

*William S. Hatcher explores the
philosophical framework of the Bahá'í
Faith as a basis for an adequate
understanding of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas,
Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book.*

THE KITÁB-I-AQDAS:

The Causality Principle in the
World of Being

Introduction

The usual articulation of the well-known Bahá'í principle that prejudices are truly immoral and not just socially troublesome affective attitudes tends to obscure another, cognitive defect of prejudice: prejudiced thinking is lazy thinking, signifying the subject's refusal to come to grips with the object as it truly is, in all its dimensions. Prejudiced thinking is stereotypical thinking in which we try to assimilate or reduce something new to a previously known category. Such a reductionist approach to life deprives new experiences of their capacity to transform or change us. In our rigidity and self-satisfaction, we require that each newly encountered phenomenon somehow accommodate itself to our preconceived categories of thought and experience.

Nowhere else will the reductionistic approach to life be more disastrous than if applied in our attempt to understand the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book, for this work can in no way be assimilated to any previous category of religious writing

or any pre-existing conception of religious thought. It sees spiritual laws neither as social conventions nor as divinely imposed rules of behavior, but rather as exact expressions of fundamental, objective relationships inherent in the very structure of reality.

Thus, the worldview of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is fundamentally scientific. It considers that reality is structured by objective relationships of cause and effect (i.e., laws) which can be rationally understood and articulated. The very purpose of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is the articulation of some of the most basic laws of spiritual reality. However, an adequate understanding of these laws also involves some knowledge of the overall philosophical framework of the Bahá'í Faith. The next four sections seek to provide the essentials of this framework, after which we will undertake a more direct and detailed study of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas itself.

Levels of Existence; the Material World

The Bahá'í writings affirm that reality is an integrated whole but that this wholeness is a unity in diversity, not a uniformity. In particular, within the context of overall wholeness, there are distinct levels of being. The lowest of these levels is the natural or material world, where the principle of existence is one of composition of elements. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá has expressed it:

Nature is that condition, that reality, which in appearance consists in life and death, or, in other words, in the composition and decomposition of all things.

This Nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design, from which it will never depart—to such a degree, indeed, that if you look carefully and with keen sight, from the smallest invisible atom up to such large bodies of the world of existence as the globe of the sun or the other great stars and luminous spheres, whether you regard their arrangement, their composition, their form or their movement, you will find that all are in the highest degree of organization and are under one law from which they will never depart.¹

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), 3.

'Abdu'l-Bahá further explains that this natural order, though objective, is an expression of the will of God: "...Nature, which has neither perception nor intelligence, is in the grasp of Almighty God, Who is the Ruler of the world of Nature; whatever He wishes, He causes Nature to manifest."² Bereft of the capacity for thought (intelligence) or experience (perception), the material world also lacks the power of will: "...when you look at Nature itself, you see that it has no intelligence, no will."³ In other words, the material world totally lacks the capacity of consciousness or self-awareness.

One of the consequences of the composite principle of existence in the material world is that all material systems are temporary; they have a finite life span. A material entity is born when the particular combination of elements that determines its existence is established. As long as the relationships necessary to sustain this configuration are maintained, the material entity exists, and when these relationships are destroyed it dies or decomposes, i.e., ceases to exist:

The whole physical creation is perishable. These material bodies are composed of atoms; when these atoms begin to separate decomposition sets in, then comes what we call death. This composition of atoms, which constitutes the body or mortal element of any created being, is temporary. When the power of attraction, which holds these atoms together, is withdrawn, the body, as such, ceases to exist.⁴

Another feature of the material world is that it is dynamic; it is in continual movement:

Absolute repose does not exist in nature. All things either make progress or lose ground. Everything moves forward or backward, nothing is without motion. From his birth, a man progresses physically until he reaches maturity, then, having arrived at the prime of his life, he begins to decline, the strength and powers of his body decrease, and he gradually

2. Ibid., 4.

3. Ibid., 3.

4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), 90-91.

arrives at the hour of death.... All material things progress to a certain point, then begin to decline.⁵

As explained here, the nature of movement in the material world is a reciprocal, back-and-forth motion both of progress and of regress. This, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, is because the material world is a tension of opposites, an arena of opposing forces: "The world of mortality is a world of contradictions, of opposites; motion being compulsory everything must either go forward or retreat."⁶

Thus, the dynamic of the material world is one of *continual motion within fixed limits*. This kind of motion is called *periodic* or *cyclic*, and it is the fundamental characteristic of all material phenomena. From the beating of the human heart, to the movement of the planets around the sun, the material world exhibits this cyclic feature. Periodic motion is the way God has chosen to endow the material world with both dynamism and stability. Dynamism without stability produces an unbridled, purely quantitative (and ultimately catastrophic) growth, while stability without dynamism is death.

Even though the material world, and all material composites, are on the same ontological level, there is nonetheless an ordering or hierarchy among physical systems resulting from the relative complexity of their structure, the lower systems being less structured (or ordered) and the higher more structured. At the top of this hierarchy is the human body, which constitutes the most complex and highly structured physical system: "The body of man, which is composed from the elements, is combined and mingled in the most perfect form; it is the most solid construction, the noblest combination, the most perfect existence."⁷

5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 88-89.

6. *Ibid.*, 90.

7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 143-144.

That the human body is indeed the most complex of all systems in the known physical universe has also been confirmed and validated by modern neuroscience.⁸

The Knowledge of Material Reality

According to the Bahá'í teachings, God has not only established the laws that govern material reality, but He has also given to humanity the power for the rational and systematic understanding of these laws. This power is what we call 'science':

The outcome of this [human] intellectual endowment is science, which is especially characteristic of man. This scientific power investigates and apprehends created objects and the laws surrounding them. It is the discoverer of the hidden and mysterious secrets of the material universe and is peculiar to man alone. The most noble and praiseworthy accomplishment of man, therefore, is scientific knowledge and attainment.⁹

'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that science is not just a serendipitous accident of history, but a divine, supernatural endowment:

All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight. Man is ever partaking of these fruits. All other blessings are temporary; this is an everlasting possession.... it is an eternal blessing and divine bestowal, the supreme gift of God to man.

...science or the attribute of scientific penetration is supernatural....¹⁰

8. See, for example, the four-volume series *The Neurosciences*: [First] Study Program, Rockefeller Press, New York 1967; Second Study Program, Rockefeller Press, New York, 1970; Third Study Program, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1974; Fourth Study Program, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1979.

9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 29.

10. Ibid., 50.

As we have already noted, material reality is composed of physical systems in continual movement. Through science, we gain knowledge of the laws governing the evolution of these systems and also of their current, particular conditions (states). This scientific knowledge enables us to determine and predict—not perfectly but with a practically significant degree of accuracy—the future states of these systems, given some particular set of initial conditions. This, in turn, enables us to act in the present so as to bring about a desired future configuration of a system: by deliberately establishing, in the short run, certain particular conditions of a system, we can bring about, in the long run, certain desired future states of the system, i.e., configurations that are favorable to our goals and our (perceived) interests. This is the power that scientific knowledge gives us, the power to control our future—to participate in the processes of the natural world and not just endure them. In other words, scientific knowledge has the effect of *increasing our autonomy with regard to the natural world*.

Of course, what we perceive to be in our own interest will, in itself, depend on our knowledge of reality, including the reality that is within us, the reality of our own selves. But whatever we perceive our interest to be, we generally seek to bring about those configurations that will, according to our present knowledge of reality, maximize the joy and pleasure of life and minimize its pain and suffering. Thus, scientific knowledge is a knowledge of the relationship of cause and effect in material reality, and this knowledge, when properly used, *gives us the power to produce or increase our material happiness and well-being*.

This power of scientific knowledge to produce happiness and to increase our autonomy depends fundamentally on two things: (1) that the material world is regulated by objective laws, and (2) that we are able to apprehend these laws, if not absolutely, at least to a degree sufficient to allow for reasonably accurate predictions and manipulations of future events. These two features of the material world are all we need if our goal in life is to maximize our well-being and our autonomy. The other particular features of the material world (e.g., periodic motion,

the temporary existence of objects) are incidental to this fundamental, binary goal.

Spiritual Reality

Above and beyond material reality lies a second level of existence that is not directly accessible to physical observation. In the Bahá'í writings this is called *spiritual reality* or the *spiritual world*. Like material reality, spiritual reality has objective existence and is governed by lawful, cause-and-effect relationships. However, the laws governing spiritual reality, and the structure resulting from the operation of these laws, are significantly different from the laws and structures of material reality, mainly because the principle of existence in the spiritual world is different from that of the material world: spiritual entities exist as undivided wholes rather than as composites; and chief among these spiritual entities is the soul or spirit of each human being: "The soul is not a combination of elements, it is not composed of many atoms, it is of one indivisible substance and therefore eternal. It is entirely out of the order of the physical creation; it is immortal!"¹¹

Because spiritual entities are noncomposite, there is no tension of opposites in spiritual reality, and thus no retrogression:

In the world of spirit there is no retrogression. The world of mortality is a world of contradictions, of opposites; motion being compulsory everything must either go forward or retreat. In the realm of spirit there is no retreat possible, all movement is bound to be towards a perfect state. 'Progress' is the expression of spirit in the world of matter. The intelligence of man, his reasoning powers, his knowledge, his scientific achievements, all these being manifestations of the spirit, partake of the inevitable law of spiritual progress and are, therefore, of necessity, immortal.¹²

Thus, in contrast to the movement of physical systems which, as we have seen above, is cyclical and always within fixed

11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 91.

12. *Ibid.*, 90.

limits, the motion of the soul is unidirected, irreversible and potentially infinite:

Now let us consider the soul. We have seen that movement is essential to existence; nothing that has life is without motion. All creation, whether of the mineral, vegetable or animal kingdom, is compelled to obey the law of motion; it must either ascend or descend. But with the human soul, there is no decline. Its only movement is towards perfection; growth and progress alone constitute the motion of the soul.

Divine perfection is infinite, therefore the progress of the soul is also infinite.¹³

The Bahá'í writings teach that the fundamental capacities of the soul are those of knowledge, of love, and of will. That is, the soul has the intellectual capacity of *understanding* or *mind*, the affective capacity of *feeling* or *emotion*, and the voluntary capacity of *willing* or *acting*. Because the soul is a noncomposite entity, it has no parts. Thus, the soul's capacities are inherent in its very nature, rather than being alienable parts of it.

This characteristic of the soul constitutes an extremely important difference from a physical system such as the body. The higher-order properties of the physical body are entirely due to its relative complexity in terms both of the number of its components (i.e., the cells of the body) and the complex nature of the relationship between these components. Any such composite entity has parts which may be alienated from the organism without necessarily destroying the organism. For example, a person may well survive the amputation of both his legs. But he will have lost the function of autonomous ambulation.

According to the Bahá'í writings, the intrinsic capacities of the individual's soul (called his 'spiritual' capacities) are eternally fixed. They can never be diminished or alienated from the soul, nor can they be increased; they can only be *developed*:

13. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 89.

Know thou that all men have been created in the nature made by God, the Guardian, the Self-Subsisting. Unto each one hath been prescribed a pre-ordained measure, as decreed in God's mighty and guarded Tablets. All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition.¹⁴

Thus, the soul can never lose any of its capacities, unless it be totally destroyed, which, we are assured, God will never do.

This fundamental difference between the nature of the soul and the nature of the physical body is important for an understanding of the difference between the laws governing spiritual reality and those governing material reality. Because it is such a delicate and complex system, the physical body is fragile and vulnerable. It is more or less continually threatened by the possibility of either a partial or total loss of functioning (i.e., death). But the soul is threatened by neither of these possibilities.

However, the soul does face a different kind of threat: it is threatened by the possibility of a relative underdevelopment of its intrinsic capacities. To say that the soul cannot retrogress is not to say that its progress is automatic:

My hope for you is that you will progress in the world of spirit, as well as in the world of matter; that your intelligence will develop, your knowledge will augment, and your understanding be widened.

You must ever press forward, never standing still; avoid stagnation....¹⁵

The process of developing the intrinsic capacities of the soul is called 'spiritual growth' or 'spiritual progress'. Such a process implies both an increase in spiritual autonomy and an increase in spiritual happiness and well-being.

The Bahá'í writings affirm that learning how to grow spiritually is the fundamental purpose of our existence. We

14. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), 149.

15. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 90.

accomplish this purpose by first understanding the laws that govern spiritual reality and then by applying them to the particular circumstances of our life. Just as scientific knowledge of the laws of physical reality enables us to act in the present in such a way as to produce a desired future state of increased material happiness, so a knowledge of the laws governing spiritual reality enables us to act in the present in such a way as to produce a desired future state of increased spiritual happiness. Thus, we progress towards spiritual happiness by increasing our knowledge of spiritual reality, and this, in turn, represents an increase in our spiritual autonomy. This accretion of spiritual happiness and spiritual autonomy is just another name for spiritual growth, or the development of the intrinsic capacities of our souls.

The Knowledge of Spiritual Reality

In the foregoing, we have seen that science is the means God has given us for the understanding of material reality. Scientific method is based on direct observation of the physical world followed by logically sound deductions based on such observations. But spiritual reality is not directly observable. We do not have direct access to spiritual reality, only an indirect access through observation of the effects of the action of spiritual forces on observable phenomena, such as the action of the soul on the physical body. God has therefore ordained a second source of valid knowledge about reality: religion.

The Bahá'í writings make it clear that religion and science are just two different segments of a continuum of knowledge about reality. Since the laws governing spiritual reality are objective, they are potentially discoverable by scientific method. However, because of the relative inaccessibility of spiritual phenomena to spontaneous human observation, it would take us an impractically long time to discover even the simplest of spiritual laws by an unassisted application of scientific method. Thus, religion operates by *revelation* in which God freely explains or 'reveals' to us certain of the laws and principles governing spiritual reality. We are thus spared the pain and effort that would be involved in discovering these truths for

ourselves. However, these spiritual truths are objective and can therefore be tested experientially and applied practically when once understood.

Thus, in the Bahá'í conception, religion, like science, is most correctly viewed as a knowledge-generating enterprise, rather than a belief-affirming or rule-making enterprise: "...religion is the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things.... [it] is the necessary connection which emanates from the reality of things...."¹⁶

This conception of religion clearly differs from the received idea that science is an expression of reason and rationality while religion operates on "blind" faith and unreasoned belief. Indeed, the Bahá'í writings define faith as the deliberate implementation of consciously-acquired knowledge: "Although a blind man produceth a most wonderful and exquisite art, yet he is deprived of seeing it.... By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds."¹⁷

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that the revelation of religious truth (that is, of valid knowledge of the laws and structure of spiritual reality) is a progressive phenomenon in which God periodically communicates with humanity through the agency of a specially chosen human being or *Manifestation*. These Manifestations are none other than the great religious Founders of history, some of whose names we know (such as Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Zoroaster, Muḥammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith). These unique beings are endowed by God with a direct knowledge of spiritual reality, and this endowment allows them to become the teachers of the laws of spiritual reality to humanity:

Briefly, the supreme Manifestations of God are aware of the reality of the mysteries of beings. Therefore, They establish laws which are suitable and adapted to the state of the world of man....the supreme Manifestations of God are aware of

16. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 158-159.

17. Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956), 382-383.

the mysteries of beings, therefore, They understand this essential connection [emanating from the reality of things], and by this knowledge establish the Law of God.¹⁸

In further elaboration of this point, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

Knowledge is of two kinds. One is subjective and the other objective knowledge—that is to say, an intuitive knowledge and a knowledge derived from perception.

The knowledge of things which men universally have is gained by reflection or by evidence....The circle of this knowledge is very limited because it depends upon effort and attainment.

But the second sort of knowledge, which is the knowledge of being, is intuitive; it is like the cognizance and consciousness that man has of himself [i.e., of his own being or existence]....This knowledge is not the outcome of effort and study. It is an existing thing; it is an absolute gift.

Since the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing realities and understand all things, therefore, Their knowledge is divine knowledge, and not acquired—that is to say, it is a holy bounty; it is a divine revelation.¹⁹

In other words, in the same way that ordinary human beings have the spontaneous knowledge of their own being and existence, the Manifestations of God are endowed with the spontaneous knowledge of the laws of all being. In fact, the Manifestations constitute a distinct ontological level intermediate between God and ordinarily-endowed humans: "Know that the conditions of [conscious] existence are limited to the conditions of servitude, of prophethood, and of Deity, but the divine and the contingent perfections are unlimited [on each level of existence]."²⁰

Elsewhere, it is explained that the Manifestations can be thought of as absolutely perfected human beings—as human

18. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 158-159.

19. *Ibid.*, 157-158.

20. *Ibid.*, 230.

beings all of whose spiritual capacities have been developed to the maximum degree possible. They thus represent an ideal or model of the ultimate limits of human spiritual development. However, the Manifestations are created in this state of absolute perfection, whereas ordinary humans can only progressively approximate this condition through the process of spiritual growth. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated, there is "progress in perfection but not in state."²¹ In other words, 'progress' never implies a change from one level of being to another, only a progressive unfolding of the potential inherent in a given level of being.

We can thus sum up the Bahá'í teachings concerning the levels of existence as follows: Within the framework of the overall wholeness of reality, there are four distinct levels of being. The first and highest level is that of the essence or being of God. The second level is that of the Manifestation of God, who perfectly manifests or incarnates all of the attributes of God but not His essence. The third level is that of the human soul, which has consciousness and the capacity to reflect progressively all of the attributes of God. Finally, the lowest level is that of the material world, which is totally devoid of consciousness and will.

The third level, that of the human soul, is the only level of being that exhibits true irreversible progress. God and the Manifestations are already in perfect states of existence on Their respective levels of being and therefore have no need of progression. The material world exhibits continual movement within fixed limits, which involves temporary progression, but a progression that is always followed sooner or later by retrogression and degeneration. However, the human soul, while created in an unperfected state, has the potential for perfection. After being freed from the constraints of the material world, the only movement of the soul is an irreversible progression towards God. The rate of progression, however, is specific for each person and depends on the quality and appropriateness of that person's response to the circumstances of his life.

21. Ibid., 237.

The Bahá'í writings further explain that, from the point of view of human spiritual development, the material world functions as the womb of preparation for birth into the purely spiritual world. The special conditions in the physical womb of our mother enable us to progress from a one-celled organism to a mature human form—effectively compressing five hundred million years of biological evolution into nine short months. In the same way, it is explained, the tests and trials of this material world provide us with the possibility of compressing an immense quantum of spiritual growth into the short period of a human physical lifetime.

However, whereas the physical growth and development in the maternal womb is an automatic process, our spiritual growth during our earthly lives depends on the efforts we make in response to the conditions of our lives. Moreover, during our earthly life, but not afterwards, our souls are subject to the effect of material forces that serve as a resistance against which we struggle in our efforts to grow spiritually. It is this aspect of the material world, the tension of opposition between spiritual and material forces, that provides the opportunity for rapid spiritual growth. But a necessary concomitant of this configuration is that both spiritual progression and spiritual retrogression can occur in this life, whereas (relative) progression alone is the movement of the soul in the next life.

Thus, the fundamental task of our earthly lives is to understand and apprehend the laws governing the process of spiritual growth so that we may generate the appropriate, growth-inducing responses to the circumstances of our lives and thereby profit from the unique opportunities for spiritual growth with which God has endowed this life. This knowledge and understanding can only come from religion and, more particularly, from the holy books of the Manifestations, which explain and expound the principles of spiritual reality.

The experience of five hundred million years of biological evolution is genetically encoded in the DNA of the human genome, and it is this "knowledge" that enables the human fetus to profit from the special environment of the maternal womb and accomplish its astonishing development from a single fertilized

egg to a multi-billion-celled mature and complex organism. The teachings of the Manifestations may be thought of as the spiritual counterpart of the genetic code. These teachings are recorded (encoded) in the holy writings of the great religions, and when the knowledge they contain is implemented, genuine spiritual growth is the result.

The revelation of God to humanity is progressive, because spiritual growth is both collective and individual, and the knowledge appropriate to one stage of spiritual growth may not be appropriate to a later stage. Thus, as the most recent Manifestation of God, Bahá'u'lláh represents the most appropriate and mature expression of our understanding of spiritual laws and principles, and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is the Most Holy Book of Bahá'u'lláh—the book that epitomizes His divinely-inspired articulation of the laws governing spiritual reality.

Because spiritual growth is collective as well as individual, the laws and principles of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are partly social and partly individual. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh explains that religion has always had these two fundamental aspects:

God's purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established.²²

According to Bahá'u'lláh, the history of the last few thousand years has been the history of the childhood and youth of humanity, during which most social forms and structures have had a temporary, experimental quality. We are now in late adolescence, in the transition towards full maturity, when all the potential latent within the human being will be actualized. Thus, the social laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas seek to provide the basis for this transition, as well as to establish the framework for the emerging, mature, and stable world order, founded on spiritual principles.

22. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 79-80.

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas therefore represents the culmination not only of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, but also of the process of progressive revelation itself. Humanity now stands on the brink of its maturity, and we are now in the throes of the greatest single transition in the history of the human race: the transition from our collective adolescence to our collective maturity. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas reveals to us the knowledge necessary for the successful completion of this transition.

The Laws of Spiritual Reality

In *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi describes the Kitáb-i-Aqdas as, among other things:

...the principal repository of that Law which the Prophet Isaiah had anticipated, and which the writer of the Apocalypse had described as the "new heaven" and the "new earth," as "the Tabernacle of God," as the "Holy City," as the "Bride," the "New Jerusalem coming down from God," this "Most Holy Book," whose provisions must remain inviolate for no less than a thousand years, and whose system will embrace the entire planet...as the brightest emanation of the mind of Bahá'u'lláh, as the Mother Book of His Dispensation, and the Charter of His New World Order.²³

In the light of this, and other similarly exalted descriptions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, one might expect to be confronted with a formal legal text in an inflated style. Instead, one finds nothing less than an extended love letter from God to humanity, an outpouring of tenderness and concern for every detail of human existence such as to dispel any possible doubt of God's overwhelming love for His creatures. Moreover, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas exhibits a remarkable harmony of content and style that heightens this impression of God's love and concern for us.

The development of ideas in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is not strictly linear but rather cyclical or spiral. The Author discusses certain

23. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957), 213; quoted in the introductory material of the first authorized English translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993), 13.

questions, then turns to other issues, and later returns to the initial questions, amplifying and elaborating with each subsequent discussion. There is also an ongoing alternation between the abstract and the concrete, the general and the specific, the universal and the particular. Nevertheless there is an overall progression throughout this dialectical development.

Fundamentally, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas views life as a continual dialogue between God and humanity. Thus, not only does the content of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas treat a wide spectrum of life's questions, the work's very form reproduces our experience of life, in which profound philosophical and moral issues are continually juxtaposed with practical and concrete questions of everyday life. By reproducing this existential juxtaposition within the text itself, Bahá'u'lláh allows us to see how the most significant and abstract philosophical and spiritual questions are indeed related to the most homely issues of our material existence. Also, these textual juxtapositions help the reader make logical connections that might otherwise remain obscure. This, in turn, increases the reader's autonomy in confronting and understanding the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, enabling him to "see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears."²⁴

According to Bahá'u'lláh, our dialogue with God is pursued on both the individual and the collective level; it is initiated by God, who also establishes its parameters, but its success is dependent upon our ability to generate an appropriate response to God's overtures. Thus, the laws and principles of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are presented in the form of a *covenant* or agreement in which God requires certain things from us but solemnly promises that spiritual growth, progress, and happiness will inevitably follow if these actions and attitudes on our part are forthcoming.

The opening paragraph of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas states that the fundamental duty of man towards God is "the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws..." and that the second duty is "to observe every

24. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978), 29.

ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world." It is then stated that "These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other."²⁵

Thus, the individual dialogue takes place within the framework of the collective dialogue. The collective dialogue is initiated by God's sending of the Manifestations, and the first response required of us is to recognize and accept the spiritual authority of these figures. Indeed, if God has taken the trouble to send the Manifestations to give us valid knowledge of the laws governing spiritual reality, then the minimal acceptable response on our part is to turn to Them and follow Their instruction. In particular, we must signify our true acceptance by implementing the laws and principles They teach.

Following this opening statement, paragraphs 2-5 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas constitute a powerful articulation of the importance generally of obeying and implementing the laws of God and of the benefits to be derived from such obedience. For example:

O ye peoples of the world! Know assuredly that My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures....

...“Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.” Happy is the lover that hath inhaled the divine fragrance of his Best-Beloved from these words, laden with the perfume of a grace which no tongue can describe.²⁶

This portion of the text culminates (paragraph 5) in the following metaphor for the whole of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas itself: “Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power....Meditate upon this, O men of insight!”²⁷ The symbolic use of “Wine” in this passage powerfully conveys

25. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K 1. The presently-published version of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas has sequentially numbered paragraphs, which we will use as our main reference points in alluding to the text.

26. Ibid., K 3-4.

27. Ibid., K 5.

the notion that implementation of the laws of spiritual reality produces an effect of spiritual euphoria—thus of extreme spiritual happiness. Bahá'u'lláh's choice of image here is particularly significant given the fact that, subsequently in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, He strictly forbids the drinking of wine and other intoxicants (paragraph 119), stating, "It is inadmissible that man, who hath been endowed with reason, should consume that which stealeth it away."²⁸

Thus, true happiness—spiritual euphoria—comes not from the abandonment of rationality but by its disciplined application to an understanding of the laws governing spiritual reality. Divine proscriptions are not intended to deny us genuine joy but rather to teach us the conditions under which the greatest and most enduring joy can be obtained. What is being given us is no less than the keys to a true and lasting paradise.

In this way, the opening five paragraphs of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas lay out the general parameters of the dialogue, or covenant, between God and humanity: God initiates the dialogue by sending the Manifestations to teach us the fundamental laws of spiritual reality. We respond by recognizing the spiritual authority (validity) of the Manifestation and obeying His laws. The result is increased spiritual development leading to increased happiness and, ultimately, to a state of extreme and enduring joy.

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas also affirms that the implementation of the laws of spiritual reality increases the individual's spiritual autonomy, which Bahá'u'lláh calls "true liberty":

Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed.... Say: The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth.²⁹

28. Ibid., K 119.

29. Ibid., K 125.

In this and other passages, Bahá'u'lláh makes unequivocally clear that God does not seek an obedience of childlike weakness, but a mature, intelligent obedience based on deliberate individual choice. We must submit our wills to God's, but this submission results from a disciplined accretion of spiritual power to the individual, not from a helpless capitulation.

The Covenant and the Universal House of Justice

Before examining some specific laws and principles contained in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, it is important to understand several fundamental features of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, which, as mentioned above, constitutes the basic framework for the dialogue between God and humanity. The first concerns the question of the interpretation of Bahá'u'lláh's writings and, in particular, the interpretation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Bahá'u'lláh Himself wrote elucidations of several passages of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas during His lifetime, many of which are included in the current English edition of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Given the fact that certain laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas "have been formulated in anticipation of a [future] state of society destined to emerge from the chaotic conditions that prevail today...", Bahá'u'lláh foresaw the necessity of providing for further authoritative interpretation of His writings after His death.³⁰ He therefore appointed His eldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the "Center of the Covenant," the authorized interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, and as the perfect exemplar of Bahá'í teachings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá survived Bahá'u'lláh by twenty-nine years during which time He wrote a number of texts, including explanations of certain passages of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in turn appointed His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to succeed Him as the authorized interpreter of the Bahá'í writings.

Beginning in 1921, Shoghi Effendi's ministry continued for thirty-six years until his death in 1957. During this period, Shoghi Effendi generated an extensive corpus of detailed commentary and interpretation of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, including the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Certain portions of Shoghi

30. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 7.

Effendi's commentary are likewise included in the present English edition of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

Thus, in a certain sense, "the Kitáb-i-Aqdas" is not just the relatively brief (but extraordinarily concentrated) text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas itself, but also includes the extensive body of authoritative commentaries by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi.

Another fundamental aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant derives from Bahá'u'lláh's declared intention of establishing a system of divine governance adequate for the needs of humanity for at least a thousand years. Such a system must take into account permanence, stability, and order, on one hand, and change, progression, and dynamism, on the other. The specific laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas constitute the permanent or stable underpinnings of Bahá'u'lláh's system; they are to remain inviolate for at least a thousand years. To provide for change and flexibility in His system, Bahá'u'lláh has established a supreme legislative organ, called the Universal House of Justice.

According to the specific texts of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Universal House of Justice is invested with the authority to legislate on all matters not specifically dealt with in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas or elsewhere in the Bahá'í sacred writings. Moreover, the Universal House of Justice can repeal or alter any of its previous decisions. This feature provides Bahá'u'lláh's system with a great flexibility and adaptability. As the conditions of humanity change and as scientific progress alters various social realities, the Universal House of Justice can legislate in order to take into account this evolution.

For example, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas specifically proscribes murder, defined as the willful taking of another human life. This, then, is an absolute prohibition. However, while specifying certain penalties for murder (either execution or life imprisonment), Bahá'u'lláh leaves the Universal House of Justice free to determine their application. Moreover, He also leaves to the Universal House of Justice the task of establishing various degrees of murder and the appropriate penalty for each degree. Or, to take another example, the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas do not deal directly with the question of birth control,

regional—level. Membership in these governing councils is also by election.³²

Thus, the administrative structure of the Bahá'í community exists at three levels: local, national, and international. Decisions of local Houses of Justice can be altered by the secondary House of Justice on which they depend, and the Universal House of Justice can change a decision of any local or secondary House of Justice.

Underlying all the laws and community structures in the Bahá'í Faith is a group decision-making process called *consultation*. This process was instituted by Bahá'u'lláh himself in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and further elaborated and explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Essentially, Bahá'í consultation involves a frank but loving exchange of opinions by members of a group with a view towards the determination of the objective truth of some matter and the consequent establishment of a genuine group consensus. In particular, consultation is the basic mode of functioning of the Houses of Justice. Thus, in Bahá'u'lláh's system of governance, all decision-making authority derives from consultative bodies. No individual has decision-making authority unless such authority has been specifically granted by an appropriate consultative decision of a collective organ functioning under one of the Houses of Justice.

The central role that consultation plays throughout Bahá'u'lláh's system, and Bahá'í community life in general, gives a non-authoritarian, collaborative spirit to the functioning of the Bahá'í community at all levels. The ideal of Bahá'í consultation is to arrive at a unanimous decision of the consultative group. In the instances where such unanimity is not forthcoming, a vote is taken and the majority view prevails.

Unity, the Fundamental Goal of the Bahá'í Faith

It is important here to stress that all of the laws, institutions, and principles that Bahá'u'lláh has established are expressions of the

32. It should be noted that local and secondary Houses of Justice are presently known as Spiritual Assemblies.

leaving the House of Justice free to legislate (or not) in this area. It is therefore logically possible for the Universal House of Justice to legislate in a certain manner regarding this question and later, perhaps in the light of changed demographic circumstances, repeal or alter this legislation.

Though the Universal House of Justice cannot repeal or alter any of the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, it is nevertheless empowered by Bahá'u'lláh to oversee the gradual and progressive application of those laws. The Universal House of Justice is also invested with the quasi-judicial function of rendering an authoritative and final verdict in all disputes or controversies that arise within the Bahá'í community. These functions are summed up in the following passage from the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

It is incumbent upon these members (of the Universal House of Justice) to gather in a certain place and deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself. And inasmuch as this House of Justice hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions, so also it hath power to repeal the same....The House of Justice is both the initiator and the abrogator of its own laws.³¹

The House of Justice was first elected in 1963 in the manner outlined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and has functioned continually since that date. Election of the membership of the House of Justice is held every five years.

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Bahá'u'lláh also establishes local Houses of Justice, which have administrative jurisdiction on a local—usually municipal or county—level. Acting on the authority given Him by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá established secondary Houses of Justice on an intermediate—national or

31. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968), 20.

two fundamental principles of justice and love. Justice has to do with the recognition of and respect for the role, status, and worth of a given individual, of a given social function, or of a given institution or principle. Justice provides the component of stability and order to the social fabric and to human relationships generally. Love is the underlying dynamic and motivating force of the whole of creation. Without love, justice degenerates into dry formalities, and without justice love may be improperly channeled and therefore unproductive of effective results.

The principles of justice and love are thus complementary, and each is essential to the fundamental Bahá'í goal of establishing the unity of humanity at all levels of human interaction. Indeed, the unity of the material world itself results from the natural laws (justice) which regulate the dynamic interactions (love) among the different physical forces and entities. According to Bahá'u'lláh, the ultimate expression of the unity of humanity will be the organization of the life of the entire planet into one coherent social system based on justice and cooperation: "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."³³

Given the breathtaking scope of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the future of mankind, we might anticipate that His system would exalt justice over love, order over dynamism. However, we will see that, if anything, the opposite is true: love is the most fundamental principle of all, and the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas reflect the fact that, in all of God's creation, justice is the servant of love. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá has expressed it:

Love is the mystery of divine revelations!...Love is the breath of the Holy Spirit inspired into the human spirit! Love is the cause of the manifestation of the Truth (God) in the phenomenal world! Love is the necessary tie proceeding from the realities of things through divine creation! Love is the means of the most great happiness in both the material and spiritual worlds!...Love is the greatest law in this vast universe of God! Love is the one law which causeth and

33. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 12.

controlleth order among the existing atoms!...Love is the cause of the civilization of nations in this mortal world!³⁴

The Individual Dialogue with God

Having established, in the opening passages, the fundamental premise of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas—the collective and individual dialogue or covenant between God and humanity—Bahá'u'lláh now turns, in paragraphs 6-15, to the first specific and most basic law of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the law of prayer. Prayer is the foundation of the individual dialogue between God and man. Through it, the individual establishes a direct, unmediated, inner connection between his soul and God. Moreover, this relationship is *the most fundamental of all relationships accessible to the individual*. Unless this relationship be correctly and firmly established, all other relationships, whether with other individuals, with society, or with nature, will be essentially flawed.

The following statement, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, illustrates the importance that Bahá'u'lláh gives to prayer:

How to attain spirituality is indeed a question to which every young man and woman must sooner or later try to find a satisfactory answer....

Indeed the chief reason for the evils now rampant in society is the lack of spirituality. The materialistic civilization of our age has so much absorbed the energy and interest of mankind that people in general do no longer feel the necessity of raising themselves above the forces and conditions of their daily material existence. There is not sufficient demand for things that we call spiritual to differentiate them from the needs and requirements of our physical existence....

The universal crisis affecting mankind is, therefore, essentially spiritual in its causes....the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which 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

34. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas* (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930), vol. 3, 525-526.

worship....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 which has first to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide.³⁵

Among the various prescriptions Bahá'u'lláh gives concerning prayer is a specific, daily obligatory prayer. This prayer has three forms: short, medium, and long. Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that the individual is entirely free to choose, each day, whichever of the three forms he prefers, but is spiritually and morally obligated to offer an obligatory prayer at least once every twenty-four hours. The text of the short prayer is as follows:

I bear witness, O My God, that Thou has created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth.

There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.³⁶

A detailed study of the obligatory prayers is beyond the scope of the present article, but one main feature is already clear from the content of the short obligatory prayer: the key to spiritual happiness and autonomy is *recognition* of our total dependence on God. In other words, spiritual growth is not a process of becoming more dependent on God, but of becoming more aware of our dependence on God.

The obligatory prayers, as well as other prayers, are offered individually in private. The Bahá'í Faith has no priesthood or clergy, and each individual believer is responsible before God for his own spiritual development.

The habit of regular prayer is collateral with other spiritual disciplines such as the daily reading of and meditation upon the

35. Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*. Compiled by Gertrude Garrida (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973), 86-87.

36. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 101.

texts revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. For example, in paragraph 149 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh says: "Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide. Whoso faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament...."³⁷ Thus, prayer, meditation, and the thoughtful study of the holy writings constitute the fundamentals of the individual covenant or dialogue between God and ourselves.

However, it is important to realize that the daily obligatory prayers constitute only a spiritual minimum, not a maximum or an optimum. Bahá'u'lláh stresses throughout His writings that we should pursue communion with God at every moment of our existence, in such wise that the attitude of prayerfulness pervades our entire life and all of our human interactions. As Shoghi Effendi has expressed in a letter written on his behalf: "We must become entirely selfless and devoted to God so that every day and every moment we seek to do only what God would have us do and in the way He would have us do it."³⁸

A second key element of individual spiritual discipline is fasting, and Bahá'u'lláh mentions the law of fasting in paragraph 16, immediately following his initial discussion of the obligatory prayers. He later elaborates the details of the law of fasting: Bahá'ís are to fast from sunrise to sunset for nineteen successive days during the same period (2 March to 21 March) each solar year. This periodic, temporary suspension of eating and drinking allows the individual to experience his soul as an entity separate from the body. In this way, the individual's soul or spirit becomes a palpable reality and not just an intellectual abstraction.

Most of the other prescriptions pertaining to individuals are related, in one way or another, to prayer and fasting. For example, Bahá'u'lláh stresses physical cleanliness, stating that it has an effect on spiritual purity and thereby on the heart's receptivity to communion with God. As mentioned above, He also forbids recourse to alcohol, opium, and other substances

37. Ibid., K 149.

38. *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*. Compiled by Helen Hornby. 2nd rev. and enlarged ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), 111.

which distort perception and thus inhibit the individual's capacity to maintain an ongoing state of communion with God.

The importance Bahá'u'lláh gives to our individual relationship with God and the centrality of this relationship within Bahá'u'lláh's system are expressions of the fundamental role that the love of God plays in all human relationships.

Lateral Relationships; Marriage

The vertical relationship between each individual and God is the necessary basis for harmonious and productive lateral relationships between and among human beings. Of all these lateral relationships, the most fundamental is that between husband and wife. Indeed, society comes forth from the family and the family from the couple. Ultimately, society cannot be more healthy than its families nor families more healthy than the relationship between wife and husband. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh devotes a portion of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas to laying out the fundamental parameters of the marriage relationship.

As viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, the relationship between husband and wife is governed by two basic principles: equality (or reciprocity) and fidelity. The principle of equality is the expression of justice within the marriage, and the principle of fidelity is an expression of love. We will discuss each in turn.

The equality of women and men is a fundamental principle of the Bahá'í Faith. This principle implies not only social equality but total reciprocity within the marriage relationship. In making decisions that are not purely individual—that relate to the married couple as a social entity—the marriage partners are enjoined to use consultation. As mentioned in our brief discussion of Bahá'í consultation above, the goal is to seek a consensual view of the matter at hand, and to abide by a majority view when such a consensus cannot be attained. When, as in the case of husband and wife, no non-unanimous majority is possible, then the couple must find a creative way of making a given decision when differences of opinion persist. This may involve either one deferring to the other in certain given instances, but in the Bahá'í conception of the marriage relationship, there is no presumption that either party should

ever dominate the other or impose his or her will by force or manipulation.

Consultation, and the pursuit of justice within the marriage relationship, is best thought of as a lateral extension of the intimate dialogue between each individual and God. Viewed in this way, consultation between the couple becomes a sort of collective prayer: in the same way that the individual seeks the truth through his internal dialogue with God, so the couple must seek the truth in their intimate dialogue with each other.

Clearly, this conception of the relationship between marriage partners represents a certain challenge to the maturity of their relationship. But this can be seen as a healthy challenge, conducive to spiritual growth and thus to the purpose of human existence.

The second basic principle governing the relationship between husband and wife is absolute fidelity. Among other things, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas specifically states that a sexual relationship is spiritually legitimate only between a man and a woman who are married to each other. Thus, sexual relationships outside of the marriage bond are proscribed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and those who violate this prohibition are subject to a penalty which, in the case of consenting adults, is the payment of an identical fine by both parties, the amount being doubled with each subsequent offense. The penalty for other particular violations of this law, such as rape, incest or adultery, are to be determined by the Universal House of Justice.

Bahá'u'lláh's conception of loyalty between the marriage partners implies not only the act of sexual faithfulness, but also an attitude of mind in which each partner continually gives priority to the well-being of the other in all circumstances. The importance Bahá'u'lláh gives to loyalty within marriage is apparent from His first mention of the principle in paragraph 19: "Ye have been forbidden to commit murder or adultery, or to engage in backbiting or calumny; shun ye, then, what hath been prohibited in the holy Books and Tablets."³⁹

39. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K 19.

Just as murder is the most grievous possible violation of the sanctity of individual life, so adultery is the most grievous possible violation of the sanctity of the marriage relationship. Backbiting and calumny destroy the individual by assassinating his character and reputation rather than his physical person. Similarly, other more subtle forms of unfaithfulness may assassinate the marriage relationship. But sexual faithfulness is the minimum challenge to be met by the marriage partners.

Probably most people would agree that the combination of sexual chastity before marriage and faithfulness within marriage will serve to strengthen the marriage bond. However, many may also feel that this discipline will impose an intolerable hardship on the individual. The accepted idea in many quarters is that men especially cannot be seriously expected to restrain themselves sexually before marriage or to confine themselves to only one partner after marriage.

Clearly, Bahá'u'lláh does not agree with such notions. To begin with, there is no trace whatsoever of any sexual double standard in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Marriage is monogamous, the principles of chastity and fidelity are equally binding on men and women, and all penalties for violations of these principles between consenting adults apply equally to both partners. Moreover, a number of special conditions regarding prayer and fasting apply to women only, such as special prayers to be said in lieu of fasting for menstruating women. The overall result—confirmed in other writings of Bahá'u'lláh as well—is to exalt the position of the woman as the bearer and nurturer of life, while maintaining total social equality between women and men in all other respects.

As to the question of sexual discipline, Bahá'u'lláh considers this to be a particular means God has provided for our spiritual development. If God has so freely endowed us with the precious and potent gift of sexuality, He has also endowed us with the capacity for its disciplined and responsible use. Throughout His writings, Bahá'u'lláh insists that one of the basic principles God has established in His dealings with humanity is that He never requires from us anything of which we are not truly capable: "He will never deal unjustly with any one, neither will He task

a soul beyond its power.”⁴⁰ Indeed, explains Bahá’u’lláh, everything God imposes upon us is for our benefit alone, for there is no self-interest on the part of God. God is totally self-sufficient and His love for us is absolutely pure.

Thus, according to Bahá’u’lláh, the sexual discipline of chastity and fidelity contained in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is for our benefit and fully within our God-given power to accomplish. Had God withheld the gift of so powerful a sexuality from us, we would have been spared the tensions sometimes involved in the exercise of sexual discipline, but we would have been denied the opportunities for substantial and rapid spiritual growth this discipline affords. Thus, Bahá’u’lláh’s prescriptions regarding sexuality constitute a prime example of teachings that can be understood only in the light of Bahá’u’lláh’s conception of human purpose.

Although the prescription of chastity and fidelity are not original with the Bahá’í teachings, historical attempts to practice these disciplines have been marred by several factors. First is the often unspoken assumption that human sexuality is animalistic, dirty, or debased. The Bahá’í teachings specifically contradict this notion, teaching that all of the naturally-given human capacities—both physical and spiritual—come from God and are good in themselves. Any evil connected therewith is strictly a result of our misuse of them. Human sexuality is divine and sacred, not animal and exploitative, unless we debase it through willful misuse. Moreover, Bahá’u’lláh specifically states that there is no moral value whatsoever in celibacy itself. Not only does the Kitáb-i-Aqdas condemn asceticism and other forms of extreme self-denial, it criticizes harshly anyone who, for example, “hath secluded himself in the climes of India, denied himself the things that God hath decreed as lawful, imposed upon himself austerities and mortifications,” stating that such a person “hath not been remembered by God, the Revealer of Verses.”⁴¹

40. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, 106.

41. Bahá’u’lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K 36.

A second feature that has prevented mankind from benefitting appropriately from the disciplines of chastity and fidelity has been the historic inequality between men and women. Polygamous marriage (specifically forbidden in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*), the sexual double standard (in which, curiously, women are blamed for male promiscuity), and the dominance of women by men generally have prevented the marriage relationship from reaping anything like the full benefits of sexual discipline, even when it was sincerely practiced. However, the channelling of sexual expression into long-term, stable marriage relationships, in conjunction with the Bahá'í practice of equality, reciprocity, and consultation between the marriage partners, will undoubtedly allow marriage relationships to achieve unprecedented levels of harmony, loyalty, intimacy, and satisfaction. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have said that no human can conceive of the union and harmony that God has destined for husband and wife.⁴² In Bahá'u'lláh's view, such a consummation is more than adequate compensation for whatever temporary frustrations must be endured in the practice of sexual discipline before marriage.

Importantly, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* allows divorce:

Should resentment or antipathy arise between husband and wife, [they must] bide in patience throughout the course of one whole year, that perchance the fragrance of affection may be renewed between them. If, upon the completion of this period, their love hath not returned, it is permissible for divorce to take place. God's wisdom, verily, hath encompassed all things.⁴³

It is often true that whatever has great potential for good when properly implemented also has great potential for evil if misused. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh exalts the station of marriage and its positive spiritual potential, but recognizes that there is no spiritual value—and, in fact, much potential spiritual harm—in

42. From the "Marriage Tablet" of 'Abdu'l-Bahá; see, for example, *Star of the West* 11:1 (21 March 1920), 20.

43. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K 68.

forcing a couple to maintain the formalities of a relationship that no longer exists in fact. Notice that the grounds for divorce are "resentment or antipathy," not necessarily a specific act of (sexual or other) unfaithfulness. As with other aspects of marriage, both husband and wife have an equal right to divorce, when once the year of waiting has been accomplished. Neither party can block or refuse divorce to the other.

The Family

We have seen that the two basic parameters of marriage—equality and fidelity—are particular instances of the two fundamental pillars of all human relationships, justice and love. We now want to see how these same principles operate in the context of the next most intimate category of human relationships, namely the relationships within the family.

Equality and reciprocity are the expression of justice within the marriage relationship because Bahá'í marriage is conceived as a completely symmetrical relationship between two equally mature and competent adults. But other relationships within the family, and in particular the relationship between parents and children, are not symmetrical. Therefore, the expression of justice within the family involves certain subtleties and nuances, which Bahá'u'lláh addresses in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.

To begin with, Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that the primary purpose of spiritually healthy marriages is to bring forth spiritually healthy children. Indeed, a high quality of relationship between the marriage partners provides an appropriate milieu for the healthy growth and development of each member of the family and, in particular, for the children: "Enter into wedlock, O people, that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants. This is My bidding unto you; hold fast to it as an assistance to yourselves."⁴⁴ Thus, the purpose of the family is not just the physical propagation of children but also their spiritual education. The emphasis which Bahá'u'lláh places on the parents' responsibilities is indicated by the following commentary of Bahá'u'lláh:

44. *Ibid.*, K 63.

Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing and in all that hath been laid down in the Holy Tablet. He that putteth away that which is commanded unto him, the Trustees are then to take from him that which is required for their instruction if he be wealthy and, if not, the matter devolveth upon the House of Justice. Verily we have made it a shelter for the poor and needy. He that bringeth up his son or the son of another, it is as though he hath brought up a son of Mine; upon him rest My glory, My loving-kindness, My mercy, that have compassed the world.⁴⁵

Elsewhere it is explained that the spiritual and moral obligation to educate children devolves equally upon both parents, but in different ways. The mother is declared to be the "first educator" of the child, and she has the right to material support from the father in this task. Indeed, each succeeding generation of the human race is founded on the willingness of its mothers to dedicate themselves to the best interests of their children. This pivotal role of motherhood is stressed throughout the Bahá'í writings. It means that society in general, and men in particular, must arrange their affairs so that mothers receive all of the necessary recognition, support, and reward for their accomplishment of this sacred task.

For example, Bahá'u'lláh states that sons and daughters must be educated equally (and, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with the same curriculum), but that whenever choices must be made in the education of children, preference is given to daughters because it is they who, upon becoming mothers, will be the first educators of the next generation. This principle shows clearly a shift of values away from the traditional view that the primary goal of education is to prepare males for economic or material success and towards the view that education must serve the primary goal of fostering the spiritual development of the entire future generation.

Thus, according to Bahá'u'lláh's view of the family, children have certain rights, such as the right to education, which the parents are obliged to respect. In a commentary on the Kitáb-i-

45. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K 48.

Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh states that a parent who neglects these sacred obligations may be declared by the House of Justice to have lost his rights of parenthood: "Should a father neglect this most weighty commandment [to educate one's children] laid down in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas by the Pen of the Eternal King, he shall forfeit rights of fatherhood, and be accounted guilty before God."⁴⁶

Thus, children are not viewed as chattels or possessions of their parents, and parents do not have absolute authority over their children. Appropriate community agencies and authorities, under the guidance of the House of Justice, can intervene when necessary for the protection of children. According to Bahá'u'lláh's prescriptions, children reach the age of discretion at fifteen, after which they are held individually responsible for their actions and for the fulfillment of all adult spiritual responsibilities. Fifteen is also the age at which individuals are free to contract marriage.

A counterpart to these spiritual obligations devolving upon parents are similar obligations on children to respect the rights and station of their parents. Bahá'u'lláh has said:

Well is it with him who in the Day of God hath laid fast hold upon His precepts and hath not deviated from His true and fundamental Law. The fruits that best befit the tree of human life are trustworthiness and godliness, truthfulness and sincerity; but greater than all, after recognition of the unity of God, praised and glorified be He, is regard for the rights that are due to one's parents....Observe how loving-kindness to one's parents hath been linked to recognition of the one true God!⁴⁷

The mutual respect for the rights and obligations of each member of the family provides a framework of justice which allows for true and enduring love to exist within the family. In the past, family relationships have too often been based on power rather than love. If the power of the parents is dominant, then the family falls into an authoritarian mode in which

46. Ibid., 136.

47. Ibid., 136-137.

children can become virtual slaves to their parents' purely egotistical wishes. If the power of the children is dominant, the family tends to become indulgent and degenerates into anarchy and chaos.

In Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the family, none have dominance over others. Rather, the entire family and its members are subject, one and all, to the spiritual authority of Bahá'í principles and laws. In particular, parents recognize and acknowledge that they also are guided by a moral law greater than their own individual will. This acknowledgement confers upon them the necessary moral authority to direct, guide, and teach their children. Thus, the parents function as instruments or vehicles for the spiritual education of their children, not as tyrants or dictators who rule over them.

Of course, this quality of education requires continual and significant sacrifice on the part of the parents. Thus, children are obliged to show forth respect and kindness for their parents as a recognition of the sacrifice their parents make for the sake of the children's education. The experience of many Bahá'í families has been that children respond positively to principles to which their parents also submit, whereas the common experience of humanity is that children tend to resent the imposition of principles and rules they perceive as arbitrary dictates of their parents as individuals. Indeed, is it not the gap between deeds and words that so often leads the younger generation to view the older generation as hypocritical?

Because of the great sacrifice parents make for the spiritual education of their children, and because of the seriousness of marriage and its centrality to the human enterprise, Bahá'u'lláh requires that a couple, *once they have freely chosen each other as future marriage partners*, must seek the blessing and permission of their parents for the marriage. This requirement serves the fundamental Bahá'í goal of promoting unity. It can also be seen both as a formal recognition of the contribution the parents have made to the person's spiritual development, as well as a protection against a hasty choice of marriage partner, perhaps made under a spell of infatuation. Here is Bahá'u'lláh's statement of this principle in paragraph 65 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

...marriage is dependent upon the consent of both parties. Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned it, once the couple's wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancor should arise amongst them. And in this We have yet other purposes. Thus hath Our commandment been ordained.⁴⁸

Those who have some knowledge of the immense cultural diversity abroad in the world today can appreciate the fineness and wisdom with which Bahá'u'lláh has established these various parameters of marriage and family relationships. One cultural extreme places the emphasis on absolute parental authority, where marriages are forced and arranged for economic or cultural reasons having little or nothing to do with the quality of spiritual relationship between the marriage partners. This has led to such terrible abuses as bride selling, bride burning, and involuntary surrogate motherhood. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh makes it absolutely clear that, unless and until the marriage partners have made a personal decision that they desire to marry, the parents have no right to interfere in the process. Furthermore, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas strictly limits any dowry to a symbolic amount, thereby permanently removing any basis for the infernal manipulations so widespread in many parts of the world today.

At the other end of the cultural spectrum, as for example in North America, marriage is usually viewed as an absolute free choice between two individuals, without regard for the perceptions or wishes of the parents. As a consequence of this pattern, marriages are often entered into for immature and frivolous reasons, and frequently without the vital and necessary support of the families involved. Consequently, marriages may begin under conditions of intolerable stress, leading to early and acrimonious divorce, with attendant destabilisation of the family milieu and catastrophic effects on the children involved. By making marriage conditional upon parental consent, "once the couple's wish is known," Bahá'u'lláh maximizes the possibility that marriages will begin under conditions of loving family

48. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K 65.

support and that young people will be protected from immature choices.

Interestingly and significantly, Bahá'u'lláh has not made divorce conditional on the approval of others, once the year of waiting and attempted reconciliation has been faithfully observed. Thus, on one hand, Bahá'u'lláh optimizes the possibility that marriages will be spiritually healthy and successful, and, on the other hand, He allows for the possibility that sincere mistakes can and will occur. Such a balanced, responsible and reasonable approach to the whole question of marriage and family shows the faith that Bahá'u'lláh has in the human potential for mature and responsible spirituality.

The Bahá'í principles regarding marriage and family life are not the only examples where the Kitáb-i-Aqdas deals with the question of cultural relativity and conflicting cultural traditions. Indeed, many of the ordinances in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas represent liberalizations and abolitions of past practices. For example, in paragraphs 74-76 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh states:

God hath decreed, in token of His mercy unto His creatures, that semen is not unclean....

God hath, likewise, as a bounty from His presence, abolished the concept of "uncleanness," whereby divers things and peoples have been held to be impure....

God hath enjoined upon you to observe the utmost cleanliness, to the extent of washing what is soiled with dust, let alone with hardened dirt and similar defilement.⁴⁹

Thus, with one stroke of His pen, Bahá'u'lláh completely abolishes the whole, hoary fetish of ritual uncleanness, which has lain at the root of centuries—indeed millennia—of superstitious and obsessive social practices in many parts of the world. He likewise stresses the importance of genuine physical cleanliness.

There are a number of other instances in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas where Bahá'u'lláh specifically declares previous religious

49. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K 74-76.

practices to have been based on superstition or gross misinterpretation of previous holy texts such as the Qur'an or the Bible.

The Extended Family; the Larger Society

In a certain sense, all of the challenges of human relationships are reproduced within the milieu of each extended family. The dynamics of family relationships are subtle and constantly changing. As time passes, the parents, who were once young, vigorous, and powerful, become weak, fragile, and vulnerable; whereas the children, who were dependent, vulnerable, and untutored, become strong, virile, and accomplished. The children no longer see their parents as god-like—as representing the ultimate in human accomplishment. They began to achieve things their parents have not or could not have achieved. When the parents approach old age, there is almost a complete reversal of roles in which they become, in some ways, like dependent children to the same younger generation they have propagated. Nevertheless, as grandparents, uncles, and aunts, they have various other important roles to play, providing a needed sense of historical perspective and continuity to the family. Under stable social conditions, the experiential oral history of a family can encompass almost a hundred years, involving three or even four generations.

These same dynamics exist within the larger society, in which roles and interdependencies are constantly shifting. This raises, in a very sharp way, the question of how to maintain the cohesion, the stability and progressiveness of social systems, while giving ample scope for individual freedom and initiative. Bahá'u'lláh articulates two fundamental principles that are necessary to the spiritual health of society: cooperation and service. These are the general social expression of justice and love. To the degree that society, at any level, is founded on cooperation and service, it will succeed and prosper, spiritually and materially. And, in the same way, the extent to which competition displaces cooperation and self-seeking displaces service in human motivation, society will degenerate. Here is one strong statement Bahá'u'lláh makes concerning the

destructive effects of competition and self-seeking in human society:

And amongst the realms of unity is the unity of rank and station. It redoundeth to the exaltation of the Cause, glorifying it among all peoples. Ever since the seeking of preference and distinction came into play, the world hath been laid waste. It hath become desolate. Those who have quaffed from the ocean of divine utterance and fixed their gaze upon the Realm of Glory should regard themselves as being on the same level as the others and in the same station. Were this matter to be definitely established and conclusively demonstrated through the power and might of God, the world would become as the Abhá Paradise.

Indeed, man is noble, inasmuch as each one is a repository of the sign of God. Nevertheless, to regard oneself as superior in knowledge, learning or virtue, or to exalt oneself or seek preference, is a grievous transgression. Great is the blessedness of those who are adorned with the ornament of this unity and have been graciously confirmed by God.⁵⁰

Although most people would admit that competition does indeed have negative aspects, the extreme individualism and competitiveness of modern Western society are often justified as an evil that is necessary for the achievement of excellence. However, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá strongly reject this view. The pursuit of excellence proceeds by vertical comparisons between the performances of the same individual at different times; whereas competition proceeds by the horizontal comparison of the performances of different individuals at the same time. As a basic motivation, pure competition may sometimes stimulate the pursuit of excellence, but it may also generate efforts to sabotage or undermine the performance of others (by the passive refusal to collaborate, if not through more active means). The Bahá'í writings stress that the underlying motivation for the pursuit of excellence should be to put our God-given talents at the service of others. When this intrinsic

50. Quoted in a letter of the Universal House of Justice, published in *Bahá'í Canada* (June-July 1978), 3.

motivation is dominant, individuals strive to enhance their performance for greater development both of society and self, regardless of whether this leads them to outperform other individuals.

The other pillar of the spiritualization of society is service. Service involves not only a general attitude towards others, but also the discipline of daily work at a chosen profession:

O people of Bahá! It is incumbent upon each one of you to engage in some occupation—such as a craft, a trade or the like. We have exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship of the one true God. Reflect, O people, on the grace and blessings of your Lord, and yield Him thanks at eventide and dawn. Waste not your hours in idleness and sloth, but occupy yourselves with what will profit you and others.⁵¹

Other statements in the Bahá'í writings make it clear that the obligation to work is a spiritual law equally binding on everyone, regardless of the degree of material necessity. Homemaking is considered a noble profession and, accordingly, an act of worship. However, this in no way precludes mothers' and homemakers' engaging in other professions outside the home.

The Bahá'í view of work as worship brings us back again to the theme that the fundamental purpose of the laws and principles of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is to foster the spiritual and material development of humanity. Bahá'í morality is thus not a morality of avoidance and withdrawal but a proactive dynamic of accomplishment and progression, motivated by the principles of justice and love, service and cooperation, reciprocity and loyalty.

Inheritance Laws; Huqúqu'lláh

The application of the general social principles of service and cooperation can take many forms in particular contexts. In most instances, Bahá'u'lláh has left to individual judgment, and to the

51. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K 33.

Universal House of Justice, the task of establishing or defining the implementation of these important principles. With regard to the age-old question of the distribution of wealth, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has enunciated the general principle that gross accumulation of wealth, whether by individuals or groups within society, should be avoided. He states that such overconcentration of wealth is harmful not only for society but also for the individuals involved. In the light of this principle, Bahá'u'lláh has instituted certain practical measures that, while allowing the necessary latitude for entrepreneurial initiative and individual freedom of economic action, nevertheless help to avoid extremes both of poverty and of excessive wealth.

One of these measures is called *Huqúqu'lláh* or "the right of God." In summary form, this measure stipulates that every believer must pay, once only, 19 percent of the value of his possessions, less various exempt items, such as one's home and its furnishings. Bahá'u'lláh extols the spiritual benefits of *Huqúqu'lláh* and states, "By this means He [God] hath desired to purify what ye possess and to enable you to draw nigh unto such stations as none can comprehend save those whom God hath willed."⁵²

Huqúqu'lláh is paid to the Universal House of Justice, and thus sums derived from it can be redistributed and redeployed to maximum social benefit. One can imagine, for example, that favorable local conditions could create an economic boom in one area of the planet while difficult financial conditions elsewhere generate poverty. The Universal House of Justice could use the sums derived from the *Huqúqu'lláh* paid in the prosperous region to help alleviate economic hardship in the depressed zone. Since such patterns of economic boom and bust are often temporary and shifting, it might be that, subsequently, the operation of redistribution of wealth will take place in the opposite direction. In any case, the Universal House of Justice, as the supreme governing organ of 'the entire Bahá'í world, will have the necessary information to assess accurately the situation

52. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K 97.

and the necessary authority to implement the appropriate measures.

Through the payment of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, the believer "purifies" his savings. Bahá'u'lláh institutes another tax, called Zakát, through which the believer purifies his means of sustenance: "It hath been enjoined upon you to purify your means of sustenance and other such things through payment of Zakát."⁵³ The term "Zakát" derives from the Qur'an and refers to an obligatory tax levied for the relief of the poor and other charitable purposes. Bahá'u'lláh has left to the Universal House of Justice the freedom to determine the various parameters of Zakát (e.g., exemptions, categories of income, scales of rates, frequency of payment).

Ḥuqúqu'lláh and Zakát, together with the general mandate given the Universal House of Justice, provide the necessary measures for the "horizontal" adjustment of gross economic disparities within each generation. However, there is also the question of "vertical" inequities resulting from the gradual overconcentration of wealth over succeeding generations. Bahá'u'lláh addresses this issue by specifying certain principles for the distribution of inheritance in the absence of a will on the part of the deceased: "We have divided inheritance into seven categories...."⁵⁴ With respect to the decease of a given individual, these categories are children, wife or husband, father, mother, brothers, sisters, and teachers. Bahá'u'lláh specifies the proportion of a given inheritance that is to be allotted to each category. *However, this distribution is obligatory only in the case that the individual dies without writing a will.* Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh has specifically enjoined each individual to make a testament establishing the manner of distribution of that person's accumulated wealth after his or her passing:

A person hath full jurisdiction over his property. If he is able to discharge the Ḥuqúqu'lláh, and is free of debt, then all that is recorded in his will, and any declaration or avowal it containeth, shall be acceptable. God, verily, hath permitted

53. Ibid., K 146.

54. Ibid., K 20.

him to deal with that which He hath bestowed upon him in whatever manner he may desire.⁵⁵

Of course, it is presumed that, in writing his will, the individual will take into account the general Bahá'í principle of avoiding the overconcentration of wealth in the hands of a few individuals.⁵⁶

Gender Equality and the Membership of the Universal House of Justice

As is well known, and as already mentioned above in the discussion of marriage and the family, one of the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith is the equality of men and women. The Bahá'í writings affirm unequivocally that women have historically been dominated and subjugated by men, creating a disastrous imbalance in society. For example, both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá attribute the prevalence of war and bloodshed in human history primarily to the predominance of aggressiveness, which has tended to characterize men, over compassion and common sense, which have been more characteristic of women. If women had been allowed to achieve the same level of education as men, and contribute on an equal basis to civilization, then many historic injustices, such as slavery and child labor, would have been greatly diminished if not avoided altogether. Here is one of the many strong statements in the Bahá'í writings concerning these questions:

The world in the past has been ruled by force and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the scales are already shifting, force is losing its weight, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more properly balanced.⁵⁷

55. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 126.

56. *Ibid.*, 183-184.

57. *Star of the West* 9:7 (13 July 1918), 87.

Not only does this passage acknowledge the imbalances of the past, it asserts that women tend to possess certain qualities to a degree superior to men. Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses that women possess all intellectual and creative abilities exhibited by men and that any lack of achievement on the part of women is due only to lack of adequate access to education: "If given the same educational opportunities or course of study, [women] would develop the same capacity and abilities [as men]" and this "whether in scientific research, political ability or any other sphere of human activity."⁵⁸ Moreover, 'Abdu'l-Bahá underlines the necessity for women to enter all arenas of social and public life:

So it will come to pass that when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, when they enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics, war will cease; for woman will be the obstacle and hindrance to it. This is true and without doubt.⁵⁹

In the light of these and other strong statements in the Bahá'í writings concerning the capacity and role of women, it is surprising, and somewhat puzzling at first, that the Kitáb-i-Aqdas restricts the membership of the Universal House of Justice, but not the local and secondary Houses of Justice, to men alone. Indeed, in all other public functions and roles instituted by Bahá'u'lláh, women and men have equal access. The only exception at any level is membership in the Universal House of Justice. Moreover, there is no indication whatsoever, in any statement of Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that exclusion of women from membership on the Universal House of Justice is based on any presumed incapacity of women to serve in this way.

The perception of paradox is reinforced when we recall that, as the supreme institution of Bahá'u'lláh's world order, the Universal House of Justice is the chief promulgator of all Bahá'í principles, including the principle of the equality of men and

58. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 281.

59. *Ibid.*, 135.

women. Why, one may reasonably ask, has Bahá'u'lláh excluded women from membership in the one institution that bears the primary responsibility for promoting the cause of the equality and rights of women?

This feature of Bahá'u'lláh's system has long given rise to discussion and speculation. When questioned on this subject, 'Abdu'l-Bahá only reiterated his affirmation that this restriction had nothing to do with the capacities of women and that the reason for their exclusion from membership in the Universal House of Justice would, in time, become absolutely clear to everyone.

Conclusions

The task of exploring the implications of so profound a work as the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is ongoing and progressive. Certainly the present article cannot claim to be more than a modest, initial contribution to this enterprise. Nevertheless, the fundamental outlines of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a global planetary order can already be clearly seen. The goal is a unified, universal society, founded on spiritual principles and allowing for both stability and dynamism, global order and individual initiative. This world order has two fundamental components, one personal and spiritual, the other social and structural.

The personal component is based on the direct relationship between each human soul and the God who has created us all. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas instructs us in the fundamental parameters of this relationship. Bahá'u'lláh thereby tells us that the ultimate category of existence, Being Itself, is not an abstract principle but a loving Person who seeks intimate communion with each human being.

This vertical relationship between each individual and God is the necessary source of the love and compassion that must infuse all human relationships. But this great force of love must be properly harnessed if it is to produce a truly progressive and stable society. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas therefore institutes appropriate, just social structures, at every level of society, to allow for the free and unhampered flow and diffusion of love. These structures constitute a system of rights and obligations

within marriage, the nuclear family, the extended family, and ultimately the whole of society. They involve potent institutions which allow for the implementation, at all levels of society, of decisions taken through consultation. These structures also provide the basis of a stable but dynamic economic system which, while not imposing the unrealistic and unhealthy norm of total economic egalitarianism, nevertheless eliminates the extremes of poverty and the gross accumulation of wealth.

Human history has witnessed a wide variety of social systems. Some have crushed individual freedom and initiative either through dictatorship or else an extreme collectivism that attributes little intrinsic value to the individual person. At the other extreme are highly individualistic systems in which interpersonal competition tends to permeate every aspect of society. Such systems are certainly dynamic but tend to be volatile and unstable.

Social philosophers have often held that there is an intrinsic, logical opposition between the good of the individual and the good of society as a whole. As a consequence of this view, most social systems are seen as a compromise in which some degree of individual self-realization must be sacrificed for the sake of social order.

Bahá'u'lláh's vision of society challenges this received idea. In His view, there can be no contradiction between what is truly good for the individual and what is truly good for the collectivity. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh conceives that the very purpose of society is to create a milieu that optimizes the opportunities for the spiritual growth and development of each of its members. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas we have the balanced conception of a society that is founded on the sacred, intrinsic value of each individual human soul, independently of the role that person may play within society. At the same time, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas lays the structural foundations of a stable and progressive social life that favors the maximum degree of self-realization for everyone.

Now that the publication of the full, annotated edition of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is accomplished, the eyes of the Bahá'í world are turned towards the institution of the Universal House of Justice whose sacred task it is to oversee the wise, gradual but steady

implementation of the laws and principles of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, which are nothing less than the laws governing the spiritual world, the world of being. But the ultimate responsibility for the implementation of these laws and principles lies not with any institution. Rather it lies with each of us, in whose hearts and minds the intimate communion with our Creator must be diligently pursued. This is an immense responsibility, but also a unique privilege given us by God—that we can participate, to whatever degree we choose, in the building of the mighty spiritual edifice of a world united on the basis of the very law of causality God has inscribed in the innermost recesses of reality.