefore, even at the risk of carrying coals to Newcastle, some basic information first. The Faith, founded in the 19th century in Iran, is an independent prophetic religion in the tradition of Near Eastern revealed religions, bearing the archetypal features we know from religious history: a herald figure who prepared the way, the Bāb, and the prophetic central figure whose advent he announced, the founder of the Bahā'ī Faith: Bahā'u'llāh.² The God whom he proclaims is “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”.³ Having its roots in the messianic promises of Islam,⁴ this religion came into being in the year 1260 A. H.⁵ with the appearance of the “Bāb”.⁶ With his proclamation of the onset of the “great Day of the Lord”,⁷ of the promised “Hour”,⁸ and his rapidly growing community, he provoked the embittered opposition of the Shī'ite clergy who had him incarcerated and eventually executed publicly in 1850. With the abrogation⁹ of the Islamic religious law, the sharī'a, and with the proclamation of a new divine law he laid the foundation for a conflict which continues to this day and which manifests itself in violent persecution in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The claim to a post-Qur'ānic revelation from God is incompatible with the orthodox Islamic dogma of the finality¹⁰ of the Qur'ānic revelation; it is a skandalon, a heresy and apostasy.¹¹

2 “Glory of God”, 1817-1892; civil name: Mīrzā Ḥusayn 'Alī Nuri; cf. J. R. Cole, in: Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. III, p. 422, key word “Baha'-Allah”; Hasan Balyuzi, *Bahā'u'llāh. The King of Glory*, Oxford 1980; Bahā'ī International Community (ed.), *Bahā'u'llāh*, London 1991; Shoghi Effendi, *God passes by*, Wilmette 1970.

3 cf. Ex. 3:6; Acts 3:13; *Qur'ān* 12:38; *Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh revealed after the Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, Haifa 1978, 17:122 (p. 265).

4 Kamran Ekbal, „Der Messianismus des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts und die Entstehung der Bahā'ī-Religion“, lecture given on 10 November 1992 in the framework of an annual lecture series „Studium Generale“ of Bonn University (publication in preparation); ditto, „Das messianische Chronogramm Muhammad Shāh's aus dem Jahr 1250/1834“, in: *Proceedings of the 2nd European Conference of Iranian Studies*, held in Bamberg in 1991 (in preparation).

5 = 1844 A. D.

6 “The Gate”, 1819-1850; on the concept “Bāb” cf. Todd Lawson, “The Terms ‘Remembrance’ (*dhikr*) and ‘Gate’ (*bāb*) in the Bāb's Commentary on the Sura of Joseph”, in: Moojan Momen (ed.), *Studies in the Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions*, Los Angeles 1988, vol. 5, pp. 1-63. On the life and work of the Bāb cf. Hasan Balyuzi, *The Bāb. The Herald of the Day of Days*, Oxford 1973; Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions. From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*, Cambridge 1987, p. 3; Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal. The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850*, Ithaca, N. Y., and London 1989.

7 Zeph. 1:13; Jes. 2:12; 13:6; Joel 2:1,11; 1. Thess. 5:2; Rev. 1:10.

8 cf. Mat. 24:36 ff.; 25:13; Rev. 3:3; *Qur'ān* 6:31; 7:187; 12:107; 18:21; 20:15; 22:7; 25:11 etc.

9 This shows that the Bāb (in contrast to John the Baptist) was not just a herald and paver of the way, but the founder of a religion (in Bahā'ī terminology a “Manifestation of God”); cf. footnote 40.

10 cf. Seena Fazel/Khazeh Fananapazir, “A Bahā'ī Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam”, in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies. A Publication of the Association for Bahā'ī Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3 (September-December 1993), p. 17 ff.; U. Schaefer, *Beyond the Clash of Religions. The Emergence of a new Paradigm*, Prague 1995, p. 68 ff.

11 *ridda*: according to the *sharī'a* (although not in the Qur'ān) this is punishable by death; cf. *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden 1961), keyword: “Murtadd” (Apostate), p. 415 ff.

In Bahā'u'llāh the Bahā'īs see the eschatological turning-point of history: With him the Adamic cycle, the age of prophecy, has come to an end,¹² the “Day of Resurrection”¹³ has dawned, and a new age of the world has begun, in which mankind will attain its fulfilment. During his forty-year prophetic ministry Bahā'u'llāh was a prisoner and exile of the Shāh and the Turkish Sultan. Baghdād, Constantinople, Adrianople and finally ‘Akkā in the Holy Land were the stations of his exile. The wealth of authentic texts¹⁴ revealed in the Arabic and Persian languages on all aspects of human existence, are, to the Bahā'īs, God's message to humanity, the Word of God. The Faith founded by Bahā'u'llāh, which was first introduced to a Western audience at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and has since spread over almost all the countries on the globe, is — despite the relatively small number of its adherents¹⁵ — the geographically most widespread religion, after Christianity.¹⁶ For a long time presented as an Islamic sect, it is increasingly depicted in academic literature as a universal religion and is numbered among the world religions.¹⁷

II.

A central theme in the teachings of Bahā'u'llāh (and, indeed, in those of the Bāb) is the concept of unity. This unity exists on three levels: the unity of God,¹⁸ unity of the religions, and the unity of mankind.

1. The message of the Bāb was already universal in scope. Addressing the whole of mankind, he called on the “peoples of the West” to heed his message and “to become as true brethren in the one and indivisible religion of God”.¹⁹

12 cf. Bāb, *Selections from the Writings of the Bāb* (Haifa 1976), 6:11:5 (p. 161).

13 *yaum al-qiyyamah*; cf. *Qur'ān* 16:92; 22:17; 29:13; 32:25; 39:67; 45:26 etc.

14 The manuscripts, mostly named *Lawḥ* (= Tablet) and translated by the terms Tablet or Epistle, are preserved in the International Archives in Haifa. The cataloguing of the voluminous writings has not yet been completed. There is no canon of the Writings as yet. On the authenticity of the texts of Bahā'u'llāh cf. A. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā'u'llāh. Baghdād 1853-63*, Oxford 1974, reprint 1992, vol. 1, pp. 22-42.

15 about 5-6 million.

16 *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Book of the Year 1988*.

17 cf. A. Bausani, in: *Encyclopedia Cattolica* (keyword “Bābismo” and “Bahā'īsmo”); Joachim Wach, *Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen 1951, p. 149 ff; Carsten Colpe, “Drängt die Religionsgeschichte nach einer Summe?”, in: *Evangelische Theologie*, 39th year 1979, p. 221; Peter Meinhold, *Die Religionen der Gegenwart. Ihre Herkunft - ihre Besonderheiten - ihr Beitrag zur Lösung der Weltprobleme*, Freiburg 1978, p. 317; I. R. Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam*, New York 1992, p. 49; Mircea Eliade and I. P. Culiano, *The Eliade Guide to World Religions*, New York 1991, p. 264; F. Vahman, in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (TRE), Berlin 1979, vol. V, p. 131; Hutter, Manfred, *Die Bahā'ī. Geschichte und Lehre einer nachislamischen Weltreligion*, Marburg 1994; cf. also my contribution “The Bahā'ī Faith. Sect or Religion?”, in: *Bahā'ī Studies. A Publication of the Association for Bahā'ī Studies*, Ottawa 1988, and Seena Fazel, “Is the Bahā'ī Faith a World Religion?”, in: Jack McLean (ed.), *Revisioning the Sacred: New Dimensions in Bahā'ī Theology*, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press 1996; Moojan Momen, “Is the Bahā'ī Faith a world religion?”, in: Sen Mc. Glinn (ed.), *Essays in Bahā'ī Theology*, Christchurch/New Zealand 1989, p. 55 ff.

18 *tawḥīd*.

19 *Qayyumu'l-Asma'*; cf. *Selections from the Writings of the Bāb*, Haifa 1976, p. 56.

Bahā'u'llāh, in his mission to “vivify the world and to bring into unity all who are on the face of the earth”,²⁰ has indicated to the human race, as it rapidly proceeds to develop into a world society, the goal for which it is to strive: the spiritual and political unification of mankind. His message of “world-wide regeneration”²¹ aims, in its horizontal dimension, at the establishment of a universal order among the nations, at the abolition of war and the establishment of eternal peace.²² The prerequisite for this political goal of a messianic realm, a federative world commonwealth based on “unity in diversity”²³, is a new, cosmopolitan consciousness, borne on the “vision of peoples living peacefully together”²⁴ and filled with unbounded, all-embracing love for the whole of mankind, which was created as one family: “Ye are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean”²⁵ ... “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens”.²⁶

This vision of a unified mankind is not some vague, fanciful idea, but rather a prophetic promise,²⁷ an ardent hope and a practical political manifesto. Love for humanity is a central value in the hierarchy of values. All action should be directed towards the well-being of mankind,²⁸ its welfare having absolute priority over all particular interests. For this reason it is stated: “Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self”²⁹... “It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world.... That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of

20 *Lawḥ-i-Ra'is*, quoted from J. E. Esslemont, *Bahā'u'llāh and the new Era*, London⁴ 1974, p. 147.

21 Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 7:8 (p. 84).

22 According to Bahā'u'llāh, the path to “perpetual peace” (Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace* [1795], Los Angeles/Cal.: US Library Association 1932) will be a two-stage process characterized by the concepts “Lesser Peace” and “Most Great Peace”. The “Lesser Peace” (cf., for example, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh*, Wilmette/Ill., rev. edn. 1978, 119:3) is the eschatological short-term goal; it is the unification of the nations, based on international treaties, into a federative world commonwealth invested with executive power. The crises by which mankind is increasingly afflicted will lead to a turbulent and painful process of transformation and finally to a breakthrough to a more complex, higher form of organisation and will thereby, at first without mankind’s conscious knowledge, realise principles proclaimed by Bahā'u'llāh. The “Most Great Peace” is the eschatological long-term goal. It is the vision of the Kingdom of God on Earth, the spiritual transformation of the world through the Message of Bahā'u'llāh, which will alone breathe life into the politically united organism. On these concepts see Bahā'u'llāh’s *Gleanings* 119:3; Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 3:11; 7:19; 8:54 (pp. 23, 89, 126); Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahā'u'llāh*, Wilmette/Ill., 2nd rev. edn 1974, pp. 19, 29, 75, 134, 157, 162, 192, 196, 204 f. For details on this whole subject see U. Gollmer, “Der lange Weg zum Größten Frieden”, in: *Bahā'ī-Briefe*, issue 50 (October 1985), p. 128 ff. and issue 52 (December 1986), p. 207 ff.; ditto, *Gottesreich und Weltgestaltung. Grundlegung einer politischen Theologie im Bahā'ītum*, thesis, in preparation.

23 Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahā'u'llāh*, Wilmette/Ill., 2nd rev. edn 1974, pp. 41-42.

24 The Declaration passed in 1993 by the “Parliament of World Religions” emphasises that mankind, in view of the dramatic world situation, needs this vision in particular, beyond political programs and actions (cf. H. Küng/K.-J. Kuschel, *A Global Ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, London 1993), p. 19.

25 Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 8:62 (p. 129).

26 Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 11:13 (p. 167).

27 cf. Jes. 2:2 ff.; 65:17; Zach. 9:9; John 10:17; Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, Wilmette/Ill., rev. edn. 1980, p. 116 ff.

28 Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 6:20 (p. 63).

29 Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 7:12 (p. 87).

the entire human race.”³⁰ Late Antiquity’s idea of world citizenship, whereby “the whole world is our fatherland”,³¹ has thus reached a new dimension: having been elevated to a religious creed it has become the focal point of a practical agenda for the salvation of all mankind.

2. A further universalistic feature is the Bahā’ī concept of revelation, the doctrine concerning divine revelation in history. To “all peoples”,³² from “time immemorial”,³³ God has sent his Prophets and Messengers³⁴ and has made a Covenant with them to guide them to the “straight Path of Truth”,³⁵ the path to salvation. Every one of these Messengers of salvation was “the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of his Truth”,³⁶ “the representative and mouthpiece of God”,³⁷ the representative of his authority and sovereignty. Exalted above normal human beings, they belong to an ontological level of their own in the realm of creation. In them man encounters God: “Whoso recognizeth Them hath recognized God”,³⁸ while the Ultimate Reality, the Essence of God, will forever remain veiled from man.³⁹ Bahā’u’llāh calls the founding figures who are known to us from religious history “Manifestations of God”⁴⁰ and states categorically that there is no distinction whatsoever among them.⁴¹ Belief in all the Manifestations as embodiments of a common level of divine inspiration is necessary to salvation.⁴² Whoever denies one of them, denies them all.⁴³ Thus, these religions receive their light from the

30 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 11:13 (p. 167).

31 Seneca, *De vita beata*, no. 20; *De tranquillitate animi*, no. 3; *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* no. 28:1-8 (English edition: *Letters to Lucilius*, 2 vols., Oxford 1932). The Greek term “Oikumene” designated the inhabited earth on which all people live together as equal citizens. In the New Testament, too (Col. 3:11), universal thought is visible. Background and nationality were immaterial, but there was still differentiation — in this case between Christians and non-Christians. On this whole subject cf. Peter Coulmas, *Weltbürger. Geschichte einer Menschheitssehnsucht*, Reinbek 1990, p. 178 ff.

32 *Qur’ān* 16:35; 13:7; 35:24; Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 87:6.

33 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 3:1; 87:6.

34 Not all of them are recorded in the religious traditions (Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 87:6), even before Adam, who is portrayed as a Prophet as in Islam, there was divine revelation (*Gleanings* 87:1).

35 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 81. As to the “Straight Path” (*aṣ-ṣirāṭu’l-mustaqīm*) see *Qur’ān* 1:6; 7:40; 5:15; 37:118 etc.; Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 4:8; 5:17; 6:11; 8:3 (pp. 35, 52, 61, 101 etc.).

36 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 21.

37 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 28:2.

38 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 21. John 14:9 and 10:30 is also interpreted in this manner.

39 Every attempt to understand “His impenetrable mystery” “hath ended in complete bewilderment”: “Mine Essence thou shalt never apprehend!” (Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 26:3; 78:2; 94:3; 160:1; Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 8:31 [p. 114]). On *theologia negativa* cf. Jack McLean, “Prolegomena to a Bahā’ī Theology”, in: *The Journal of Bahā’ī Studies. A Publication of the Association for Bahā’ī Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, Ottawa 1992, p. 83 ff.).

40 *al-maẓharu’l-ilāhī*. The “Manifestation” is an incarnation (*ḥulūl*) of the Word of God, not of the Godhead Itself. On this whole subject see Juan R. Cole, “The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahā’ī Writings”, in: *Bahā’ī Studies* no. 9 (A Publication of the Association for Bahā’ī Studies, Ottawa/Canada 1982). See also U. Schaefer, *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, pp. 121-130.

41 “There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message” (Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 34:3; 24).

42 The idea that the individual’s encounter with the Manifestation obliges him to make a decision of major significance for his spiritual life is to be found in the Gospels (Mark 16:16; Mat. 10:32; John 3:17-18; Luke 12:8), in the *Qur’ān* (57:8; 48:29), in the Zoroastrian tradition (*Yasna* 31:2-3) and in the Writings of the Bāb (*Selections from the Writings of the Bāb* 1:4:4 [p. 12]). In the Writings of Bahā’u’llāh we frequently come across this statement: *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*,

Thus, these religions receive their light from the same source: “These principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems have proceeded from one source, and are rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.”⁴⁴

Differences exist not in the essence of the Manifestations,⁴⁵ but in their historical mission. Revelation is not an abstract event, it always takes place in a historical context. The cultures of mankind have produced widely divergent views, ways of thinking and structures of consciousness. Their social orders, too, have always differed, as have the “ailments” attacking the body of society, so that different “medicaments” had to be prescribed in each case.⁴⁶ Thus, divine revelation as God’s instrument for the education of mankind is related to, and inevitably reflects, both the cultural-historical conditions and the level of comprehension of the people of a particular time.⁴⁷ Every Messenger of salvation was thus also the “bearer of a specific Message”.⁴⁸ Hence, the revealed truth which confronts man with a claim to absolute validity is relative.⁴⁹ All religious truths which we encounter in the traditions of the historic religions are but “facets of one truth”,⁵⁰ facets of an ultimate Truth of which man, if only because of the limitations of

verse 1; *Tablets* 5:4; 5:11-12; 17:78,93 (pp. 47 f., 50, 253, 257); *Epistle to the Son the Wolf*, Wilmette/Ill., 1978, section 104 (p. 61); *Prayers and Meditations*, London rev. ed. 1978, 180:3. On this topic see Seena Fazel, “Understanding Exclusivist Texts”, in: *Bahā’ī Scriptural Studies*, vol. 1, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1995.

43 Lawḥ-i-Aḥmad, in: *Bahā’ī Prayers*, Wilmette/Ill. 1982, p. 212.

44 Bahā’u’llāh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, section 18 (p. 13).

45 “There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message. They all have but one purpose” (Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 34:3; cf. also 24; Bahā’u’llāh, *The Kitāb-i-Iqān*, Wilmette/Ill. 1979, section 162 [p. 152] and section 171 [p. 159 ff.]).

46 In the Writings of Bahā’u’llāh we find the allegory of the divine physician, the “infallible physician” who from his higher wisdom diagnoses the sickness and prescribes the remedy for a grievously ailing mankind (cf. *Gleanings* 16:3; 34:6; 106:1; 120:1). The recipient of salvation is thus not just the individual soul in need of mercy, but the whole of mankind. This metaphor is also to be found in the Buddhist Canon. Buddha saw himself as a “physician” and the entire world as a “hospital”. The physician prescribes the medicine and its dose (quoted from Karl Eugen Neumann, *Übertragungen aus dem Pali Kanon*, Zürich-Wien 1957, vol. III, Sammlungen in Versen [Sutta Nipata], Brahmadatto 444 [p. 369], Adhimutto 722 [p. 417]; cf. also Wilhelm Gundert, *Der Buddhismus*, München 1966, p. 44).

47 “The Words are revealed according to capacity, so that the beginners may make progress. The milk must be given according to measure so that the babe of the world may enter into the Realm of grandeur” (*Lawḥ-i-Ittīhād*, quoted from Esslemont, *Bahā’u’llāh and the new Era*, p. 117; cf. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā’u’llāh*, vol. 4, Oxford 1987, p. 192). “All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the Pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice” (Bahā’u’llāh, *The Hidden Words*, Wilmette/Ill. 1954, Arabic 67; see also Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 31; 34:4-5; 38. John 16:12 is also interpreted in this sense).

48 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 31; 34:4.

49 On the relativity of religious truth cf. Moojan Momen: “Relativism: A Basis for Bahā’ī Metaphysics”, in: M. Momen (ed.), *Studies in the Bābī and Bahā’ī Religions*, Los Angeles 1988, vol. 5, p. 185 ff.; Jack McLean, “Prolegomena to a Bahā’ī Theology”, in: *The Journal of Bahā’ī Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, Ottawa 1992, p. 37 ff., and my essay *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, pp. 131-134.

50 Shoghi Effendi, *Guidance for Today and for Tomorrow*, London ²1973, p. 2.

language, can never partake in its completeness.⁵¹ The fact that the Manifestations appear to vary in “the intensity of their light”⁵² is inherent, as Bahā’u’llāh says, “not in the light itself”, but “should rather be attributed to the varying receptivity of an ever-changing world”.⁵³ Seen in this light, there is a mystic unity among these heralds of the Ultimate Reality, in which is manifested the transcendent unity of the religions. Ultimately there is, as the Bāb formulates it, only the “one and indivisible religion of God”,⁵⁴ “*una religio in rituum varietate*”,⁵⁵ as Cusanus called it. The Qur’ān calls it *Islam*.⁵⁶

That differences exist between the religions is self-evident, but this does not constitute a compelling argument against the thesis of the unity of the religions. Differences can be discerned in the horizontal dimension; they belong, as Anne-marie Schimmel formulates it, “to the outer sphere of the religion”,⁵⁷ to the “husk”, in which forms, rites and above all the Law are set down,⁵⁸ i. e. those aspects of a religion that are historically conditioned, whereas the differences in the metaphysical concepts used are due to the varying cultural environment of the revelation, to the diverse developments of human existence within the multifarious cultures of the world,⁵⁹ as well as to the historical fragmentation of the reli-

51 “How great the multitude of truths which the garment of words can never contain! How vast the number of such verities as no expression can adequately describe, whose significance can never be unfolded, and to which not even the remotest allusions can be made!” (Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 89:3).

52 “These Messengers have we exalted, some of them above others” (*Qur’ān* 2:254).

53 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 34:5.

54 Cf. footnote 19.

55 *De pace fidei* (1453), cap. 1, fol. 114 V. German edition: *Über den Frieden im Glauben*, ed. Ernst Hoffmann, Leipzig 1943; French edition: Nicolas de Cues, *La Paix de la Foi (Extraits)*, dans: *Oeuvres choisies de Nicola de Cues*, Paris 1942.

56 The fact that the name which Muḥammad gave to his religion is not limited to his dispensation is shown by the circumstance that in the *Qur’ān* Noah (10:73), Abraham (3:60), Jacob (2:126 ff.), Joseph (12:102), Moses (7:122; 10:84) and the Disciples of Jesus (5:111) appear as “Muslims”, as believers who “have submitted to the Will of God”. In this sense the exclusivist interpretation by the ‘Ulamā’ of *Qur’ān* 3:17 (“The true religion with God is Islam”) is in no way compelling. On the uncompromising claim to finality in orthodox Islam see U. Schaefer, *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, pp. 68-72; Seena Fazel/Khazeh Fananapazir, referred to in footnote 10.

57 „Der Beitrag der islamischen Mystik zur Einheit der Religionen“, in: *Gemeinschaft und Politik*, Bad Godesberg 1957, Issue 12, p. 47.

58 “It is the outward practices of religion that are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity, while the reality is always the same, and one. The Reality is the Truth, and truth has no division” (‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Paris Talks*, London 1995, 39:13).

59 Concerning the question of why the Ultimate Reality appears so different in the thinking and experience of men, John Hick has repeatedly affirmed that: “We are not directly aware of the divine reality as it is in itself, but only experienced from our distinctive human point of view. This is inevitably a partial awareness, limited by our human finitude and imperfections. We ‘see through a glass, darkly’; and the glass is constituted by the set of human concepts operating within our cultures. The result is the range of ways of conceiving and experiencing the divine that is to be found within the history of religion” (*God Has Many Names*, Philadelphia 1982, p. 67; see also “Religious Diversity as Challenge and Promise”, in: Hick, John/Hasan Askari (eds.), *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, Aldershot/England and Vermont/USA 1985, p. 20). This would appear to be what ‘Abdu’l-Bahā alludes to when he states that “the differences among the religions of the world are due to the varying types of minds” (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā*, Haifa 1978, 31:5 [p. 63]). In another place Hick appositely refers to the fundamental insight of Immanuel Kant that our spiritual observation and perception are influenced by the thinking process itself, and that we “are always aware of our surroundings, as it appears to a consciousness, which works with our particular conceptual sources” (“Religiöser

gious traditions.⁶⁰ The differences lie not in the light itself, but in the object on which it falls, similar to the way in which the sun appears in the mirror as a disk, but in the crystal as fire.⁶¹ In their essential teachings the religions constitute “the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future”.⁶²

Thus, the plurality of the religions is in accordance with the divine plan of salvation. *Heilsgeschichte* (lit: the history of salvation) is the entire history of religion, encompassing all the revealed religions. Revelation is a progressive, cyclically recurring event, open to the future. Bahā’u’llāh has declared invalid all claims to the finality, uniqueness and unsurpassability of any one religion.⁶³

Hence, a theological paradigm shift has evidently taken place. In contrast to the traditional paradigm in which the history of salvation was seen as an evolutionary process leading up to a final act of redemption whereby a unique figure has redeemed mankind once and for all,⁶⁴ unsurpassably and finally, the new paradigm is one of a divine ‘economy of salvation’, an ongoing process of divine “education of the human race”⁶⁵ through successive outpourings of divine revela-

Pluralismus und Erlösung”, in: Reinhard Kirste/Paul Schwarzenau/Udo Tworuschka (eds.), *Gemeinsam vor Gott — Religionen im Gespräch*, Hamburg 1990/1991, p. 31; John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, pp. 83, 103 ff.; John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, New York 1985, pp. 40 ff., 98).

60 Adolf v. Harnack is the source of the dictum: „No living thing can evade the ravages of time“ (*Entstehung und Entwicklung der Kirchenverfassung und des Kirchenrechts in den zwei ersten Jahrhunderten, nebst einer Kritik der Abhandlung R. Sohm’s „Wesen und Ursprung des Katholizismus“*, Leipzig 1910, p. 87). Many contradictions between the religions can be explained by the time factor. All religions have undergone centrifugal processes in their history and in so doing have assimilated disparate elements. This is why we also encounter the phenomenon of reformation in all religions, the human endeavour to return to the unadulterated original source of the revelation. That which has developed over long periods of history, often on the basis of a tradition that is fragmentary, does not exist as a monolith, but rather in a wealth of forms with irreconcilable dogmatic contradictions. If even Christianity, which originates from one source, the Gospel, has split up into innumerable sub-groups with diverging doctrines, it is hardly surprising that insoluble contradictions exist between the historical religions, each of which has in its turn, gone through similar processes” (On the whole topic cf. *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, pp. 139 ff., 144 ff.).

61 cf. Bahā’u’llāh, *The Seven Valleys*, Wilmette/Ill. 1978, p. 19. See also Bāb, *Selections* 3:34:1 (p. 105).

62 *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 182.

63 “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” (*Su-ratu’š-Šabr*, quoted from Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahā’u’llāh*, p. 116; cf. also Bāb, *Selections* 3:34:1 [p. 106]). The thesis that all Revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the day-springs of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, ... and that out of the Tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest” (*The Kitāb-i-Iqān*, section 149 [p. 137]), was designated by Shoghi Effendi as “sheer blasphemy” (*The World Order of Bahā’u’llāh*, p. 58).

64 cf. Hebr. 9:12.

65 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 7:13 (p. 87). An idea explored by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in a work which is published under the title *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* in 1780 (English edition: John Dearling Haney, *Lessing’s Education of the Human Race*, New York 1908). Inspired by the teachings of Joachim di Fiore, Lessing developed the idea of progressive divine revelation. Joachim was awaiting a new era, in which the Torah and the Gospels, as promised in the Revelation of St. John (14:6), would be superseded by an “Everlasting Gospel”, an era of reason and of self-fulfilment of man, thus at the same time the fulfilment of the Christian revelation. However, Lessing’s work ends with a theory of the transmigration of souls, a view not subscribed by the Bahā’īs. On the whole subject see Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Chicago 1949, p. 208 ff.

tion. The phenomenologically attestable unity of the religions⁶⁶ reflects the transcendent unity of the religions that is firmly established in the divine plan of salvation.

III.

This poses the question of the extent to which Bahā'u'llāh's unity paradigm can be introduced into the dialogue among the religions and how it can be made fruitful for collaboration between the religions, especially for the "Global Ethic Project" in its efforts to work out from the holy writings of mankind common standards for right and wrong, good and evil, binding norms, values, ideals, aims and maxims on which all people of good will can agree. Indeed, the viability of our increasingly interdependent world society depends on such a consensus on fundamental values being reached.

1. According to the criteria elaborated by theologians⁶⁷ and the guidelines⁶⁸ set out by the Ecumenical Council of the Churches in 1977, interfaith dialogue is a critical dialogue which should be characterized by frankness and honesty and carried on in a spirit of reconciliation and humility. It should not serve the purposes of theological apologetics or be used for the image-enhancement of the participant's own religions, nor should it obscure the differences that exist⁶⁹ or lead to the kind of indifference or liberalism which accepts everything and which leaves the question of truth out of consideration. Such dialogue does not aim at the conversion of one participant by the other, but rather at mutual understanding, mutual appreciation and "transformation".⁷⁰ Trust, understanding and the readiness to cooperate for the benefit of the whole of mankind can develop only from dialogue that is characterized by openness and understanding, from an encounter, which "honestly perceives that which unites and that which differentiates".⁷¹

66 cf. Friedrich Heiler, „Einheit und Zusammenarbeit der Religionen“, in: *Gemeinschaft und Politik*, Bad Godesberg, Issue 12/1957.

67 This include, in particular, Hans Küng, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Leonard Swidler, Raimondo Panikkar, John Hick, Willard G. Oxtoby, Paul F. Knitter, Johannes Lähnemann, John B. Cobb, Udo Tworuschka, Paul Schwarzenau, Reinhard Kirste. A selected bibliography is offered by Reinhard Kirste/Paul Schwarzenau/Udo Tworuschka (eds.), *Religionen im Gespräch. Interreligiöser Dialog zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, Balve 1994, pp. 485 ff.

68 *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, published by the World Council of Churches, Geneva 1979.

69 "Theological dialogue needs to focus on the differences... In its initial phases [it] needs to confront differences and to avoid the tendency to over-simplify and to reduce all religions to something that they are not" (Seena Fazel, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahā'ī Faith: Some preliminary Observations", in: Jack McLean [ed.], *Revisioning the Sacred. New Perspectives on a Bahā'ī Theology. Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions*, vol. 8, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1996).

70 Leonard Swidler, "A Dialogue on Dialogue", in: Swidler, Leonard et al. (ed.), *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, London 1990, p. 57; ditto, "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue", p. 26.

71 J. Lähnemann, „Die Frage nach Gott in einer säkularen Welt und der Dialog der Religionen“, in: Der Nationale Geistige Rat (ed.), *Gedenkfeier zum hundertsten Jahrestag des Hinscheidens Bahā'u'llāhs in der Paulskirche zu Frankfurt am Main am 26. Mai 1992 — Eine Dokumentation*, Hofheim 1992, p. 32.

Each faith has its distinctive characteristic and its inalienable positions, its *proprium*. It would be dishonest to avoid mention of positions which arise from unequivocal Scriptural statements, just because they are not compatible with rival manners of belief. Hence, one must realise that, for the Bahā’īs, the revelation of Bahā’u’llāh is the path of salvation, the “Path of Truth”.⁷² In contrast to post-modern subjectivism, the Bahā’ī Faith, like all religions,⁷³ makes a claim to truth which is universal, and that is inseparable from the clear statement that recognition of the Faith is necessary for salvation.⁷⁴ In the process of interfaith dialogue this claim to truth is no more amenable to compromise than is the idea, immanent in the unity paradigm, of a progressively unfolding revelation, an evolutionary *Heilsgeschichte*. This idea implies the consummation of former revelations and the fulfilment of their promises.⁷⁵ The new “Book of God” — according to Bahā’u’llāh “the unerring balance in which all is weighed”⁷⁶ — is the scale against which the other religions are to be assessed. The new revelation is, so to speak, the divine “reformation”,⁷⁷ the “time of harvest”,⁷⁸ the “day of ingathering”⁷⁹ as Bahā’u’llāh, alluding to the Gospel of St. Matthew⁸⁰, proclaimed in his Tablet to Pope Pius IX.

The doctrine of “progressive revelation”⁸¹ admonishes the Bahā’īs to conduct a personal “inner dialogue”⁸² with the earlier dispensations of religious faith, since these are also a part of their religious identity. It is obvious, however, that this interpretation, which treats the former revelations in an inclusivist manner and thus relativises them, is incompatible with the way in which the other religions see themselves and is unacceptable to them. Therefore it cannot be made the basis for dialogue. This is one of those insoluble conflicts between divergent claims to

72 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 81.

73 St. Augustine says: „*Quia communis est omnibus veritas. Non est nec mea, nec tua; non est illius, aut illius; omnibus communis est*“ (“Enarrationes in Psalmos”, in: *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, Oxford 1847-1857, LXXV 17 [20]). “*Non habeo quasi privatum meum, nec tu privatum tuum. Veritas nec mea sit propria, nec tua, ut et tua sit et mea*“ (*ibid.* CIII, 11 [25]). See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahā: “If it be true, it is for all; if not, it is for no one” (quoted in Esslemont, *Bahā’u’llāh and the New Era*, p. 257).

74 Bahā’u’llāh, *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 1; cf. footnote 42.

75 According to Bahā’u’llāh’s testimony, his epiphany fulfils the messianic promises of all religions concerning the coming of an eschatological Redeemer: “The promise is fulfilled” (*The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 80; *Gleanings* 7:1-2,10; *Tablets* 8:16 [p. 107]). On the Qur’ānic signs of the time of the end cf. Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 8:37 (p. 117); on the return of Christ cf. *Tablets* 2 (p. 9 ff.); Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 116:1; Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahā’u’llāh*, p. 105 ff.

76 *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verses 99, 183; *Lawḥ-i-Aḥmad*, in: *Bahā’ī Prayers*, p. 209 ff.

77 cf. *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, pp. 139 ff., 143 ff.

78 Mat. 13:30.

79 “Verily, the day of ingathering is come, and all things have been separated from each other. He hath stored away that which He chose in the vessels of justice, and cast into the fire that which befitteth it” (*The Proclamation of Bahā’u’llāh*, Haifa 1967, p. 86).

80 cf. Mat. 13:30, 40 ff.

81 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 31.

82 On the typology of dialogue forms see Seena Fazel, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahā’ī Faith” (see footnote 69).

truth that affect all interfaith relations.⁸³ One must live with these differences and tolerate the contradictory convictions. The dialogue begins at those levels at which there is compatibility and from where statements on questions of life — in this case that of ethics — can be made. Belief in the mystic unity of the religions is a level from which a dialogue among the religions can, indeed, be conducted.

2. Such a belief necessarily results in the rejection of exclusivism whereby one religion is regarded as the sole bringer of salvation, while the other religions are condescendingly dismissed as “unbelief”⁸⁴, or even as “religions of falsehood”,⁸⁵ and its adherents labelled “unbelievers” or “heathens”. The historical religions have been neither “abolished” nor “invalidated” by Bahā’u’llāh’s epiphany, nor is his revelation the “only true”, the “solely valid and right” doctrine.⁸⁶ The religions of mankind are not merely part-truths, reflections of the human striving for transcendence, not just a “ray of the truth”,⁸⁷ they are divinely founded, manifestations of the Word of God, Paths to Salvation.⁸⁸ Their Holy Books are testimonies to the Truth and integral parts of Holy Scripture in a broader sense, since they all originate from the same source. With the exception of the historically conditioned elements, the verities proclaimed in these Holy Books have eternal validity.⁸⁹

83 The Church sees in Jesus Christ the fulfilment of the promises of the Old Covenant, in Judaism the *praeparatio evangelica*. Islam sees in the Biblical religions revelations of the Living God, which refer to the final revealed religion of Muḥammad and prepare for it. Prophetic claims were at all times in conflict with the established religious authorities and their orthodox doctrines.

84 Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, München 1938, vol. I.2, p. 235.

85 Karl Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 377; vol. IV, p. 456. See also *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, p. 68.

86 As F. Ficicchia in his polemic monograph so insistently alleges (*Der Bahā’ismus — Weltreligion der Zukunft?*, Stuttgart 1981, pp. 21, 214, 293, 392, 416, 418, 428), and as Manfred Hutter evidently also thinks when he writes “that the non-Bahā’ī religions have no place in their present form, so that they can also be condemned” (*Die Bahā’ī*, p. 46). A rebuttal of Ficicchia’s polemic book will be published in October 1995: U. Schaefer/N. Towfigh/ U. Gollmer, *Desinformation als Methode. Die Bahā’ismus-Monographie des F. Ficicchia*, Hildesheim 1995.

87 As the Second Vatican Council conceded (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, London 1966, no. 2 = “*De ecclesiae habitudine ad religiones non-christianas*”, no. 2).

88 Of Christ it is said: “Blessed is the man who, with a face beaming with light, hath turned towards Him” (Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 36:3). Muḥammad appears as the “Ark of Salvation” (‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, Wilmette/Ill. 1970, p. 53), the Qur’ān as “the Straight Path”, “the Way of God unto all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth” (Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 18:4).

89 It is only insofar as the time factor is of relevance and in that each religion bears the hallmark of the age in which it was founded, that the old law loses its validity. The revelation of Bahā’u’llāh is, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahā says, “no new Path to Salvation”, but the ancient “Straight Path” (quoted from *Sonne der Wahrheit*, Stuttgart 1947, Issue 1, p. 1). Shoghi Effendi has precisely defined the attitude to the historic religions and has emphasised their unity and eternal validity: “The Revelation, of which Bahā’u’llāh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it... It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verities of their teachings... Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least hesitation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind” (*The World Order of Bahā’u’llāh*, pp. 57-58). “Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world’s religious systems, its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to

3. Furthermore, theological universalism has far-reaching practical consequences for law and ethics. Legal norms, attitudes and religious practices promoting separatism and belittling other religions or discriminating against their adherents are rejected in the revelation of Bahā'u'llāh. In His Writings are to be found

a) the explicit abrogation⁹⁰ of the Shī'ite concept of “uncleanness”,⁹¹ according to which all non-Muslim peoples are considered⁹² “unclean”⁹³ and are to be avoided,⁹⁴

b) the prohibition of cursing⁹⁵ and blaspheming those of other faiths, as it is practised in some religions,⁹⁶

c) the abrogation of the prohibition of marriage to an adherent of another religion.⁹⁷

The removal of discriminative barriers is the prerequisite for one of the commandments given by Bahā'u'llāh to his followers — and one which is unique in the Holy Writings of mankind: To consort with the believers of all religions “with amity and concord”, “in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship”.⁹⁸ This implies not

restore the pristine purity of their teachings, ... and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations” (*op. cit.*, p. 114; cf. also p. 166).

90 *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 75.

91 *najāsāt*.

92 The law of the *Qur'ān* (9:28), according to which *mushrikūn* (idolaters) are declared unclean, is extended in Shī'ite law to all non-Muslims, even to the “People of the Book”, Jews and Christians. The bodily substance of the unbeliever is declared unclean in the ritual sense and listed among the things which cause uncleanness in the ritual respect. Foods or vessels for food and drinks become unclean as soon as an unbeliever has touched them (cf. I. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, Princeton/New Jersey 1981, p. 213 ff., with further details; *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, keyword “*nadjīs*”, p. 431 ff.; see also *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, p. 78).

93 *nadjīs*, see *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p. 431 ff.

94 cf. Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 7:27 (p. 91).

95 *la'n*, from *la'ana*, *yala'an*: to curse; wherefrom derives *mal'ūn*: accursed (cf. Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 3:26; 4:21; 8:62; 15:2 [pp. 27, 38, 129, 219]).

96 “This cursing of enemies is a Shī'ī religious law; to fail to practice it is a religious lapse (Kulīnī, *Uṣūl al-kāfi*). This attitude of mind too left its characteristic mark on Shī'ī literature” (I. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 181). In respect to the Shī'ite clergy Bahā'u'llāh says: “From the lips of the members of this sect foul imprecations fall unceasingly, while they invoke the word ‘*mal'ūn*’ (accursed) — uttered with a guttural sound of the letter ‘*ayn*’ — as their daily relish” (Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 7:27 [p. 92]). Nor was this attitude alien to Christianity: Apologists of the ancient church, church fathers, popes, teachers of the church and reformers over the centuries cursed the Jews as being repudiated and disinherited by God. The anti-Jewish accentuation of the intercession “*pro perfidis iudaeis*” was only removed from the Good Friday and Easter liturgy in 1955.

97 cf. *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 139; *op. cit.*, »Questions and Answers« 84. While the *Qur'ān* permits Muslims to enter into marriage with women of the Jewish or Christian Faiths, this is forbidden by Shī'ite law, which equates believers in other monotheistic religions with idolaters (*mushrikūn*, cf. *Qur'ān* 2:220). Catholic and Evangelical church law also include an impediment against marriage with a non-Christian.

98 *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 144; Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 3:5; 4:10; 7:13 (pp. 22, 35, 87). I am much indebted to Seena Fazel for the insight that the Arabic verb ‘*ashāra*, *yu'ashiru*’ is etymologically related to *mu'ashīra* (clan, tribe, close relatives) and to ‘*ashīr*’ (companion, comrade, friend). There are overtones of an emotional component in the sense of “having familiar social intercourse”. Hence, it is translated into English by the verb “to consort”.

just the abrogation of the Qur’ānic law not to take infidels or believers in other faiths as friends.⁹⁹ It also amounts to a command to conduct dialogue with other religions in the same spirit, in order to overcome the old attitudes of division, disputation and delusion toward those of other faiths.¹⁰⁰ The reconciliation of the religions¹⁰¹ is a major goal of *Heilsgeschichte*, because it is the foundation of the “world-wide reconciliation”¹⁰² called for by Bahā’u’llāh, and which is the prerequisite for lasting world peace.¹⁰³

In addition, mention should be made of the high esteem in which the virtues of tolerance¹⁰⁴ and forbearance¹⁰⁵ are held, the unequivocal condemnation of religious fanaticism,¹⁰⁶ the emphatic warnings against proselytism,¹⁰⁷ bigotry,¹⁰⁸ useless theological “disputation”,¹⁰⁹ “fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair-splittings”¹¹⁰ and “useless disputes.”¹¹¹ Religion, whose purpose is love, harmony and peace among people,¹¹² must not lead to estrangement, discord, strife, enmity and hatred.¹¹³

What is required, therefore, is more than just tolerance; the adherents of other religions are to be met with love and affection, “with joy and radiance”, in “tender mercy and free from animosity and hatred”.¹¹⁴ Thus, as Bahā’u’llāh has himself declared, “the doors of love and unity have been unlocked and flung open to

99 cf. *Qur’ān* 3:28; 3:118; 5:51.

100 cf. Udo Schaefer, *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, p. 72 ff.

101 cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 223:1 (p. 281).

102 *op. cit.*, 77:1; 13:1; 35:8; 227:2 (pp. 113 f., 28, 72, 296 f.); Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 119:4; Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 11:8; 11:23 (pp. 165, 170).

103 Literature on this topic: ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, Tablet to the Hague, in: *Selections*, section 227:1-31; The Association for Bahā’ī Studies (ed.), *To the Peoples of the World. A Bahā’ī Statement on Peace by the Universal House of Justice*, Ottawa 1988; Ulrich Gollmer, “Der lange Weg zum Größten Frieden”, in: *Bahā’ī-Briefe*, Heft 50 (October 1985), p. 128 ff.; Heft 52 (December 1986) p. 207 ff.; Udo Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion. The Bahā’ī Faith and the Future of Mankind*, Oxford 1983, pp. 139-144.

104 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 4:12; 11:21 (pp. 36, 170).

105 Bahā’u’llāh, *The Hidden Words*, Persian 48; Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 17:28 (p. 237); Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 115:4.

106 “Gird up the loins of your endeavour, o people of Bahā, that haply the tumult of religious dissension and strife that agitateth the peoples of the earth may be stilled, that every trace of it may be completely obliterated... Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction” (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, section 19 [p. 13 ff.]).

107 Bahā’u’llāh, *The Hidden Words*, Persian 36; Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 5:23; 163:5.

108 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 6:28 (p. 68).

109 *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verses 77; 177; Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 17:40 (p. 240); ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 105 ff.

110 *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, note 110.

111 *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 105 ff.

112 cf. Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 11:6 (p. 163 ff.); Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 34:5.

113 cf. Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 11:15; 4:11; 6:40; 7:14 (pp. 168, 36, 72, 88); Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 156. “Religion is like a remedy; if it aggravates the disease then it becomes unnecessary” (‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 227:9 [p. 299]; cf. also *Paris Talks* 39:1).

114 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 4:11 (p. 36)

the face of men”, and all that spiritually divides them, that causes “dissensions and divisions” amongst them, has been “nullified and abolished”.¹¹⁵

The interfaith dialogue demanded by Bahā’u’llāh is not an end in itself. Its purpose is, rather, to serve the highest goal of religion, namely “to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men”.¹¹⁶ Therefore, Bahā’u’llāh calls on the religious leaders and rulers to arise for the rehabilitation of the world, to consult together and “administer to a diseased and sorely-afflicted world the remedy it requireth”.¹¹⁷ The Bahā’īs are thus admonished to cooperate and engage in joint service with the other religions for the benefit of mankind. The attempt to convey a universal ethical code — basic moral values which can be found in the traditions of all religions — to a world in a state of “a fundamental crisis”,¹¹⁸ “in agony”,¹¹⁹ and foundering on the verge of chaos is a project in which the Bahā’īs wholeheartedly collaborate because of their commitment to the oneness of mankind and their belief in the divine origin of all religions. Let us consider how the relationship between religion and morals is seen in the Bahā’ī Faith.

IV.

1. As I have pointed out in detail elsewhere,¹²⁰ moral values are of an axiomatic nature. No logical proof of their truth can be supplied. It is neither within the competence of science to create absolute moral standards, nor can it be defined in scientific terms, how man should act in order to live a fulfilled life; and only to a limited degree is reason able to recognise what is right and what is wrong.¹²¹ It is man’s presumptuousness, his hubris if he succumbs to the temptation of imagining that he could distinguish between good and evil in absolute sovereignty, wanting to be as God¹²². In his book *Global Responsibility*¹²³ Hans Küng has convincingly demonstrated¹²⁴ that supreme values, absolutely binding norms, cannot have a purely rational foundation, nor can they be established emotionally in the human conscience solely by the power of reason; moral imperatives can derive only from the Absolute, from the Ultimate Reality.

115 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 7:13 (p. 88).

116 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 11:15 (p. 168).

117 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 11:14 (p. 167 ff.).

118 *A Global Ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions*, quoted from H. Küng/K.-J. Kuschel, p. 17.

119 loc. cit., p. 13.

120 *The Imperishable Dominion*, pp. 128-135.

121 As to the role of reason see my essay *Die Freiheit und ihre Schranken. Zum Begriff der Freiheit in Bahā’u’llāhs Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, Hofheim 1994, pp. 32-52.

122 “*Eritis sicut dii, bonum et malum scientes*” (Gen. 3:5); cf. John Paul II., encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), no. 86, 102.

123 *In Search of a New World Ethic*, New York-London 1991.

124 *A Global Ethic*, quoted from H. Küng/K.-J. Kuschel, pp. 56 ff.; 67 ff.; 75 ff.

Religion alone is able to create a system of transcendental values and ideals, to build up a hierarchy of values, to translate moral values into standards of behaviour, to pass them on by education to the younger generation and to keep them alive in the consciousness of society. Torn loose from their metaphysical moorings, these values lose their characteristic of faith and common sense to the point where they are no longer “believed”, but instead critically questioned and negated. In the long run, moral standards can only be upheld if they have this character of faith: One must believe in them. Indeed, religion alone is able to invest man’s central values with an inner authority and to urge him to comply with the standards which are derived from it.¹²⁵

Without this Ultimate Reality, which we call God, morality lacks its last hold. Max Pribilla SJ aptly formulated this insight in the twenties: “Without God, morality is cut adrift: The last moorings are gone... Why should man tremble before barriers which he himself or those like him have erected? Even culture, humanity and common weal pale to an unsubstantial illusion if, without a ray of eternal hope, happiness and life are to be sacrificed therefore.”¹²⁶

Without morality, as was already known in Antiquity,¹²⁷ the law is not viable. Without a world ethic, without “a minimal fundamental consensus concerning binding values, irrevocable standards, and fundamental moral attitudes”,¹²⁸ it is impossible to imagine a “new global order”,¹²⁹ as envisaged¹³⁰ and so urgently enjoined upon mankind by Bahā’u’llāh in the nineteenth century.

2. These fundamental values are to be found with various emphases and expressed in different language in all the religious traditions. It is in this aspect that the unity of the religions, which is central to Bahā’ī belief, is most clearly evident. In addition to the “Golden Rule” and the four basic commandments: “not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to fornicate”¹³¹ cited in the *Declaration Towards a Global Ethic*, the religions share a multitude of common features and show some striking parallels. Although the main emphasis of each religion is different as regards specific moral instructions, they all teach that people should do good and avoid evil; they all teach that violation of the prescribed ethical standards — “sin”

125 “These virtues do not appear from the reality of man except through the power of God and the divine teachings, for they need supernatural power for their manifestation” (‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions* 15:8 [p. 80]).

126 August Messer/Max Pribilla SJ, *Katholisches und modernes Denken*, Stuttgart 1924, p. 95. On the whole subject see also U. Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion*, pp. 79-85.

127 “*Quid vanae leges sine moribus proficiunt?*” (Horace, *Carmina* 3, 24, 35).

128 “The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions”, quoted from H. Küng/K.-J. Kuschel, *A Global Ethic*, p. 18.

129 quoted from H. Küng/K.-J. Kuschel, *A Global Ethic*, p. 18 ff.

130 Indeed, Bahā’u’llāh has indicated the very structures required for such a New World Order; cf. *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 179; Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 11:8 (p. 165); ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, Tablet to the Hague, in: *Selections* 227:31; *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 64 ff.; Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahā’u’llāh*, p. 128.

131 quoted from H. Küng/K.-J. Kuschel, *A Global Ethic*, p. 24 ff.

— has consequences for one’s salvation; and all religions include the idea that the individual bears a metaphysical responsibility for his actions.

Bahā’īs believe that these universal values have their ultimate source in God, that these values which constitute the core of the law of religious law,¹³² are eternally valid¹³³ and have been repeatedly renewed in the successive revelations. The Bahā’ī, who finds in the Writings of Bahā’u’llāh a new law of God¹³⁴ and an immense wealth of ethical ordinances,¹³⁵ recognises in the ethic of the religions reflections of that light “which illumines all men”,¹³⁶ the “spiritual, immutable law”,¹³⁷ which is the fundamental reality of all religions and is “changeless and eternal”,¹³⁸ and leads man to salvation.¹³⁹ He sees in it a *lex aeterna* (founded not in the contingent world, but in the sovereign Will of God)¹⁴⁰, the “Archimedian

132 “The fundamental aspect of the Religion of God” (‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Wilmette/Ill.,²1982, p. 403).

133 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions*, Wilmette/Ill.,⁴1981, 11:9-10 (p. 47); 15:7 (p. 79).

134 cf. U. Schaefer, *Die Freiheit und ihre Schranken*, pp. 11-15.

135 Different kinds of moral instructions — commandments and prohibitions, catalogues of virtues, parenetical appeals to live a life of virtue and service pleasing God, of warnings against the evil and the consequences of such deeds — are scattered throughout the body of Scripture (cf. *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 120; *Kitāb-i-Iqān*, section 214-216 [p. 192 ff.], Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 9:4-5 [p. 138 f.]; *Gleanings* 130 [p. 285]; *The Hidden Words*; ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p. 40). Among the virtues and attributes of perfection are the love of God, “the fear of God and steadfastness in His Faith” (Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 134:3), “trustworthiness, truthfulness, purity of heart while communing with God, forbearance, resignation to whatever the Almighty hath decreed, contentment with the things His Will hath provided, patience, nay thankfulness in the midst of tribulation, and complete reliance, under all circumstances, upon Him” (*Gleanings* 134:2), humility, unselfishness, self-knowledge, charitableness, the love of mankind, mercy, detachment, righteousness, moderation in all things, wisdom, purity and chastity, cleanliness, honesty, freedom of prejudice, hospitality, courtesy, thankfulness, kindness to animals, “how much more unto his fellowmen” (*Kitāb-i-Iqān* 215 [p. 194]), meekness, piety and others. To be avoided are envy, covetousness, malice, craftiness and suspicion, haughtiness, pride, sloth and idleness, unseemly talk, backbiting and calumny, cursing and reviling, cruelty, hate, strife, dissension and rancour, hypocrisy and fanaticism. Prohibited are murder, arson, slavery, theft, adultery, fornication, gambling and the consummation of intoxicating drugs and beverages (cf. *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verses 19, 45, 62, 72, 119, 155, 190). These moral instructions and ordinances have their dogmatical foundation in the doctrine of the Covenant of God (*The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verses 2-4), in God’s sovereignty (*The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verses 7; 78; 161-163) and the infallibility of the Manifestations (*The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verses 47, 161-163, 183).

136 John 1:9.

137 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Paris Talks* 44:14.

138 “These [ordinances] are essential or fundamental, one and the same in all religions, changeless and eternal — reality not subject to transformation. Abraham heralded this reality, Mose promulgated it, and Jesus Christ established it in the world of mankind. All the divine Prophets and Messengers were the instruments and channels of this same eternal, essential truth” (‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 106).

139 Bahā’u’llāh does not make a claim to originality for his ethical instructions, since he repeatedly refers to the “sacred Books and Scriptures” of the past (*Gleanings* 131:4): “The virtues and attributes pertaining unto God are all evident and manifest, and have been mentioned and described in the Heavenly Books” (*Gleanings* 134:2). In the preamble to the Arabic *Hidden Words*, a collection of ethical maxims, it says: “This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfil in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue.”

140 This doctrine of ethical voluntarism has a long tradition in Christianity (St. Paul [Rom. 9:20], St. Augustine, Duns Scotus, William Ockham, Calvin, Luther) as well as in Sunni Islam (see George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, Cambridge 1985, p. 28 ff.).

point”, “the Sure Handle”¹⁴¹ for the individual and for society, a fixed frame of reference that is not open to criticism, that sets the goal and shows the way, the “Straight Path”¹⁴² with its irremovable barriers to arbitrariness in human behaviour, thus keeping society in equilibrium and laying the foundation of civilisation and culture. These universal fundamental norms are as timeless as is the goal of all religion: the establishment of justice, love and brotherliness among people, and the establishment of unity, peace, progress, security and well-being in the political sphere.¹⁴³

3. This existing global ethic, the common spiritual heritage of mankind,¹⁴⁴ cannot be allowed to remain an abstract ideal; it must be implanted and nurtured in the hearts of every human being.¹⁴⁵ The project of a global ethic, therefore, has an eminently pedagogical dimension: Because the quality of humanness is spiritual in essence, because, as Schopenhauer so rightly pointed out, religion alone can refer to the continuance of human existence after death and the transcendent moral significance of our actions,¹⁴⁶ only a religious education is able to transcend the prevailing attitude of nihilism and the relativisation of all values, and, hence, to arrest the moral decline of society. Only a religious education can anchor the common ethic in the conscience of men and motivate them to apply it in their daily lives.

Since the character and the conscience of an individual are formed in the first years of life,¹⁴⁷ the moral education of the child has priority over the merely cognitive,¹⁴⁸ according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahā. The global ethic must therefore be taught in all schools,¹⁴⁹ which — Bahā’u’llāh states — must “first train children in the principles of religion, so that the Promise and the Threat recorded in the Books of God may prevent them from the things forbidden and adorn them with the mantle

141 ‘*urwatu’l-wuḥqā*, cf. *Qur’ān* 2:257; 31:22; *The Kitāb-i-Īqān* section 29 (p. 29 ff.); in the Writings of Bahā’u’llāh synonymous for the Covenant of God.

142 see footnote 35.

143 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 6:27; 7:5; 7:13; 8:53,63,74; 11:11-12,15 (pp. 67, 84, 87, 125, 129 f., 133, 166 ff., 168); ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 46, 59 f., 98 f.

144 cf. Suheil B. Bushrui, *Retrieving our Spiritual Heritage. A Challenge of our Time*. Inaugural Lecture, University of Maryland/USA, 1994.

145 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā has made it clear that there is no “innate sense of human dignity” which prevents “man from committing evil actions”. This “very sense of honour and dignity is itself one of the bounties deriving from the instructions of the Prophets of God... It is therefore clear that the emergence of this natural sense of human dignity and honour is the result of education” (*The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p. 97).

146 “If a religion has taken care of these two points, everything else is secondary” (*Parerga and Paralipomina*, Oxford 1974, vol. 1, p. 121).

147 “Good character must be taught” (‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 111:1 [p. 136]) ... “While the branch is green and tender it can easily be made straight” (*op. cit.* 101; 111:7; 110:3 [pp. 127 f., 137, 136]) ... “It is extremely difficult to teach the individual and refine his character once puberty is passed” (*loc. cit.* 111:7 [p. 137]; cf. also 110:3 [p. 136]).

148 cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 110:2 (p. 135 f.).

149 “It is by introducing Spiritual Education into schools, colleges and universities, that we can begin to work towards evolving a new world ethic, acceptable to all and applicable to our present crisis — an ethic which has its roots deep in our spiritual heritage” (Suheil Bushrui, *Retrieving Our Spiritual Heritage*, p. 37).

of the commandments”.¹⁵⁰ Only such an education can fill the young with respect for other people, with love for their neighbour, with solidarity and civic sense, and can bestow on them the inner strength which will enable them to respect the rights of others, to forgo the temptations of private enrichment at the expense of the public weal, to curb their vital urges and anarchic impulses, to withstand the lure of selfishness and the temptations of vice and to resist hedonism, that way of life devoted to consumption, luxury and satisfaction of the basic drives¹⁵¹. Such an education alone can instill into children’s minds the sense of human dignity, so that “once they come of age, they will cast their beams like brilliant candles on the world”¹⁵² and become “true reminders of the virtues of God amidst men”¹⁵³ in a world darkened by hatred and violence.

150 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 6:28 (p. 68). However, Bahā’u’llāh here also counsels wisdom and moderation: “But this in such a measure that it may not injure the children by resulting in ignorant fanaticism and bigotry” (*ibid.* 6:28 [p. 68]).

151 the utopia of a life in “*luxe, calme et volupté*”, as Baudelaire defined it (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, LIX L’invitation au voyage).

152 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 110:3.

153 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 9:4 (p. 138).